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‘She Lived Happily for Seven Years’: How Official Corruption in China May Provide Lessons for America

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China no longer tries to conceal its treatment of political dissidents. In early 2011, the Communist regime decided once again to crack down on those who dared to protest government behavior.\(^1\) Officials had numerous human rights activists arrested or detained without due process, in an effort to prevent them from criticizing the government any further. Between February and April 2011, when “anonymous calls for ‘jasmine rallies’ in China began circulating on the internet,” 26 people were arrested for inciting subversion of state power, 30 disappeared altogether, and 200 were detained with their movements completely restricted.\(^2\)

Probably the most well-known of all detained dissidents was Ai Weiwei. For years, Ai Weiwei has used his art to address the corruption of the Chinese communist government.\(^3\) Ai was arrested for economic crimes and pornography in April 2011 as he was waiting to board a flight to Hong Kong. This was his second arrest. In August 2009 he was arrested and beaten so severely that he had to have emergency brain surgery; all because he was testifying for Tan Zuoren, a fellow investigator of the Sichuan earthquake school collapse.\(^4\)

The 2008 Sichuan earthquake devastated the Sichuan province of China on May 12, 2008, killing an estimated 69,000 people. To most, the greatest consequence of the natural disaster was that over 7,000 schoolrooms collapsed instantaneously, killing somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 students (most of who belonged to one child families).\(^5\) Because of the disproportionate number of school collapses in comparison to older buildings nearby, many reports blamed corrupt local government officials and construction companies for being negligent in the construction of the schools, ignoring civil engineering standards, saving materials and taking shortcuts while pocketing the surplus. After so many online and news media postings about the “tofu schoolhouses,” as they were being called, the Beijing government promised to investigate into the allegations of shoddy construction and corruption.\(^6\) However, instead of following through with this promise, their attention instead seemed to be on silencing protesting parents and locals, and critical foreign journalists. Their silencing efforts included offering monetary compensation (equivalent to $8,800 USD) to the parents affected by the tragedy in exchange for their vow of silence;\(^7\) ordering the Chinese news media to cease all reporting on the collapses and to focus instead on uplifting stories; and arresting anybody who continued to openly criticize or question what had happened, like Liu Shaokun, a Sichuan school teacher. Shaokun was just one of dozens imprisoned and ordered

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2 Ibid.
Ai’s first project about the earthquake was an investigative documentary that aimed to expose the cover up by the Chinese government. His project helped to reveal what most people were speculating – that the school buildings were not constructed to code, and were in fact the reason behind the deaths. Ai aimed to compile a list of all the students killed in the earthquake, since the government would not release the actual number of deaths or the names of the victims. A little less than a year after the earthquake, Ai’s list had 5,385 names. He published the names as well as numerous articles documenting the investigation on his online blog (which was shut down by authorities a few weeks later).

While he was in Sichuan he saw remnants – mainly backpacks and school supplies – of the thousands of lives lost; the very same lives that Ai said would “disappear within the state propaganda” and cause everybody to forget everything. He was inspired to create the installation piece So Sorry, which he constructed from nine thousand children’s backpacks. They spelled out a quote from a mother whose child died in one of the schools. The line read: “She lived happily for seven years in this world” in Chinese characters. Ai said the title of his show referred to “the apologies frequently expressed by governments and corporations when their negligence leads to tragedies” such as this one. In April 2011, two months before the opening of the exhibit, Ai was arrested. He was formally charged with suspected economic crimes (a.k.a. tax evasion) and pornography. His family did not hear about his detention or his whereabouts for 81 days.

Many people believe that this crackdown, which was deemed “one of the most repressive campaigns in more than a decade,” was being staged because the Chinese government was and continues to be fearful that the democratic uprisings in the Middle East and Africa would spread to China, threatening its stability. China targeted artists, writers, and bloggers who had been continually pushing the boundaries. Even though China has major firewall systems in place to censor information and alternative viewpoints, Ai is just one of many who figured out how to use an internet connection from outside of the country to access forbidden sites like Twitter. Ai uses Twitter to speak out about important global values, like freedom of expression and creativity. The outlet has enabled him to share his thoughts with 72,000 followers, most of whom are also suffering from the oppression of the Chinese government. In February 2011, Ai posted on his Twitter page about the Jasmine rallies – a major online campaign in China that called for Arab Spring style uprisings: “I didn’t care about jasmine at first, but people who are scared by jasmine sent out information about how harmful jasmine is often, which makes me realize that jasmine is what scares them the most. What a jasmine!” A few days later, the police picked him up at the airport.

Ai’s art, and by extension his arrests, have gotten a lot of recognition, both internationally and domestically. When Ai was arrested in 2011, the United States government and the European Union demanded his immediate

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10 McMahon, “Ai Weiwei’s ’Remembering’ and the Politics of Dissent”
11 Ramzy, “Ai Weiwei Held in Sichuan”
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
release. The international arts community led demonstrations and 24-hour peaceful sit-ins; they also organized petitions, collecting more than 90,000 signatures. The Tate Modern in London, the home to Ai’s Sunflower Seeds exhibition, displayed a large sign on their façade that read “Release Ai Weiwei.”[15] And in 2012, American film-maker Alison Klayman, made Ai the subject of her documentary film called Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry.

Ai also felt incredible support from his own people when the government served him a $2.4 million dollar fine for tax evasion, to be paid in full within fifteen days, with $31,640 added each day it was late. His fans sent donations via PayPal; they wrapped cash around fruit and delivered it to his doorstep; they folded money into paper airplanes and sent them flying over the wall into his yard.[16] While the donors ranged from rural Chinese farmers to men driving Mercedes, he also had the support of other Chinese activists, like food-safety activist Zhao Lianhai, whose infant child became ill after consuming formula that had been contaminated by the chemical melamine (Note: The 2008 Chinese milk scandal was another result of corruption in China, when the chemical was added to milk to cause it to appear to have a higher protein content. China reported an estimated 300,000 victims, with six infant deaths, and 860 infant hospitalizations). Ai’s thousands of supporters helped him pay a 8.45m yuan bond (about 1.2 million dollars), allowing him to challenge the charges. Critics accused Ai of “illegal fundraising.”[17] In October, 2012 the court rejected his appeal against the charges. The government continues to closely monitor him and has revoked his passport and freedom to travel.[18]

Ai’s brave fans also came together in support around the Pornography charge levied against him after he posted two photographs online of himself completely nude, except for a toy alpaca strategically placed. The photos had a caption that translates into “Grass mud horse covering the middle.” This term can apparently be interpreted in Chinese as “F*** your mother, the party central committee.”[19] When Ai was questioned about the photographs by police, he said that he took the photographs as a way to “remove fear and a feeling of isolation” – two defining characteristics of “certain societies.”[20] A website was created called “Ai Wei Fans’ Nudity – Listen, Chinese Government: Nudity is not Pornography” where people posted nude photographs of themselves. Wen Yunchao, who showed solidarity by baring all for the camera, said he and others chose this extreme method of protest because “the interpretation of people’s naked bodies in itself is an individual freedom and a form of creative freedom…we don’t see any pornographic elements in (Ai’s) photographs.”[21]

In October, 2012 Ai released his latest piece of protest art. His cover of the dance video called “Gangnam Style” originally released by the Korean popstar, Psy, shows Ai dancing in a goofy way, gyrating alongside both Chinese and Western friends. The shots of Ai intercut with shots of horses, money, and expensive cars.[22] Ai has always said that freedom, whether it’s of expression, of creativity, or – as this video shows – of the ability to behave in

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21 Ibid.

whatever outrageous, silly way he wants, is the most important value to him. Although the majority of the video appears harmless and fun, Ai does inject critical undertones, in an effort to “wake up the largest nation in human history.”[23] Ai reuses the phrase of his nude photographs, “Grass Mud Horse,” to title his video, and includes several shots of himself with handcuffs, which seems to be an obvious reference to his own incarceration, and to how ineffective the government’s persecution against him has been.

Even though some may interpret the support for Ai as a sign that the Chinese people may finally challenge the government; and though some reports say that people in China are increasingly imitating Ai’s outspoken approach; and furthermore, even though Ai himself says that these protests make him feel like “young people still have some conscience” – the total number of his supporters is incredibly small when compared to China’s vast population. While some say the mainstream public in China remains opposed to “radical and confrontational political stances,” preferring the status quo, it seems more likely that people are afraid of the consequences that result from open dissent.[24][25]

So why is corruption in China important to the American people? In this country, it would be impossible for companies to get away with adding toxic chemicals to the food products, or for them to disregard safety codes while building children’s schools. In the United States, we do not let big corporations profit at the expense of our safety.

Wait a minute…

In September 2012, contaminated injections from the New England Compounding Center resulted in an outbreak of fungal meningitis that killed 34 people. The investigative report concluded that both state and federal regulators were to blame, for having allowed “bad actor” NECC to remain open, after over a decade of repeatedly risking public health.[26] On the food safety front, in 2008, several hundred people in Oklahoma became victims of the virulent E. coli bacterium known as 0111, of which harmful effects include bloody diarrheal illness, kidney failure, heart failure, and death. 0111 is one of six strains that food-safety experts say are increasingly appearing in meats and other food products in the U.S. It took the Obama administration more than two years to officially regulate the six E. coli strains, even though the bacteria had already infected 113,000 people in the U.S., resulting in 300 hospitalizations a year.[27] Until the decision to regulate the six strains, federal inspectors were only required to screen one E. coli strain. According to Newsweek, the delay in updating our food safety requirements by increasing screenings, for example, is just one of several potential weaknesses identified by an investigation of America’s safety net against food poisoning and bioterrorism that the magazine carried out in 2012. The review found that USDA inspectors are “stretched so thin,” that they frequently miss required plant inspections, particularly in the Northeast.[28] Also, inspectors check only about one percent of the food shipped into the U.S. from foreign countries, and only about 25% of domestic plants a year. Representative John Dingell of Michigan,

28 Ibid.
a fierce advocate for tougher food safety laws is certain that “a lot more people are going to have a bellyache and die” before things get better. [29]

Ai Weiwei mocks Chinese federal officials for delivering empty apologies after disasters, but at least they make some attempt to express regret, even if it’s insincere. Perhaps the American people are due an apology from the government after these public health disasters.

So is China actually the model for America’s turn in the wrong direction? Over five decades since corporations caused the collapse that led to the Great Depression, Americans gradually built up their government structure, putting in place labor, environmental and food and drug laws, in response to over-reaching corporations and greedy executives; and now, the government is talking about dismantling that system, by gutting the Environmental Protection Agency, stripping down the Department of Education, and getting rid of labor unions. So, maybe instead of criticizing China for being backwards, America should make an effort to draw lessons from the disasters there, like the milk scandal, the 2011 high-speed rail crash, in which 38 people were killed and 192 were injured, and the school collapses – all caused by corruption and greed, so as to best protect its own children from the fatal consequences of such corruption.

In a 2012 CNN Special, Ai Weiwei provides the Chinese perception of a regressive America: “Many here believe America has lost the credibility it once had on the world stage. Unlike the 1960s or ‘70s, when America had a more convincing claim as the moral arbiter of the world, many Chinese officials now believe the United States is only concerned with its own economic gain.” [30] He said that while the Chinese people desire democracy, they are hesitant to adopt the system of the U.S. – in which “a vast number of voices are drowned out by others” – because it does not seem to be engendering progress for Americans. [31] He referenced our recent election, specifically

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29 Conant, “America’s Dangerous Food-Safety System”
31 Ibid.
how we allow wealthy individuals and corporations to pour outrageous amounts of money and advertising into the campaigns, as an example of how our democratic system has been tarnished. His description of these campaigns, “Mere showcases, extravagant yet empty – and the time, money and energy spent on the grand spectacle could have been used to solve specific problems for Americans” echoes his critique of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which he described as, “A fake smile, an elaborate costume party with the sole intention of glorifying the country, unable to “bring joy or happiness to its people.”[32][33]

Though Ai’s life has had its heartbreaking and painful moments, he continues to value and reflect upon them all through art. Before the opening of his current show titled Ai Weiwei: According to What, which will be traveling around the U.S. throughout 2013, Ai said that it is the adversities he faced in China that allow him to naturally conceive of works that challenge beliefs and question established assumptions.[34] The show tackles similar themes as those taken on in the past, but Ai has assumed a new strength. Power rests in a large coiled snake which hovers on the ceiling above. The serpent is made from a familiar object: children’s backpacks, this time varying in size to represent the differing ages of the earthquake victims. In another room Ai presents the final list in black and white, of all the children who died. In this piece, the painful truth prevails. Rather than judge China’s backward behavior, perhaps Americans need to open their eyes to the growing resemblance between the two nations. Ai points out a significant similarity that deserves recognition and attention: “The people in both nations share a sense of hopelessness; they feel empowered and disappointed at the same time but on different matters. No matter the country or system, it’s clear that the relationship between the masses and their leaders must be transformed.”[35]

32 Weiwei, “Ai Weiwei: Despite Flaws, America Should be Proud”
35 Weiwei, “Ai Weiwei: Despite Flaws, America Should be Proud”
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