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Citizen Ai: Warrior, Jester and Middleman

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Citizen Ai: Warrior, Jester and Middleman¹

INTRODUCTION

Ai Weiwei's story is now well-known. In the past few years, he has burst out from his limited role of being an artist who engaged in activism in China, to become one of the world's top dissidents. He first gained international fame as the artistic consultant for the Beijing's "Bird's Nest" Olympic stadium, which was designed by Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron; just before the 2008 Olympics, Ai became *infamous* for denouncing the stadium as China's "fake smile" to the world. In October 2010, Ai fascinated the art world with his *Sunflower Seeds* exhibit at London's Tate Modern museum; before the exhibit closed in May 2011, Ai became a global political figure when he was arrested by the Chinese government on April 3, 2011. After his release in June 2011 after 81 days of illegal detention, Ai continues to intrigue, outrage, and entertain audiences in China and around the world. In response to the controversy around the U.S. surveillance operation PRISM, Ai argued that by invading people's privacy "the US is behaving like China" (Ai 2013c).

However, understanding the meaning of Ai's peculiar blend of art and activism is a challenge. Although he is a global political figure, the politics of his work has attracted little academic analysis. Perhaps this is because Ai is a polarizing figure: people either love him as a human rights activist, or loathe him for playing to the dissident-hungry Western media that profits from criticizing China. Ai's activities are likewise full of contradictions: He is a global artistic force, but has little artistic presence in China. As a dissident Ai characteristically targets the state as his enemy; but at times he also works closely with the state on his various projects.

Rather than seek to resolve such contradictions to declare Ai either a human rights hero or a stooge of the neoliberal West, the essay appeals to Donna Haraway's (1991:149) notion of ironic tension: "Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true." Thus rather than search for the "One True Ai Weiwei," this essay will examine his work in terms of multiple overlapping narratives (see White 1973): "Ai the Heroic Warrior," "Ai the Court Jester" and "Ai the Middleman." "Ai the Heroic Warrior" considers his campaigns for human rights in China; "Ai the Court Jester" analyzes his appeal to audiences in the Chinese state and in Western media. The third narrative, "Ai the Middleman," argues that Ai's activities as a broker—between China and the West, between old and young people, and between artists, civil society and the state in the PRC—offer a new way of understanding political dynamics in China. In the conclusion, the essay proposes a fourth narrative, "Ai the Citizen Intellectual," as a way to bring together these contradictory narratives in an ironic, partial and contingent understanding of Ai's work. "Citizen intellectual" is useful because it accounts for the slippery nature of Chinese politics, where activists often have a liminal relation to the state: sometimes they work with the state, and at other times against it—but always for what they see as the good of China, rather than for the party-state. Citizen intellectuals are a growing force in the PRC, and thus understanding their work in this multicoded way can help us to appreciate the fruitful ambiguity of politics and civil society in China. The four narratives allow

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us to appreciate the “momentary truths” in Ai’s work (Ai in Chen and Ai 2007:3), which can also tell us something about the momentary truths of China’s rapidly changing society.

This essay thus has two goals: 1) to explain the peculiar mix of art and politics in Ai Weiwei’s work, and 2) show how Ai’s peculiar practice is also part of a broader movement of citizen intellectuals who are building civil society in China.

AI THE HEROIC WARRIOR

Ai Weiwei is famous for crossing boundaries, especially the boundary between art and politics. His activities explore the limits of what is acceptable in China both in terms of political action and aesthetic taste: in 2000 he co-organized an exhibit in Shanghai called “Fuck Off,” and more recently his nude photos were denounced as pornography both by the police and in the court of popular opinion (see Hua, Ai and Feng 2000). He thus is a polarizing figure among both artistic and non-artistic audiences.

Ai delights in making people—both friends and enemies—feel uncomfortable. His main friend, promoter and defender in the West, Swiss art collector and former ambassador to China Uli Sigg, warned Ai “to be careful. Don’t let them mix your position as an artist and a political activist” because “‘political art’ is not a good word” (Ai 2013a). After Ai was illegally detained in April 2011, an official critic complained that Ai’s art “confounds the boundary between the artistic and the political; in fact, he uses it to engage in political activities” (Liu Yiheng 2011; Barmé 2011).

Actually, art and politics have always had an intimate relation in China, starting with imperial Confucianism that relied on rites and music to order the masses, and continuing with the rule of communist party, which still seeks to “regulate the arts in order to secure a well-ordered citizenry” (Kraus 2004:10-11). The idea of art for art’s sake is quite new in China, becoming popular only in the 1980s (see Hui 1989; Barmé 1989).

Ai’s work as an activist-artist thus is noteworthy not because it is “new.” His critique of China’s politics and society is actually part of a broad and ongoing debate about the moral crisis that China faces after thirty years of economic reform and opening up. In other words, China’s New Left, traditionalists and liberals are all worried about the “values crisis” presented by what they call China’s new “money-worship” society (see Liu Mingfu 2013; Xu Jilin 2011; Pan Wei 2009; Callahan 2013). Intellectuals from across the political spectrum thus are engaged in what Chinese call “patriotic worrying” (忧患意识); they feel that it is their job to ponder the fate of the nation, and to find the correct formula to solve China’s problems (Davies 2007; Liu 2013).

Ai’s contribution to this debate is straightforward: he feels that the PRC is a corrupt authoritarian state, and the country can only be saved if the government respects freedom of expression and the rule of law. As he wrote in his blog: “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” (Ai 2011c:181-82).

Like a classic nineteenth century liberal, Ai Weiwei sees China’s dictatorial state as the problem. As he wrote in *The Guardian*, “every day in China, we put the state on trial” (Ai 2013b). One Tweet declares “Every delight we have on Twitter is a death of dictatorship and totalitarianism” (September 3, 2009), while another states “Evil exists to test our courage” (August 3, 2009). When asked for his reaction to Chinese president Xi Jinping’s new catchphrase, “The China Dream,” Ai

replied “China nightmare! There is no such thing as the China dream. I think it’s just a nightmare. The leaders are completely lost ... and have no courage to face reality” (Ai 2013a).

Ai thus sees himself engaged in a Manichean struggle of good versus evil, where the heroic dissident fights the cruel state. Although many people report that Ai only became active in the past few years, evidence shows that his art has had a political component from the very beginning. He was part of the Stars Group of avant garde artists whose first exhibit in Beijing in 1979 directly challenged the state; it included a street demonstration under the banner “We Demand Democracy and Artistic Freedom.” Ai’s artistic comrade Wang Keping later explained that the goal of the Stars Group was “not to emulate the literati of the Ming and the Qing [dynasties], and hide from the complexities of social struggle and to pursue pure art” (cited in Barmé 1989:76). Throughout his career, Ai thus has refused to compromise with what he sees as the totalitarian state.

On the other hand, many artists and intellectuals argue that they are able to work within the system because China is (slowly but surely) changing for the better. Jia Zhangke, who was well-known in the 1990s for his “underground films,” argues that the reason that his films now pass the censors is not because he has changed; rather, China’s propaganda system itself has loosened up. Unlike dissident directors who work with an elite and often foreign audience in mind, Jia’s target audience is the Chinese public because he “believes his social critique is strongest not as a protestor on the sidelines but as a legal—and marketable—filmmaker” (Osnos 2009:95).

Ai, however, is wary of such arguments. While acknowledging that China’s standard of living has improved, Ai is “pretty cynical” about his country’s political changes: “It’s still an extreme political society, where people don’t have freedom” (Ai 2013a). While Jia has chosen to work within the system, Ai tries to avoid being interpellated into Beijing’s propaganda system. Ai refused to attend the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics because he was disgusted at how the Bird’s Nest stadium that he helped design was being deployed by the government as China’s “fake smile.” He later Tweeted that “No outdoor sports can be more elegant than throwing stones at autocracy” (March 10, 2010). Ai thus sees himself as an individual fighting oppression on behalf of the Chinese people.

Ai shares many political values with Nobel-laureate Liu Xiaobo, who likewise questions Beijing’s authoritarian rule: In his co-authored Charter ’08 manifesto, Liu argued that the Chinese people need to “embrace universal human values, join the mainstream of civilized nations, and build a democratic system” (Liu 2012:301). Yet Ai’s style and tactics are quite different. Liu is a quintessentially twentieth century dissident. He drafts manifestos demanding radical change, and acts in rationally earnest ways. Charter ’08, which ultimately landed Liu in jail for “state subversion,” reads like a Five-Year Plan for the fifth modernization: democracy.

Ai, however, takes a twenty-first century approach to dissent that blurs art, life, politics and activism. Rather than writing earnest essays that demand rational governance, Ai appeals to people’s outrage, mocks the government and works primarily through the Internet. As one of his Tweets explains: “My motherland, if I have to have one, would be the Internet because it can fulfill the space and boundaries of my imagination. As for the other so-called countries, you can have them” (December 29, 2009). It is much harder for the state to control Ai’s playfully ironic protests, which have continued even after his detention in 2011. In our decentralized and hyper-connected world where information is power the Chinese government takes Ai’s critical commentary very seriously.

Although his ideals are classically liberal and his methods are very hi-tech, Ai’s strategy is also similar to that of the 2000-year-old classic, Sunzi’s *Art of War* (Mair 2007). While Western military strategy largely follows Clausewitz’s *On War* to stress material power, Sunzi focuses on positional and

psychological factors. Rather than simply deploy brute force, the *Art of War* employs knowledge, espionage and deception (see Waldron 2007). The goal is to win the war even before it has begun: “Being victorious a hundred times in a hundred battles is not the most excellent approach. Causing the enemy forces to submit without a battle is the most excellent approach” (Mair 2007:85).

Against the vast resources of the police state, Ai follows Sunzi’s methods of asymmetric warfare. He seeks out the state’s weaknesses to use state power against itself. When the police put up fifteen surveillance cameras outside his house, Ai did not try to evade their gaze: “I say, OK, let me put cameras in my bedroom and in my yard. Let you have a 24-hour broadcast so everybody knows exactly who I am seeing and what I am talking about. ... I invited [the police] to work in my studio. ‘You don’t have to follow me or tail me, just sit next to me, write whatever, have your own computer, report to your boss what I am doing. And if I travel to foreign states, be my assistant.’ They [the police] can just see who I am and what I talk about. Who are those anti-China forces and what they are doing” (Ai 2013a). By videoing himself and his police handlers, Ai “invert[s] the usual logic of art and politics: instead of enlisting art in the service of his protest, he had enlisted the apparatus of authoritarianism into his art” (Osnos 2010: 45).

The result is the confusion provoked by psychological warfare. For Sunzi, nothing is constant. Strategy focuses on determining the adversary’s psychological center of gravity. As Ai explains, “I don’t have a strategy, but I always think that when there are problems [or] difficulties there’s always a chance, a new possibility there. Whenever I get very frustrated, I think that this is the moment that you can find a way. That is the interesting moment” (Ai 2013a). War here is a mind-game waged by brilliant commanders whose genius can outfox the material power of the state. The goal is to unnerve opponents to the point where their social cohesion breaks down. Victory comes when adversaries retreat in chaos—or defect to your side (Waldron 2007:xvi).

We saw such a psych-ops battle when Ai was detained in 2011. While Ai sought to shame the state into respecting freedom and human rights, his interrogators declared, “You criticized the government, so we are going to let all society know that you’re an obscene person, you evaded taxes, you have two wives, we want to shame you” (Ai in Osnos 2011). Rather than respecting Ai as an artist, his interrogators treated him like a con-artist (Martin 2013; also see Barmé 1989). But instead of surrendering to overwhelming authority, Ai explains how he converted his captors: “they always ended up having to change to another [interrogator] because they keep nodding their head saying ‘yes, I think you are most patriotic’” (Ai 2013a). Ai gave the guards his phone number, and after he was released they called to say, “We were so worried about you, we kept thinking about you, we are so happy you are out” (Ai in Martin 2013:236).

Rather than breaking him mentally, Ai’s guards became his friends in a Sunzi-like shift in the psychological balance of power. Rather than breaking him physically, Ai reports that his health actually improved in captivity, in what he now calls the “secret police cure” for diabetes and obesity (Martin 2013:158). Ai thus seems to be in accord with the statement from the *Daode jing*, “The Way of Heaven does not wage war, yet it is good at conquering” (Chapter 73).

Ai’s asymmetric and psychological warfare does not just tear down the state. It also builds up civil society. Like many public intellectuals, Ai was critical of the official response to the earthquake in Sichuan in 2008. Noticing that public schools often suffered more damage than surrounding buildings, many people felt that the schools collapsed due to substandard construction stemming from official corruption.

After the party-state refused to investigate, Ai enlisted hundreds of volunteers in what he called a “Citizens’ Investigation” to “keep asking those very simple questions. ... We made 200 calls to various departments—the police, the civil affairs department, the construction department, the education department—just to ask simple questions. They asked almost 10,000 questions, and still we didn’t get one answer” (Ai 2013a). Although the citizens’ investigation was “frustrating,” it was also cathartic for many people. The volunteers were able “to release their anxieties, their anger, by doing very simple small things, everybody can do it. Ask the questions. Do the research and put it on the Internet” (Ai 2013a).

Eventually the citizens’ investigation compiled and published a list of the names of the 5,212 children who were killed in the earthquake. Ai and his team eventually shamed the government into releasing its own list of 5,335 names. Again blurring the line between art and politics, Ai turned this tragedy into the massive mosaic “Remembering” (2009) at Munich’s Haus der Kunst where he lined up 9,000 school bags to spell out one mother’s reaction to her daughter’s death: “She lived happily on this earth for seven years.”

According to Ai’s friend the poet Bei Ling, this social activism constitutes a natural extension of Ai’s provocative nude photographs: “Ai does not just like to get naked by himself or with friends, he has also helped to lay bare ‘China’, from the Central Committee to regional administrations. He has his own brand of indignation, mixed with an easy humor, to face the violence of state power” (Bei 2011).

It’s easy to get caught up in the enthusiasm of the “Ai the Heroic Warrior” narrative. Its uncompromising view of the individual vs. the totalitarian state is certainly seductive—and accords with Ai’s personal experience—but does it make sense of China’s current political situation?

Actually, China no longer is a totalitarian state (see Callahan 2013). Even Liu Xiaobo thinks that we need to understand how China has changed for the better. With Deng Xiaoping’s economic reform program, society has opened up, “gradually weaken[ing] the enemy mentality and the psychology of hatred,” thus providing “gentle and humane grounds for restoring mutual affection among the people” (Liu 2012: 325). Lung Ying-tai, a Taiwanese social critic who published widely in mainland newspapers, was an influential part of the debate about political action in China before she became Taiwan’s Minister of Culture in 2012. In a prominent essay that was widely-distributed in the PRC she discussed “The Power of Civility” to highlight how intellectuals need to engage with the state as a way to create civil society in China (Lung 2010). Against Ai’s search for pure truth and total freedom, public intellectuals like Jia Zhangke, Liu Xiaobo and Lung Ying-tai take a more aesthetic approach to politics that leads to an “increased toleration for rival points of view” in China (Kraus 2004:232).

Ai’s search for the “singular truth” about China actually plays into the hand of the communist party’s Central Propaganda Department that likewise seeks to restrict our understanding to what it calls “The Real China” (Brady 2008; Latham 2009). Dissidents and officials thus often rely on each other to construct their legitimacy and identities.

Michel Foucault (1980:121) suggested that to escape the narrative of heroic warrior versus the cruel state “We need to cut off the King’s head.” Otherwise, anti-state oppositional discourse tends to reproduce the state even as it resists it: “the struggle in this limited political space has permitted the state to survive, even as we are questioning it” (Foucault 1991:103). To understand how politics and civil society work in China, it is necessary to look away from the razor-sharp focus on the state (as either protector or enemy), to also appreciate the complex relations that emerge in institutions beyond the state in the family, the workplace, the market, and so on.

AI THE COURT JESTER

The “Ai the Heroic Warrior” narrative reflects the seriousness of the struggle. It accounts for the many risks and dangers that Ai Weiwei and other activists face when they criticize the Chinese state. But it effaces the riotous fun of his critique that often involves singing, dancing, mocking, shocking, joking, swearing and flashing. One of Ai’s pictures mocks the state’s censorship policy via a naked dancing version of the infamous “Grass Mud Pony-Fuck Your Mother” song; his debut music video “Dumbass” is a foul-mouthed mocumentary of his time in detention (Branigan 2013). Such images exemplify Ai’s strategy of turning political problems into edutainment opportunities.

Mocumentary art that plays with political piety is not a new method for Ai. In 1994, for the 5th anniversary of the June 4th massacre, he photographed his wife Lu Qing lifting her skirt in front of Mao’s portrait at Tiananmen. “A Study in Perspective” (1995) has Ai giving Tiananmen the finger. His company is called “Beijing Fake Cultural Development;” the Chinese characters “fa” and “ke” are pronounced like “fuck” in English. Through his art and his activism, Ai is continually playing with what the Chinese authorities call the “red line”: the characteristically vague quasi-legal boundary of what is allowed (and not allowed) in Chinese society. In this way, Ai has taken his father Ai Qing’s advice to heart: “this is your country. You don’t have to be so polite. You can do whatever you want to.” (Ai with Merewether 2003:27).

Mao Zedong famously declared that “revolution is not a tea party.” But for Ai resistance often involves inviting people to a dinner party. In 2008, a district mayor in Shanghai invited Ai to build a studio in his neighborhood; just as construction on the studio was complete, the city government informed Ai that the building was illegal and had to be torn down. Ai responded to this Kafka-esque situation by throwing a party at the soon-to-be demolished studio in December 2010. He served river crabs (*hexie*) to mock Beijing’s harmonious (*hexie*) society policy. Thousands of people showed up; unfortunately, back in Beijing Ai was put under house arrest for the first time to prevent him from attending his own party.

Certainly, some people—including many of his artistic peers—think that Ai is a clown; his mocking and irreverent style makes him look like a smart ass. The scene described by *New Yorker* correspondent Evan Osnos, in which Ai’s visit to a police station in Chengdu is filmed by four of Ai’s own videographers and two more from the police, certainly sounds like a circus. Yet Osnos concludes that Ai’s use of new media has “subverted the usual Chinese method of dissent: favoring bluntness and spectacle over metaphor and anonymity. He shamed the system with his own transparency” (Osnos 2010:60).

This *modus vivendi* is similar to that of jesters who flourished in pre-modern Europe and China (see Otto 2001). Jestors were special people who sang, danced and joked in royal courts. Rather than merely being entertainment, they had special license to speak truth to power, often criticizing their kings quite directly. This description of one of Rabelais’s characters is reminiscent of Ai: “Irreverent, libertine, self-indulgent, witty, clever, roguish, he is the fool as court jester, the fool as companion, the fool as goad to the wise and challenge to the virtuous, the fool as critic of the world” (Kaiser 1963:126; Otto 2001:6). In 1990, an American critic similarly praised Ai for “making artistic and political jokes,” concluding that he “is a visionary who seeks to laugh at political and social hypocrisy through his work” (Cohen 1990).

Although most people think of jesters as creatures of European court life, imperial China had its share of famous jesters (滑稽)²: in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) Dongfang Shuo was said to have used jokes and moral riddles to burst the bubble of imperial pride (Sima 1982:3202). This is not just ancient history: in 2010 Dongfang's story was dramatized in a popular television series in China (Dongfang 2010), and he is a major character in another mainland TV series, "The Prince of the Han Dynasty" (Da Han Tianzi 2002).³

In a similar vein, art critic Holland Cotter (2004) argues that Ai's "antic" works show "the versatility of an artist whose role has been the stimulating, mold-breaking one of scholar-clown." To make sense of his own methods, Ai muses, "I cannot be against something obviously. It's ridiculous. But I still can have my attitude, just one look or one gesture makes those in power just cannot bear it. It's not that I want to become ridiculous and have nothing else to do, but I feel so uncomfortable under this condition. ... the last thing you can do is laugh about it" (Ai 2013a).

Ai's unease helps us to question this tale of jesters who are valued for their playful critique of rulers. The jester actually was closely tied to state institutions as a "court jester." Rather than having the freedom to speak truth to power as a civil right, the jester always relied on the tolerance of the king (see Otto 2001).

Jesters' uneasy dance with power suggests that we look more at their audience than at their ideas. In other words, to whom is Ai jesting? Although he presents himself as a heroic warrior who is totally separate from the state, Ai is also caught in the party-state's social dynamic. China's 5th generation leadership that took control in 2012-2013 is dominated by a group called the "princelings" (天子党), an informal group of around 300 children of veteran communist revolutionaries. These princelings, who are also known as the "red aristocracy," see themselves as China's natural leaders. They have used their family connections to make vast fortunes in business, as well as gain political power. The most famous princelings are China's new president Xi Jinping and his rival Bo Xilai, a political rising star who in 2013 was sentenced to life in prison for corruption, bribery and abuse of power (see Garnaut 2012). While Ai sees himself as an outsider, he is also the ultimate insider: a princeling.

His father Ai Qing was a famous communist poet who acted like a court poet during the early Mao era. In 1941, Ai Qing wrote a poem, "Mao Zedong," that begins "Whenever Mao Zedong appears / Thunderous applause fills the air." This was not just empty talk. In 1942 Ai Qing took part in the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature that set the socialist realist bounds on creativity in China until the reform and opening up policy in 1978. The last line of Ai's "Mao Zedong" poem is telling: "The new slogan determines the new political direction" (Ai Qing 1982:125).

During the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1956, Ai Qing responded to the communist party's call for comments on its rule with a prose poem, "The Gardener's Dream." In this dream hundreds of different kinds of flowers criticize the gardener for only cultivating roses. Upon awakening, the gardener realizes that "his world is too narrow. With no point of comparison, many ideas will become confused." He thus concludes that to have a "kingdom of many fragrances" he needs to "let all flowers bloom in their own time" (Ai Qing 1982:209, 210). By employing metaphor and allegory

² In modern standard Chinese these characters are pronounced *huaji*, the word for comical. In imperial China, this word was pronounced *guji*, and referred to court jesters.

³ Many thanks to Andrea Riemenschnitter for pointing this out. She also notes that this film came from one of China's first successful internet novels, *Dongfang Shuo the Wise Sage* (智圣东方朔) by Long Yin (also see Liu 2004:152-153).

to argue that the leadership should be more open to diverse ideas, Ai Qing engaged in a traditional intellectual critique of power (see Goldman and Lee 2002; Barmé 1999).

But China's head gardener Mao was not amused. In 1957 Ai and his family were sent into internal exile as part of the Anti-Rightist Movement. Like many other princelings, Ai Weiwei spent the Cultural Revolution far away from Beijing's privileged life, and was welcomed back into the capital's elite society once his father was "rehabilitated" by the communist party in 1976 (see Garnaut 2012; Barmé 2011). Although he had little formal education, Ai was accepted into the elite Beijing Film Academy in 1978, and his father introduced him to many of China's prominent writers and artists.

Hence if we think in terms of the different roles Chinese intellectuals have historically played, Liu Xiaobo is an earnest official petitioning the throne with Charter '08, Ai Qing was a court poet who both praised and gently criticized the emperor Mao Zedong, and Ai Weiwei is a court jester who playfully mocks the state's imperious power.

By detaining him in 2011, the Chinese state certainly treated Ai like a court jester who had committed *lese majeste*. Since "China has entered an era of unprecedented political tolerance," according to Beijing's pro-state newspaper the *Global Times*, Ai was detained because he didn't respect the limits have to exist in a "harmonious society" ("West's support" 2011; "Law Will Not Concede" 2011). But will Beijing's new princeling leadership treat Ai as a jester to show the Chinese public that it is a more tolerant regime? Since China's "soft power" foreign policy seeks to distribute positive images of the PRC to the world, will Beijing now allow Ai more space to appeal to an international audience as well? It is still too early to tell; but how the new leadership treats Ai Weiwei can tell us much about how open they will allow Chinese society to be.

More importantly, Ai is playing to dissident-hungry audiences in the West. After his release from detention, Ai was named one of *Foreign Policy's* "100 Top Global Thinkers of 2011," and made the short list for *Time* magazine's "Person of the Year 2011" (100 Top 2011; Beech and Ramzy 2011). *GQ* profiled him as China's "photographer, architect, gambler, orchestrator of installations, organizer of happenings, troublemaker, mad tweeter" (Mason 2011:218). In 2012 Elton John dedicated his concert in Beijing to Ai, while in 2013 Ai's detention ordeal was dramatized on the London stage in "*#aiww: The Arrest of Ai Weiwei*" (Branigan 2013; Barnett 2013). The *coup de grace* was when *ArtReview* chose Ai as the "most powerful artist in the world" (Higgins 2011; *ArtReview* 2011).

Although Ai is presented here as a powerful leader, we should remember that jesters are never in control of the game. He thus realizes the limits of being "dissident"—by either Beijing or the West (Barmé 1999:179-200). When challenged with the charge that he plays to a well-heeled Western audience, Ai replied, "that's not my game. I hate it, I really hate it. Why should I play that game?" (Ai 2013a). In this way, Ai is caught between a rock and a hard place like Lear's fool: "I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are: they'll have me whipp'd for speaking true, thou'lt have me whipp'd for lying; and sometimes I am whipp'd for holding my peace" (Shakespeare, *Lear*, I.4.186-188).

Two years after his release from illegal detention, Ai has gone from a liminal figure who blurs the fields of art and politics to a figure who is in limbo. He hadn't engaged in political activities (beyond those associated with his own legal case). Ai still didn't have his passport, and was still waiting to see if he could have his first major solo exhibit in China.

Ultimately, the jester is a conservative figure that can only judge the king according to royal values. The jester thus serves to reinforce the legitimacy of the system he serves—whether it is China's party-state or the global neoliberal order. Ai's apparent playfulness masks his frustration: he is not sure where to go or what to do in his new post-detention situation. Like a jester who is ultimately

the plaything of the state, Ai realizes that he is not in control of his fate. In that way he is the Chinese everyman.

Ai the Middleman

In both the heroic warrior's tragic narrative and the court jester's comic narrative, Ai Weiwei's modern liberal ideals shine through. The need for clear rules—and ultimately the rule of law—is a recurrent theme (see Ai 2013a; Martin 2013). His current political project uses the illegalities of the state's legal case against him as a teaching moment (see <http://fakecase.com>).

But Ai actually first became prominent not as a heroic individual fighting for the ultramodern ideals of a rational society. Rather he took on the very traditional Chinese role of the middleman who negotiates the ambiguous social terrain of human relations (see Gold, Guthrie and Wank 2002; Lindquist forthcoming). In New York in the 1980s his East Village apartment was a meeting place for newly-arrived Chinese film-makers, musicians, artists and poets including Chen Kaige, Feng Xiaogang, Jiang Wen, Tan Dun, Xu Bing and Bei Dao (see Ai 2011d). When he moved back to Beijing in the 1990s, his new studio became a meeting place for Chinese artists who wanted to know how to succeed in America (Ai with Merewether 2003:27). Western artists and collectors likewise made what art critic Philip Tinari called the “ritual pilgrimage to the House of Ai” for an introduction to China's newly emerging contemporary art scene (Osnos 2010:56).

In both New York and Beijing Ai was less the artist and more the broker, the go-to-guy who brought people together and made things happen. His main role in the 1990s and early 2000s was as an editor, an organizer and a curator who mediated between the artistic worlds of China and the West. The *Black Cover*, *White Cover* and *Gray Cover* books introduced the ideas of conceptual art to young Chinese artists in the 1990s (Zeng, Ai and Xu 1994; Zeng and Ai 1995; Zeng and Ai 1997). In 1997 Ai co-founded the China Art and Archives Warehouse in Beijing to serve as “a semi-open nonprofit organization” that is “willing to handle and showcase works of a complex and unclear nature” (Ai 2011b:22). In 2000, Ai's co-curated “Fuck Off” exhibit was “directed at Chinese institutions as well as Western curators and institutions and dealers” (Ai with Yap 2003:51; Hua, Ai and Feng 2000); his co-curated “Mahjong” exhibit likewise exposed contemporary Chinese art to broader European audience (Ai 2005). While the warrior and jester narratives suggest a lonely rebel speaking truth to power, Ai's actual activities over the past two decades show how he has worked closely with other people to organize conceptual space and exhibition space for the benefit of other Chinese artists.

In the 2000s, Ai's fascination with architecture turned him into a new type of middleman, who mediated not only between East and West, but also between artists, society and the state in China. To design and construct a building, he explains, an architect has to deal with the government: “You have to know all the regulations. You have to have a lot of governmental meetings talk about planning. You meet a lot of leaders in different provinces because we got involved in these projects” (Ai 2013a). Meeting with contractors, government officials and politicians gave Ai an acute understanding of the workings of China's political and social systems.

This experience of working with the government shows another side of Ai's political practice. While “Ai the Heroic Warrior” narrative pits him against the cruel totalitarian state, the “Ai the Middleman” narrative makes sense of how he often works with the state. Indeed, Swiss architect Jacques Herzog explains that he picked Ai to be the artistic consultant for the Bird's Nest stadium because of his connections: “You need strong alliances and he helped us operate in China” (Pilling 2010). The Shanghai studio fiasco actually shows how local and national governments can have

conflicting views. The national government was against him. But the local mayor still supported Ai: when the project did not work out he apologized, and paid Ai's expenses (Ai 2013a).

Most intriguingly, Beijing has courted Ai on-and-off over the years by suggesting that he join the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (政协), an advisory body that meets annually alongside the National People's Congress. "I didn't say yes or no, I just laughed, I said if I have an opportunity. ...I think they seriously considered it because they talked to me twice through different people." Ai added, "I'm not black and white, [who] cannot work with the government. Today if something comes, if it's right I can work with them" (Ai 2013a; also see Barmé 2011).

Ai thus is an inside/outsider, an outside/insider, who mediates between different groups, first in art, then in architecture, and now in politics. As we saw in the first two narratives, Ai is the go-to-guy for dissidence in China. In 2012 London's *New Statesman* invited him to be guest-editor of a special issue on China. The statement proclaiming "The rebel artist reveals a China its censors don't want you to see" was used to promote the special issue (*New Statesman* 2012).

This focus on connections and networks, rather than on ideas and ideologies, is actually the way most Chinese analysts understand politics. The question is less whether you believe in "freedom" or "stability," and more whose faction you belong to and which clan you represent (see Gold, Guthrie and Wank 2002). One of Ai's early comrades described his *modus operandi* as "Ai the Cobbler" (Huang 1989), who not only stitched together different objects and ideas in his art (most notably in "Shoes" (1987)), but also stitched together different people.

While conceptual artists explore the depths of meaning, brokers thrive on the surface's network of connections. As Ai himself stated, "I don't think that I'm a sophisticated political analyst" (Ai 2013a). We should not see this as a weakness, but as Ai's intervention into the long-standing philosophical debate over whether meaning resides in deep principles or in activities on the surface. Jürgen Habermas (2006:160) praises ancient Greece and other Axial Age civilizations that "broke open the chasm between deep and surface structure, between essence and appearance, which first conferred the freedom of reflection and the power to distance oneself from the giddy multiplicity of immediacy." Nietzsche, on the other hand, argued that it is a mistake to assume that meaning is hidden in the depths. He felt that such a giddy multiplicity of immediacy is not a problem, but a solution: "Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to *live*: what is required is to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin, to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance!" (2001:8-9). Following Nietzsche's insight, we can join those who have refocused their critical gaze to look for meaning in the play of symbols that are exchanged on the surface. Ai's focus on the body—on which he inscribes meaning through playful nude images and scenes of physical torture—translates Nietzsche's celebration of the surface into artistic-activism.

Ai's work as a middleman who thrives in bodily networks recalls Sunzi's strategy in the *Art of War*: its longest and most detailed chapters are about how to navigate the uneven surfaces of the world, where the battlefield is a rough terrain (see Mair 2007:113-24). The successful warrior does not study deep principles, but like a broker is aware of changing circumstances, living-breathing networks, and shifting centers of gravity. The risk of living and working on the surface is that you are always skating on thin ice, and must be ready for anything.

Conclusion: Citizen Ai

Ai Weiwei is a complex figure who mixes art and politics in interesting—and often contradictory—ways. This essay has employed three narratives to make sense of Ai's work: Ai the Warrior, Ai the Jester and Ai the Middleman. These three narratives each highlight certain aspects of Ai's work, and of political action in China more generally: the heroic warrior narrative explains how many dissidents battle against the state, while the court jester narrative shows how public intellectuals can become playthings of the system. The middleman narrative highlights how politics takes place on the surface, as activists weave together East and West, young and old, and civil society and the state.

Certainly, we could take Ai's radical ideas seriously as his overall strategy, and see heroic warrior, court jester and middleman as roles that he employs as tactics for his greater strategic goal. Ai's different actions thus would not be contradictions, but different tactical responses to different situations in China's uneven political terrain.⁴ Yet this interpretation is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, separating ideology from tactics in this way significantly narrows our understanding of Ai's multivalent approach to politics, and distracts us from considering how tactics have a vital role in the formation of ideas. Secondly, as the above analysis has shown, it accords too much agency to actors like Ai Weiwei, and underestimates how he not only plays with the system, but is also played by it.

The middleman narrative is useful because it shifts away from seeing politics in terms of ideas and audiences (and structure and agency), to concentrate on the emergence of civil society as a network of social connections that both includes and excludes the state. In other words, its focus on public intellectuals as brokers between East and West, young and old, and the state and society in China leads us to a fourth narrative: "Ai the Citizen Intellectual." Citizen intellectuals are liminal figures who sometimes work with the state (as a court jester or middleman), and sometimes work against it (as a heroic warrior), but always for what they see as the good of China, and often the good of humanity. The citizen intellectual concept thus aims to be flexible enough to allow for the interplay of structure and agency, radical opposition and embedded action, individual activity and community building (see Pieke 2004). Like Haraway (1991:149), citizen intellectuals don't worry about contradictions because they value the multivalent ironic tension that holds "incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true."

Because the state is so strong in China, it is easy to frame politics in terms of officials versus dissidents and society versus the state. Yet if we widen our view of activism beyond dissidents to include citizen intellectuals—the bloggers, novelists, filmmakers, scholars, and artists who are thinking about China's future direction—then we can see the enormous energy and optimism of people who are busy building the future in China. The citizen intellectual idea starts off from Czech dissident and later president Vaclav Havel's 1978 analysis of civil society in "The Power of the Powerless." Havel, who is very popular among China's liberals, suggests that being a dissident can be counterproductive because it isolates intellectuals as an exclusive group from the rest of society. Rather than arguing that an elite movement should lead a grand revolution, Havel (1987:58) thinks that everyone can make their own revolution by "living in truth." Living in truth starts with rejecting the lies that the regime produces to buttress its legitimacy. But it is also positive in the sense of engaging in "small-scale work" to build parallel cultures and parallel markets, and thus a parallel society that exists side-by-side with the party-state's official culture, economy, and society (1987:80, 100–103). Havel (1987:108) argues that ultimately official structures "simply begin to wither away . . . to be replaced by new structures that have evolved from 'below' and are put together in a fundamentally different way."

⁴ Many thanks to Prasenjit Duara for suggesting this interpretation.

It may seem odd to invoke the ideas of a key twentieth century dissident to explain Ai Weiwei's very twenty-first century practice. But in a strange way post-socialist China is in a similar situation to that of late-socialist countries in Eastern Europe in the 1980s. It is not a coincidence that Havel (2012) was asked to write the foreword for Liu Xiaobo's book *No Enemies, No Hatred*. Moreover, the CCP's obsessive study of the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union shows that even party elites understand China's current problems in this historical and social context. Even as it feels obliged to open up social space to encourage technical innovation and economic growth, the Chinese leadership is still very wary of civil society movements. According to the civil administration law, all NGOs have to be sponsored by party-state organizations. Thus, NGOs in China are, by definition, GONGOs (government-organized NGOs) or even PONGOs (party-organized NGOs). Hence, civil society in China is characteristically unorganized; it is built largely through the small-scale work of individuals and informal groups.

Citizen intellectuals are a new phenomenon that takes advantage of opportunities in China's elastic social space, which is continually opening and closing (see Callahan 2013). They have emerged as an influential force in recent years as an unintended consequence of Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening up policy that started in 1978. While Deng's goal was economic reform, the "opening up policy" has gone far beyond liberalizing markets to create much more space for discussion in China. The past two decades have witnessed an explosion of new social and cultural activities as the party-state has loosened its control over daily life. The economic reforms, thus, have opened up a wide variety of cultural opportunities, ranging from elite literature to the popular culture of China's *American Idol*-like show *The Voice of the China Dream* (中国梦之声).

China thus is interesting because it presents a paradox. While political space is quite narrow in the PRC (with regular crackdowns on human rights lawyers and social media activists), Beijing's reform and opening policy has also created a wide variety of social and economic opportunities for "small scale work" in China's expanding arena of civil society. Thus, instead of looking for alternative organizations (such as NGOs), we need to see how civil society emerges through the "alternative civilities" (see Weller 1999) of citizen intellectuals.

China's citizen intellectuals are, thus, slightly different from the public intellectuals found in more liberal societies. They have emerged out of the gaps produced by China's uneven social, economic and political development. More to the point, they have emerged in the shadow of state censorship, which continues to shape modern Chinese thought and culture. "Citizen" here is not a legal term (e.g. passport holder); rather, it describes the social responsibility that such intellectuals feel when they think about China's future. As novelist Chan Koonchung (2009; 2011) puts it in *The Fat Years* (盛世 : 中国 2013), Chinese intellectuals are 90 percent free. While he and others lament the 10 percent that is lost to (self)censorship, the work of film-maker Jia Zhangke and essayist Lung Ying-tai shows what citizen intellectuals can do with this newly expanded freedom.

Still, it would be a mistake to conclude that citizen intellectuals are all liberal critics; this new trend also includes conservative voices. Colonel Liu Mingfu's *China Dream* (2013) of building up the PRC's military power to challenge America was written as a personal commentary rather than an official statement from the Ministry of Defense. Peking University's Pan Wei even uses his position as a citizen intellectual to argue against civil society in China (Pan 2009; also see Hu 2013).

Citizen intellectuals thus are "independent voices" not because they stand in opposition to state power, but because they take advantage of China's new social and economic opportunities to choose when to work with the state and when to work outside state institutions. Tsinghua University economist Hu Angang, for example, works within the system on the committee that

draws up China's five-year economic and social development plans; but he also uses his status as a citizen intellectual to push a "green development model" that is often at odds with the political leadership in Beijing (Hu and Yan 2010:2; Hu, Yan and Wei 2011). While it is easy to dismiss people who work so closely with the party-state as propagandists, China's new social and economic freedoms mean that we need to take citizen intellectuals—and their new ideas—more seriously. While not political in the sense of always directly criticizing the party-state, citizen intellectuals are certainly political in the broader sense of probing the boundaries of what is allowed in Chinese society.

"Ai the Citizen Intellectual" thus brings together the three other narratives in a partial and contingent unity that makes sense of many of the contradictions in his work. Sometimes Ai fights the state as a heroic warrior; sometimes he plays with (and is played by) the state as a court jester; at other times he works with the state and with other social groups as a middleman. While it is common to understand Chinese politics in terms of restrictions, citizen intellectuals like Ai show us how we need to think of politics in terms of taking advantage of opportunities: particular opportunities to work with the state, and other opportunities to work against and alongside the state. It is noteworthy that Ai won the inaugural "Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent" in 2012 (HRF 2012). Although surely another example of Ai being a court jester to Western interests, this award is apposite in the context of Havel's work building civil society in a late-socialist state.

On the other hand, Ai's 81-day illegal detention in 2011 shows the negative side of this liminal politics. Instead of recognizing Ai as an artist, his captors often treated him like a con-artist (Martin 2013; also see Barmé 1989). His situation and status is characteristically unclear: Ai actually was never officially arrested, and two years after his release he was still under an informal form of house arrest.

Still, when asked in May 2013 about China's future, Ai demonstrated a citizen intellectual's contingent sensibility (Ai 2013a): "China is changing, changing in every respect. It changes so fast. The younger generation, the internet generation, they are much freer than before, and they think the old machine is not running well. Fundamental problems. I used to be very optimistic. I used to say in three years [there will be political change], and then in three years nothing happens. Five years, nothing happens." After smiling, Ai concluded: "I'm just a stupid guy. I think that at any moment something can happen. But it may never happen."

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