

Electronic Dissidence: Ai Weiwei and Maoist Legacies in the Reform Era

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Introduction

April 2011: Inside the building of the Tate Modern in London, several million porcelain sunflower seeds lie on the floor in a large-scale installation within the museum's Turbine Hall (Tate 2011). The piece, descriptively entitled *Sunflower Seeds*, has been a popular one with critics and public alike, drawing crowds into the museum to dwell and play (*Ai Weiwei: No Fear or Favour* 2010). However, despite its popularity and size, the piece has fallen into its creator's shadow. The building's riverside exterior reads "Release Ai Weiwei," in open-ended demand to the Chinese government while activists engage in performative protests on the street, stopping passersby and disseminating a similarly pro-Ai message (Thorpe and Branigan 2011). In his disappearance, Ai Weiwei has created a stir unmatched by his work on display. Ai's vanishing has become the latest event in a string of antagonistic struggles between China's government and one of its most famous provocateurs, in which Ai has employed his status as an artist to promote public political dissidence, activism, and protest. Though critical of the Chinese socialist state, Ai's advocacy for public political expression, selflessness, and status as a visible political figure recalls and builds upon Maoist political practice through the creation and reinforcement of his heroic public status, and mass-oriented styles of outreach; this simultaneous evocation and rejection of the Chinese Communist Party through media, space, and personality both perpetuate and reconstitute components of high socialist legacies while others remain ambiguous.

Ai's 81-day disappearance, later revealed as an illegal detention by Chinese police, began on April 3, 2011 and became a political rallying point for Western and Chinese observers alike (RandomWire 2011; Wong 2011; Thorpe and Branigan 2011). Playing out on an international stage with diplomats and art enthusiasts alike looking on, the event represented yet another dramatic escalation of tensions between the artist and his home government in China (Thorpe and Branigan 2011). The disappearance, understood as a silencing tactic on the part of the Chinese government, became a basis for public political expression in its own right and propelled Ai into a new strata of notoriety. In an ironic twist, the Chinese government's attempt to quiet this publicly vocal citizen critic instead reinvigorated public criticism and dissension in both China and the West.

In this paper, I examine Ai Weiwei's transformation from "artist" to "activist" within the context of reform era China, focusing specifically on the role of the internet. I argue that Ai's evolution has been made possible by the advent of the internet as a commercialized platform, which Ai has utilized as an expressive medium. In doing so, he fosters a new branch of public political expression that builds upon legacies of high socialism in a new medium within the context of the reform era. Such expressions include mass-oriented blogging and participatory artistic processes as well as boycotting, all of which Ai has taken part in, to the note of observers abroad.

In constructing my analysis, I first examine the historical context of contemporary Chinese art from the appearance of modernism in mainland China in the 1930s to the present time. I then utilize the work of Chang Tan to unpack broad legacies of Communism in China's avant-garde art and introduce the reform era before delving into specifics of Ai Weiwei's personal history and emergence as public political figure. These histories and legacies are subsequently put into the context of Maoist politics as a basis for comparison to the contemporary political climate.

“Fuck Off”

Since 1979, Ai Weiwei has been a figure in the art community in China or the United States, where he spent twelve years between 1981 and 1993. Though his work has long been political in nature, it was not until 2000, when Ai curated the provocatively titled exhibition “Fuck Off,” that Ai became truly international.¹ The years surrounding the turn of the millennium were ones in which avant-garde art in China became increasingly bold and aggressive, pronouncing the perception of a cleft between “official” (*guanfang*) and “nonofficial” (*fei guanfang*) art (Berghuis 2004, 713). These works, placed within the simplistic binary category of “nonofficial,” came to be understood by Western onlookers as “real” Chinese art (Berghuis 2004) and were readily received within the international art community, propelling Ai to international fame as a member of the progressive avant garde.

Ai’s own work, including pieces such as *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads* (2010a), *China Log* (2005a), and *Colored Vases* (2007-2010), initially appears to fit neatly within Western conceptions of “real” Chinese art, leveling both explicit and implicit critiques of the state. However, though critical of the state and the advent of commercial culture in China’s reform era, Ai himself has become a participant in the production and reinforcement of such culture. One such example includes his most famous architectural work, The National Stadium (colloquially referred to as the Bird’s Nest) that was created with Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron for the 2008 Olympics hosted in Beijing and entailed significant government collaboration (Horowitz 2012). Later, Ai would exploit the global visibility of the stadium to publicly voice his dissident political views when he refused to attend the Olympic opening ceremony, highlighting contradiction in his status as a commercialized public figure and a critical pro-democracy activist. A year later, after Ai sustained a life-threatening head trauma following a violent confrontation with police in Chengdu, MRI scans showing his cranial bleed became a consumption-ready political statement when they were printed on German-made t-shirts (Horowitz 2012; Designboom 2010). Both instances contrasted Ai’s critiques of commercialism while exemplifying the emergence of Ai as a highly commercial entity as well as a political activist, blurring the distinctions between both and illustrating a broader phenomenon of political assemblage between Maoist and reform era policies.

Enabling Ai’s evolution into a publicly-recognized activist and artist was the blog he maintained between 2006 and 2009. Over the course of a three-year period, Ai amassed over 2,700 posts and several thousand images that documented and criticized the Chinese state and Party while simultaneously connecting similarly-minded readers, whose combined volume of comments numbered in the millions (Ambrozy 2011). Though ultimately shut down by Chinese authorities in 2009, the blog represented a genesis of public political expression and resistance within the internet as a commercialized medium, which has been continued through avenues such as social media. With his blog, Ai revisited Mao era, mass-oriented political outreach and reconfigured it for the reform era through media.

¹ Sasha Su-Ling Welland, personal communication, Oct. 2013.

Maoist Politics Revisited

Ai's artwork, though intensely critical of Chinese society and government structures, remains tethered to high socialist legacies. In her work, scholar Chang Tan specifically emphasizes the lasting influence of Communism upon contemporary (specifically avant-garde) Chinese art (Chang 2012). Her argument, applied to a broader artistic spectrum, draws upon the similarities between Communist and Chinese avant-garde ideology, which she argues critique capitalism and economic commodification while "[desiring] to negate the privileged autonomy of art and to reconnect artistic creativity with the praxis of everyday life," (Chang 2012, 177). In doing so, avant-garde artists (including Ai) "return" art to the masses, echoing the Maoist slogan "to serve the people" and display elements of public participation (Chang 2012; Welland 2002, 12). These participatory aspects of Ai's works are distinctly reminiscent of high socialism, which itself demanded high degrees of involvement in both the political and labor sense. Examples of this specific ideological legacy can be seen in many of Ai's recent works, but are most distinctly iterated by pieces stemming from events and the aftermath of the earthquake in China's Sichuan province in 2008, such as *Remembrance* (a recording of the names of students killed in the quake as read by volunteers; 2010) and *Names of the Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizen Investigation* (a list of the names, ages, and sex of over 5,000 student victims; 2008-11; see Figure 2). Necessary to the production of both works was an element of participation that extended beyond the artistic team and engaged citizens in the process of its fabrication, recalling Maoist era labor politics by way of this creative dependence. Pieces such as *Remembrance* required the participation of more than 5,000 recorded readers, while *Sunflower Seeds* incorporated the efforts of 1,600 people (Horowitz, 2012; *Ai Weiwei: Without Fear or Favour* 2010). These works not only require the selflessness of participants, but build upon the premise of service to the people through the dissemination of knowledge (Welland 2002, 12).

In seeking to analyze Ai Weiwei's persona and reconfiguration of public political expression in relation to Maoist era policy, it is necessary to understand the historical context of contemporary (especially the avant-garde/experimental) art in China. Within this context, one may examine the ideological and practical continuities between historical periods as well as the shifts that occur between them. In this section, I examine stylistic and ideological legacies of art in China from the May 4 Movement (1919) to the reform era. In doing so, I trace the lineages of art as a political tool as well as a product of cultural movements within the public sphere. This provides context for later discussions of Ai's specific role in the development of new forms of web-based resistance through both art and activism.

Realism, Service to the People, and Service to the State

During the first half of the 20th century, China and its art underwent a multitude of changes as a result of increasingly global interactions. Following what art critic Li Xianting calls "the capitulation of the Qing dynasty" in 1911, China began to rapidly import Western culture as a way to modernize itself (1994, 40). Traditional Chinese art forms and styles were largely rejected in favor of Western realism, their "modern" alternative (Li X. 1994; Andrews and Shen 2012). In the years prior to the Chinese civil war and ultimate Communist victory, other Western styles, such as impressionism and expressionism, also began to take hold among avant-garde artists (Andrews and Shen 2012). In embracing and emulating Western styles, the artists of the

day were reflecting their own “cosmopolitan aspirations” (Andrews and Shen 2012, 83), notions that have persisted into the contemporary reform era.

As the Chinese art scene flourished under Western influences, a dramatic attack upon old traditions was waged by intellectuals, for whom traditionalism symbolized a wayward “unworldliness” that was unacceptable in the wake of the May 4 Movement (Li X.1994). This specific, cultural targeting would later be revived by Mao Zedong in 1966 in an effort to destroy the remnants of non-revolutionary society and reformulate China as an oasis of Communist ideology and practice. Between were nearly 50 years during which art would grow to become expressly political, yielding revolutionary realism (a Chinese variation on the genre of socialist realism pioneered in the Soviet Union) as the dominant artistic style (Li 1994).

The creation of revolutionary realism during the first half of the Maoist era was dependent on three primary factors. It first required the influx of artistic styles, which occurred prior to Mao Zedong’s ascension to power in 1949, as well as Soviet influences from the nation’s one-time ally, and secondarily depended upon the Communist Party and Mao himself for its dissemination throughout China (Li 1994; Andrews and Shen 2012). The rise of the Chinese Communist Party created a monopoly on culture in which “the arts had to serve the state,” a more explicit iteration of assumptions that Richard Kraus dates to Imperial China (Li X.1994, 40; Kraus 2004, vii). This coincided with the deliberate “[weakening of] certain forms of traditional art,” such as classical painting, which had been long maintained as a form of personal political expression (Andrews and Shen 2012, 140). “Service” to the state was realized through the adoption of realist styles that expressed the political idealism of the new Communist era through depictions of revolutionary zeal (Li X.1994, 40; Andrews and Shen 2012). Oil paintings cemented critical political moments into the minds of the viewers while visually-idealized propaganda posters served as “an almost instantaneous expression of party policy” (Andrews and Shen 2012, 152). Art became the prerogative of the state and was controlled through “cultural bureaucracies” built by the Party to support sanctioned arts (Andrews and Shen 2012). As a result, artists were subsequently transformed from low-class social outcasts to valued citizens within the society (Kraus 2004, 37, 43).

Though Party-sanctioned artists enjoyed elevated standing within society, in the years after Mao’s death, Li writes that “society breathed a sigh of relief, liberated from the pressure of all-embracing ideology” (Li X.1994, 41). Artists, free of the Party’s guiding hand (although still subjected to censorship), proceeded to produce work that “[rejected] political and social themes,” which had been vigorously adopted during the Cultural Revolution, creating countercurrents against state control (Li X.1994, 41). Areas of the arts, which had been universally politicized as an expression of Chinese Communist ideology under Mao, underwent a period of rapid political denouement in which they refocused around conceptions of “beauty” rather than revolutionary meaning (Li X.1994, 41). However, even in these newly “liberated” arts of the early reform era, remnants of high socialism remained in the form of an obsession with “truth” and the portrayal of the human experience, echoing realist themes of high socialism (Li X.1994, 41-42).

Following the conclusion of the high socialist era, some artists rejected the “all-embracing ideology” that had consumed artistic expression. However, even as it became a means of critique and dissent, the arts retained expressive legacies of the Maoist politics, such as realist representation to reveal “the truth” and selflessness as a way to depict service (Li X.1994). In 1979, the Stars Group, a collective of avant-garde artists, launched the “Stars Exhibition,” in

which Ai Weiwei took part. It was a short-lived, but politically-charged showing that culminated in government seizure of the art (Foster and Obrist 2009; Li X. 1994). This exhibition marked the birth of two lasting characteristics of “modern” Chinese art: a “critical awareness of politics and culture” and usage of symbolism based upon realist techniques (Li X. 1994, 42). For Ai, it signified the beginning of his critical, yet historically-informed, style of art and expression, which has since translated into his activism. Both characteristics remain visible in Ai’s contemporary work, the former most clearly in pieces such as *Map of China* (2008a; see Figure 4), *Moon Chest* (2008b), and *Fragments* (2005b; see Figure 5), which grapple with the destruction of cultural heritage in the wake of rapid economic development spurred by the Chinese government (Horowitz 2012).

Ai has retained a style of work that is premised on political-historical legacies of the high socialist era in practice and symbolism, though it is highly critical. Other works, including *Surveillance Camera* (2010d; see Figure 6) and *Marble Helmet* (2010b), subtly evoke “techniques of realism” (Li X. 1994, 42) as a tool of political critique and dissent. Such pieces demonstrate Ai’s retention of established artistic and political practices of symbolic representation. *Surveillance Camera*, a security camera realistically rendered in white marble, represents state oppression by mimicking monitoring tactics (*Ai Weiwei: Without Fear* 2010). *Marble Helmet* (2010b), a similarly styled marble replica of helmets worn by rescuers in the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake (SACI 2013), visually recalls a traumatic moment in China’s recent history and sustains public memory of state failures. Both build upon realist techniques to form critical commentaries through the representation of pedestrian objects, highlighting not only the ongoing impacts of the early reform era political climate upon Ai’s contemporary works, but hinge upon established traditions of directly politicized art that informs current artistic practice.

Over the course of the reform era, four distinct categories of art emerged as the product of long-standing historical traditions and new cultural inputs (Wu 2000). However, as the period has advanced, these categories have begun to intersect in the work of artists such as Ai Weiwei, indicating a more complex phenomenon of blurring and hybridization. These initial categories consist of primary “traditions,” including state-sponsored art, highly technical academic art, referential “popular urban visual culture” stemming from Western and developed East Asian aesthetics (e.g. Hong Kong and Japan), and the commercialized avant garde (Wu 2000, 12). Illustrating such categorical intersections are works such as *Coca-Cola Vase*, which references popular culture and the commercial avant garde by painting Coca-Cola’s company logo over a Neolithic vessel (2007a; see Figure 3). Other works, such as *China Log* and *Map of China*, utilize the beams of centuries-old temples joined with traditional techniques to produce an image of China’s geography, blurring distinctions between the commercial avant garde and academic art (2005a; 2008a). This contemporary convergence of traditions and categories of art in Ai Weiwei’s work is representative not only of artistic intersections, but of cultural legacies that inform the categories on which they are based.

A New Public Politics: Political Parody and Dissent

Since the end of the Maoist period in 1978, political expression in the reform era has been largely limited to private space. This spatial delineation, described by author James Mann

as a reaction against the traumas of the Cultural Revolution, has recently begun to shift, a phenomenon sometimes equated with a relaxation of political regulation (Mann 2007). However, such tolerance for private political expression on the part of the Chinese government, Mann argues, is the product of the implicit understanding that it is *not* public (Mann 2007). In his work and activism, Ai has blatantly rejected the notion of political expression as private, instead reimagining the public sphere as a political realm through his usage of social media as a tool of both. Quoted in a 2008 article, Ai stated, “Everything is art. Everything is politics.” (Ai in Warsh 2013). In expressing this sentiment, Ai recalls Mao era policies of the Cultural Revolution, which succeeded in producing extensive politicization of both public and private realms. Yet, even as he does so, Ai remains critical of Maoist ideologies and the all-encompassing ideological framework, including restriction of expressive freedoms and the current authoritarian government.

In advocating for political liberation, Ai becomes the most recent voice in a history of highly-visible political dissent, which includes 1978’s Democracy Wall protests and the student movement of 1989. In both interviews and via social media, Ai has repeatedly called for freedom of political expression in China, in direct opposition to Chinese government policy. However, public political expression is not limited to dissent and builds upon Maoist era political practice as evidenced vividly during the Cultural Revolution, a period in Chinese history in which both public and private spaces were highly politicized, an arrangement that resulted in the persecution of thousands over the course of a ten-year period (Clark 2008).

For instance, Ai invokes the elements of the Cultural Revolution, such as the destruction of the Four Olds, and revisits the high socialist era but does so while referencing the Western liberal system. His pieces, especially those produced after Ai’s return to China following twelve years in the United States, remember and reimagine the destructive power wielded by the state during the Cultural Revolution through addressing themes of value, heritage, and dissent within the context of commercial culture (Horowitz 2012). Pieces such as *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), a polarizing triptych in which Ai apathetically destroys a nearly 2,000 year-old urn (see Figure 1), and *Fairytales* (2007b), a portion of which included the construction (and ruin) of a free-standing sculpture with the remains of Ming and Qing dynasty temples demolished for economic expansion, question the practical meaning of such themes. Premised on the act of cultural destruction, these works level critical questions toward contemporary Chinese society, yet are themselves tied to the legacies that have produced them.

In the years following 1989, political parody became popularized among artists in reaction to the commercialization of Maoist legacies (Li X. 1994). Informed by “reawakened Maoist fever” during the 1990s and at the same moment China was rapidly modernizing, artists began to use the invocation of the Maoist era as a means of ridicule toward the governing establishment, forming a new artistic genre based on high socialist political legacies as they did (Li X. 1994). By highlighting a distinctly ironic hybridization of seemingly contradictory ideologies of Communism and the market economy, artists created a comic commentary on the state. In a twist portrayed as laughable, China’s great Communist figure (Mao) had become sellable on a consumer level and, therefore, devoid of meaning (Li X. 1994, 45). In a broader scope, this emergence of political parody in China represented a rejection of Mao’s vision of “art to serve the state.” Yet many artists remained invested in their work as a tool of political expression, displaying a hybridities of legacy and emergent practice. This form of ideological

criticism and outspokenness, present in political parody, may also be seen as a precursor to contemporary iterations of political activist art, which remain staples of Ai Weiwei's work since his return to China in 1993.

While the political parody emerging in China's art scene after 1989 sought to make a mockery of the Chinese establishment by articulating ideological discontinuity, the avant-garde art of the day continued to retain legacies of Marxist-Communist ideology. Scholar Chang Tan argues that artists had not only inherited revolutionary symbols, such as Mao badges or the "Little Red Book" with which to synthesize parody, but the ideology behind them, including the rejection of bourgeois lifestyles and "commodity [fetishism]" (2012). More significantly, Chinese artists in particular retained a communal quality of work through particular aesthetics and "mass-oriented outreach" that emphasized the viewership above authorship (this would later shift towards increasingly individualized expression in the 1990s; Chang 2012, 178). For instance, experimental art groups, such as the '85 Art New Wave, emulated (perhaps inadvertently) what has been described as "one of the most fundamental concepts and technologies of Chinese political culture": the *yundong*, large-scale movement, affirming the lasting impressions of not only Communist ideology but practice and policy as well (Wu 2002, 13). In more recent years, the practice of "mass-oriented outreach" and the emulation of the *yundong* have become reimagined as dissidents and artists alike have gained access to blogging and social media and created methods of political resistance.

While such social media forms of dissent clearly break with the Party and may be said to be reminiscent of Western liberal political visions (e.g. democratic governance), contemporary Chinese art — especially that of Ai Weiwei — continues to be informed and structured by meaning resonant of Communist and Maoist ideology and practice. During the high socialist period, traditional and incoming foreign artistic styles were reconstituted within the revolutionary setting. The elevation of art as an explicitly political tool aimed for mass consumption during the Maoist era provided the basis for its contemporary usage as a medium of political dissent. While the Maoist era utilized the politicization of art as a public policy tool, in the contemporary era, the usage has become a tool of political outreach. Despite the oppositional usages, both remain similarly operated under the control of a charismatic male leader.² The art of the high socialist period was the product of historical and stylistic inputs, synthesized by the Chinese Communist Party for political purposes. In the aftermath (the reform era), art has shifted away from exclusive Party control but retains direct legacies from the preceding period as well as indirect legacies of pre-Communist China.

Minor Resistance in Commercialized Space

In the course of Ai Weiwei's evolution and the emergence of new forms of resistance over the past several years, the internet has played a critical, enabling role. Through blogging and the usage of social media such as Twitter, Ai has gained exposure to a new and broadening audience, even as censorship measures limit the accessibility of his written work. In utilizing the web as a tool of "mass-oriented outreach," Ai has contributed significantly to the production of a new mode of political expression within the commercialized and regulated space of the internet.

² Sasha Su-Ling Welland, personal communication, Oct. 2013.

In this, Ai has also participated in the creation of a new “minor genre of resistance” (Pun 2005), despite his status as a visible public figure, built upon the legacies of Mao era leadership.

From its introduction to China in 1994, the internet has rapidly emerged as a multifunctional space for users. Though initially perceived as a space ripe with expressive, democratic potential (Warf and Grimes 1997), the medium has evolved into a source of entertainment and information. In the process it has been reconfigured and has reproduced dynamics between state and non-state actors in China (Yang 2010; MacKinnon 2008). This evolutionary path is one molded by political restrictions and practices of censorship, which have curbed the development of a politically liberated space. Though political expression and civil society have failed to materialize in the Chinese cybersphere as the result of censorship and technological access, the internet has not been a stagnant space. In censoring political expression, the state has effectively guided the marketization of the internet and enabled it to become a producer of commercialized culture (Li S. 2010). However, even as Ai participates in the commercialization of the medium, he continues to advocate for the “incredible potential” that it retains through blogging and social media (Ai 2011). In his utilization of the internet as a platform of political speech, Ai proposes new methods of expression and large-scale connection within a commercialized space.

Ai Weiwei’s 2006 entrance into the cybersphere was a seminal moment for the evolution of Ai as a public figure. While it is tempting to analyze it as the arrival of democratic critique in China, it is, in fact, much more complex. Formerly recognized foremost as an artist, the blog platform gave Ai broader communicative access and provided him with an audience of like-minded internet users and international observers, transforming him over the course of the blog’s three-year existence from an artist dissident to a political-activist artist. The blog became an expressive outlet that enabled Ai to “create a sphere of autonomous action and self-determination within the constraints imposed upon [him]” (Li S. 2010, 64). In doing so, Ai reclaimed a public space as politically expressive through “mass-oriented outreach” reminiscent of established political technologies, including the *yundong*, and affirming the continued value of such high socialist era practices in the reform era, even as it functioned in the context of liberal ideals of freedom of speech. In participating in this pushback against restrictive policies of the Chinese government, Ai has garnered Western media attention and become an even more well-known public and commercialized figure in the process (Ambrozy 2011).

As his online presence became more pronounced, Ai increasingly began to use the internet as connective in relation to certain projects or protests. Though Ai’s work has long been politically critical in nature (see Ai’s *Safe Sex*, a 1986 commentary on the AIDS epidemic in China), his introduction to the internet as a tool enabled the production of new, participatory projects that involved members of Ai’s online public in the creation of art and the practice of dissidence reminiscent of the *yundong* and Maoist labor politics. During the Maoist period, high socialist politics and society were constituted, in part, through the labor sector. In the reform era, the participatory processes remain similar, but occur in different spaces and contexts. In utilizing the internet as a tool of outreach and participation, Ai simultaneously continues to evoke mass orientation of public politics while pushing the medium’s possibilities of collective action through social media within the confines of government restriction, demonstrated in works such as *Remembrance* (2010c) and *Names of the Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizens’ Investigation* (2008-11).

Through both his media usage and artistic works, Ai continues to mount a highly-visible resistance against China's authoritarian government. In examining this resistance, I draw from and build upon the work of Pun Ngai, whose book *Made In China* analyzes the expression of resistance from the perspective of "major" and "minor" genres in urban factory workers in Shenzhen, China (2005). While Pun dealt with socially-alienated female workers in Shenzhen, Ai represents a different type of actor. However, though internationally noted, Ai's resistance against oppression of expression still represents a "minor genre of resistance" and remains so as a result of his participation in commercialized cultural arenas.

In placing Ai Weiwei's resistance within the "minor genre," I refer to Pun's initial explanation of minor literature and build upon it. Of minor literature she writes, "A minor literature does not come from a minor language, it is *constructed by a minority within a major language*" (2005, 166; emphasis added). As an activist, Ai has succeeded in creating new expressions of resistance, but does so within a commercial context. Though popularly conceived among Western observers as a dissident first and foremost, over the last several decades, Ai has become a commercialized entity in his own right, due in part to his political activism and dissident status. By participating in the commercialization of culture and the production of the "major language," Ai has effectively relegated his political resistance to a "minor genre." Ai's web-based dissidence, occurring within the commercialized space of the internet, cannot be extricated from commercial cultural practice and, as such, becomes a part of a "minor genre of resistance," as opposed to a major one. As a commercialized entity himself, Ai's resistance is not only limited to the "minor genre," but in fact also serves to reproduce and reinforce norms of commercialization within society. In an ironic twist, Ai is not only a part of the systems he critiques, but perpetuates them as he does so.

One way to understand this is to see the internet as a kind of "safety valve," described by Rebecca MacKinnon as a way in which citizens may vent their frustrations without "taking their gripes to the streets" (2008, 33). In this way, the internet functions as a double-edged knife. Though utilized by anti-authoritarian individuals and groups as a way in which to express dissent, the internet also functions as a way in which to hold uprising at bay by diffusing tensions through public expression. These electronic vents, occasionally punctuated by physical gatherings as in the case of Ai's 2010 feast of river crabs (in protest of governmental control of information; Horowitz 2012), represent spurts of political organization that lack long-term significance and planning, and thus fail to be legitimized (Yang 2010). As such, Ai remains part of a highly-visible expression of minor-genre resistance.

Though Ai's expressions of political resistance and dissidence remain within the "minor genre," there is little doubt as to his aspirations as a "major genre" leader. Both in status and action, Ai recalls Mao as a contemporary iteration of the archetypal heroic male leader.³ Ai has been quoted on his art and activism as saying, "It's never about me. [My supporters] use me as a mark for themselves to recognize their own form of life: I become their medium" (Warsh 2013, 25). In this sentiment, Ai parallels Mao in numerous speeches and writings in which he espouses the duty of the state and those in power to "serve the people" (Welland 2002, 12), as well as the importance of selflessness. In his evocation of Mao and his rhetoric, Ai reinforces the Maoist

³ Sasha Su-Ling Welland, personal communication, Oct. 2013.

conception of the political leader as a charismatic man.⁴ Informed by these legacies of leadership, Ai also acknowledges the effectiveness of such strategies.

The nature of Ai Weiwei's resistance aside, he remains a powerful figure in the constitution of the Chinese internet as a "deepening" realm of public expression. Ai has successfully seized the opportunity provided by a theoretically open-access medium to fashion himself into an idol of sorts, in which his politics, persona, and art have become interwoven and elevated him to a status of international notoriety. This status is one that recalls Mao, known among his followers as a heroic leader of change and revolution, reconstituted in the internet age. Where Mao and his government once held a near monopoly on the dispersal of information, the internet has provided a means by which non-state actors become involved in the production of communications, especially on an international level (Esarey and Qiang 2011; Li S. 2010, 64). Nevertheless, it is a "minor genre of resistance" that is being produced.

Commercialized Threat

The advent and popularization of the internet in China has enabled new forms of political resistance and dissent. However, the medium remains tightly controlled by government regulation and censorship (effectively channeling it into a primarily commercial platform). As a communicative tool, the internet has enabled citizen collaboration in a new, although not entirely unfamiliar way. In reaching out to the people for works such as *Remembrance* (2010c) and *Names of the Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizens' Investigation* (2008-11), Ai has embraced values of selflessness, which harken to the high socialist era, and reintegrated them with acts of political expression. In doing so, he simultaneously utilizes and critiques socialist practices and ideological legacies in the creation of new forms of "minor genre" and multi-sited resistance.

Despite my description of Ai as a producer of a "minor genre of resistance," he remains a potential threat to the Party by building upon the successes of Mao's leadership to inspire a following of critical observers and dissidents, both inside and outside of China. Though weakened by his practical hybridization of status as both a critic of commercialism and a participant in commercialized culture, Ai's persona is one that continues to resonate with the people and, as such, represents a unique threat to the government. However, even as Ai strives to reconstitute the internet as a forum-like space for expression, the majority of Chinese usership over the last decade has been apolitical and within government guidelines (MacKinnon 2008; Yang 2003). This trend is the result of prohibitive practices, such as of use such as censorship, which have produced a non-threatening economic medium (MacKinnon 2008). As most users self-regulate their internet usage, this understanding of the internet as a commercialized entertainment space is reinforced.

Though he represents a commercial entity as well as a dissident, Ai's evocation of the Maoist legacy as a political figure resonates with the Chinese populace and symbolizes (in the Leninist conception) a loss of control (Esarey and Qiang 2011, 304). Over the course of China's Communist history, many have demonstrated and called for political change. However, the

⁴ Sasha Su-Ling Welland, personal communication, Oct. 2013.

means of expression has changed and it is that which has become increasingly problematic. Within China, censorship and the regulation of internet content have resulted in the transformation of what was initially perceived as a budding public forum in the early 2000s to a highly-commercialized space utilized primarily for entertainment and consumption. As such, the space has served to affirm and reproduce commercial culture as well as a sense of identity. In this context, Ai becomes significant, despite his own participation in the reinforcement of commercialized cultural norms as an outlier. Through his blogs and social media, Ai pushes the boundaries of what is possible on the internet in China. What is being *said*, (e.g., vehemently pro-democracy postings and philosophical monologues on freedom) becomes less important in comparison to how the medium is being *used*. In an ironic twist, it is this utilization of the internet, despite the highly commercialized nature of both the medium and Ai as a user, that I perceive to be the basis of Ai's status as a threat in the eyes of the Chinese government.

Despite his status as a threat, Ai Weiwei has affirmed specific legacies of Maoist political practices by revisiting them in the reform era while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of the internet as an expressive medium in China. In this status and his activism, Ai has built upon the legacies of Mao by constituting himself as a central male figure, representing the voice of the people and of political justice through ideas of service and selflessness. His work, which builds upon the genre of revolutionary realism, conveys a critique of the Party through realist representations of mundane objects by utilizing legible symbolism from the Maoist era to express dissidence in the current time. Similarly, the blog platform as well as Ai's recent adoption of social media such as Twitter, has enabled him to connect with like-minded individuals and a highly receptive Western audience through a mass-oriented style of outreach that echoes established political techniques such as the *yundong*. In doing so, Ai has interwoven his politics, life, and art with legacies of the Maoist era to form a powerful presence around which an online public has formed.

Over the course of his internet usage, Ai Weiwei has used the medium as a platform for bold critiques of the consumer and the state, but has also succeeded in reinvigorating Maoist ideals of service to the people and selflessness. During the blog's operation (2006-2009), Ai's postings were both irreverent and overtly political, voicing criticism leveled at both the state and complacent citizens (Ai 2011). He posed deliberately controversial questions, posting under titles such as, "If You Aren't Anti-China, Are You Still Human?" (2009) and "Ignorance and Hypocrisy Always Win" (2006). Over the course of the blog's three-year run, Ai Weiwei amassed nearly 3,000 posts, taking "full advantage of [his] expressive potential" (Ai 2011). While remaining critical of the commercialized internet, Ai continues to utilize and advocate for the internet as an expressive platform, despite governmental censorship (Ai 2011). Though scholars have described the internet as a "safety valve" through which personal frustrations can be expressed, Ai has pushed this type of expression further, utilizing personal expression as a basis for collaboration through works such as *Remembrance* (2010c). The work, an auditory memorialization of over 5,000 student casualties of the earthquake in Sichuan in 2008, asked volunteers to participate by each recording a student's name. By taking part, individuals engaged in "service"-oriented acts of personal expression and selflessness within the framework of a collaborative project, creating a brief network of dissidence through which collective disquiet was expressed.

With his usage of the internet in processes of art-making and political dissention, Ai Weiwei has challenged conventions of resistance within reform era China. Through his own persona and rhetoric, Ai recalls Mao as a charismatic male leader endeavoring to “serve the people” and fostering selflessness in others.⁵ Though Ai’s politics contradict many of Mao’s policies, particularly concerning freedom of expression, Ai builds upon his successes as a political leader and similarly seeks to publicize political expression through art and the utilization of the internet as a political medium. In doing so, Ai not only revisits Mao, but also the Cultural Revolution, in which expressions in public and private spaces were highly politicized and served to reinforce ideological and political legacies attached to both.

The perpetuation and reconstitution of Mao era legacies as conducted by Ai Weiwei are significant in their representation of a larger, ongoing phenomenon in China. As the nation continues to modernize, political, economic, and social vestiges of the past are being hybridized and reconciled with reform-era structures and policies in the production of new forms. In the process, the legacies of Maoism remain ambiguous, both evoked and challenged, but no less present. Made visible in Ai’s artwork and public persona, these legacies of meaning are part of broader processes and, in their presence, continue to inform and influence the reconstitution of Chinese society in the reform era.

⁵ Sasha Su-Ling Welland, personal communication, Oct. 2013.

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Appendix



Figure 1: *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995)



Figure 2: *Names of the Student Earthquake Victims Found by the Citizen Investigation* (2008-11)



Figure 3: *Coca-Cola Vase* (2007a)



Figure 4: *Map of China* (2008a)



Figures 5: *Fragments* (2005b)



Figure 6: *Surveillance Camera* (2010d)