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Citizen Ai: Warrior, Jester, and Middleman

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Ai Weiwei is famous for crossing boundaries, especially the boundary between art and politics. To appreciate the often contradictory nature of Ai's work, this essay employs multiple narratives: "Ai the Heroic Warrior" who criticizes the Chinese government; "Ai the Court Jester" who plays with the Chinese state and Western media; and "Ai the Middleman" who acts as a broker between China and the West, between young and old people, and between civil society and the state in the PRC. The essay concludes that a fourth narrative can bring together these three stories in a multicoded understanding of Ai's work: "Ai the Citizen Intellectual" who sometimes works with the state, and at other times against it—but always for the good of China. By comparing Ai's work with that of other public intellectuals and placing it in the context of debates about civil society, the conclusion argues that "citizen intellectual" also tells us about a broader movement of activists and public intellectuals who are creating a new form of political space in postsocialist China.

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 a key dissident on the global stage. He first gained international fame as the artistic consultant for 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 art gallery; 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. Following his release in June 2011 after eighty-one 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 United States surveillance operation PRISM, Ai argued that by invading people's privacy "the US is behaving like China" (Ai 2013b).

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.[1] 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. Ai's activities are likewise full of contradictions: He is a global artistic

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[1]This essay is based on the author's 90-minute interview with Ai Weiwei at his studio in Beijing on May 27, 2013.

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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, this essay appeals to the notion of ironic tension, where "[i]rony 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" (Haraway 1991, 149). 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.

The conclusion thus 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 complex 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 just for the good of the party-state.[2] 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 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.

To be clear: these narratives are not Ai's self-understandings; he prefers to see himself as a "rebel," and vehemently denies that he is a broker.[3] Yet the narratives are useful as heuristic devices that can help us make sense of Ai's various contradictory thoughts and activities. Employing narratives to frame Ai's work is helpful because, instead of aiming to "tell the whole truth," narratives are admittedly partial accounts. Rather than seeing "incompleteness" as a weakness of this essay's particular account, Ai's work suggests that partiality is a condition of postmodern life (Nietzsche [1887] 2001; White 1973). This essay will first present each narrative sympathetically to appreciate its contours, before more critically analyzing its limitations. Rather than take a positivist approach that seeks to resolve Ai Weiwei's contradictions in search of a new truth, this essay takes an aesthetic approach that allows for multiple interpretations to fruitfully coexist (see Yurchak 2006).

Certainly, Ai's experience and his body of work are unique. However, this essay will draw broader conclusions about political activism in China by comparing Ai's work with

[2]I also explore the concept of "citizen intellectual" in *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future* (Callahan 2013); while *China Dreams* focuses on Ai Weiwei as a dissident, this article more thoroughly considers how he is a citizen intellectual.

[3]Ai Weiwei, interview with the author, May 27, 2013.

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that of other public intellectuals—especially dissident Liu Xiaobo and filmmaker Jia Zhangke. The conclusion will place Ai Weiwei's peculiar mix of art and politics in the context of debates over the meaning of "civil society" in China to argue that citizen intellectuals are creating a new form of political space in postsocialist 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 public opinion (see Hua, Ai, and Feng 2000). He thus is a polarizing figure among both artistic and nonartistic 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."[4] 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; also see Barmé 2011).

Actually, art and politics have always had an intimate relation in China, starting with imperial Confucianism, which relied on rites and music to order the masses, and continuing with the rule of the 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 Barmé 1989; Hui 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 three decades 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 Callahan 2013; Liu Mingfu 2013; Pan 2009; Xu 2011). 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 Mingfu 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 2011a, 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

[4]Ai Weiwei, interview.

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trial" (Ai 2013a). In one tweet he declares, "Every delight we have on Twitter is a death of dictatorship and totalitarianism" (September 3, 2009), while in another he 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"[5] (Ai in Callahan 2014).

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" (Hui 1989). 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" (Wang 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. Like Ai, filmmaker Jia Zhangke is also worried about the lack of social justice in China, and argues that the PRC needs to have more freedom of speech and freedom of expression. But Jia's career trajectory gives an alternative example of how to be an engaged intellectual in China (see Cheah 2012). He was well-known in the 1990s for his "underground films" about people who were marginalized in China's transition to a market economy (see Cheung 2010; Jia 2009). Since his films could not be shown in the PRC, his main audience was the international film festival circuit, where he was very successful.

In 2004, however, Jia decided to work within China's propaganda system because he wanted a large Chinese audience for his films. He thus submitted his fourth feature film, *The World* (世界), to the PRC's censors, who approved it for distribution in China. Unlike dissident directors who produce "packaged dissent" with an elite and often foreign audience in mind (Barmé 1999), 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 2009a, 95). In this way, Jia hopes to raise "public consciousness" about the problems facing China's underclass (Jia in Veg 2010, 60).

Jia 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. As he explains, after 2004 "there was more discussion in the censorship process. In the past, no one came to talk to us. They would just say 'yes' or 'no'. No one would listen to the director, no one talked to the director about why he or she made the film or why he or she dealt with the subject in this manner. After 2004, directors began to have the opportunity to discuss and express their own views." He concludes that "I've always believed that we must encourage progress in China's system. If China makes progress, then we must recognize it. The censorship process has slowly become more relaxed" (Jia in Wong 2013b). And Jia has been quite successful: his films, which still examine the underside of

[5]Ai Weiwei, interview.

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modernization and globalization in China, are now screened on the mainland, and they continue to win awards both in the PRC and in international film festivals.

Ai, however, is wary of such stories of political progress in China. 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."[6] 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 also 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 Xiaobo 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. Art critic Chang Tsong-zung explains that Ai is "one of the few people who really understands art as a political platform, as a platform for negotiation . . . in very, very creative ways."[7] 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. Ai Weiwei thus has taken a different road both from Liu Xiaobo, who directly opposes the system as a traditional dissident, and from Jia Zhangke, who tries to be a critical voice within the system. Ai takes advantage of our decentralized and hyper-connected world where information is power to critically engage with the Chinese government in new and interesting ways.

Although his ideals are classically liberal and his methods are very high-tech, Ai's strategy is also similar to that of the 2,000-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).

[6]Ai Weiwei, interview.
[7]Chang Tsong-zung, interview with the author, Hong Kong, June 26, 2013.

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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 twenty-four-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.[8]

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, 54).

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."[9] 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 psy-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. 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.'"[10] 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" (chap. 73).

[8]Ai Weiwei, interview.
[9]Ai Weiwei, interview.
[10]Ai Weiwei, interview.

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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."[11] 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."[12]

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 combination of art and 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 is easy to get caught up in the enthusiasm of the "Ai the Heroic Warrior" narrative. Its uncompromising view of the individual versus 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 Xiaobo 2012, 325). As mentioned above, Jia Zhangke likewise stated, "I've always believed that we must encourage progress in China's system. If China makes progress, then we must recognize it" (Jia in Wong 2013b). Against Ai's search for pure truth and total freedom, public intellectuals like Jia Zhangke and Liu Xiaobo take a more aesthetic approach to politics that leads to an "increased toleration for rival points of view" in China (Kraus 2004, 232). Indeed, as Jia's successful career most prominently shows, there is space in the PRC for engaged social critique. Unfortunately, Ai's practice is often to denounce Chinese compatriots like Jia who work within the system (see Ai 2010; Ai in Kennedy 2011).

[11]Ai Weiwei, interview.
[12]Ai Weiwei, interview.

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Ai's search for the "singular truth" actually plays into the hand of the Communist Party's Central Propaganda Department, which 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 respective legitimacies and identities. Ai's anti-state oppositional discourse thus tends to reproduce the state even as it resists it (see Foucault 1991). In this sense, Ai is like many of China's "patriotic worriers," whose critical inquiry, even in its post-positivist form, tends to search for the correct theory and method to "save China." Rather than engaging in political critique, such patriotic worrying tends to reproduce the grand narratives of the state and civilization (Davies 2007, 23, 7).

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 characteristically 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 mockumentary of his time in detention. Such images exemplify Ai's strategy of turning political problems into edutainment opportunities.

Mockumentary art that plays with political piety is not a new method for Ai. In 1994, for the fifth 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 Kafkaesque 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 smartass. The scene described by

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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 premodern Europe and China (see Otto 2001). Jesters 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 monarchs 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): 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 (CCTV 2010), and he is a major character in another mainland TV series, *The Prince of the Han Dynasty* (CCTV 2002).[13]

In a similar vein, art critic Holland Cotter (2011) 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."[14]

Ai's comical 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 fifth-generation leadership that took control in 2012–13 is dominated by a group called the "princelings" (太子党), 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

[13]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 (Long Yin 1999; also see Liu Kang 2004, 152–53).
[14]Ai Weiwei, interview.

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famous princelings are China's new president Xi Jinping and his sometime rival Bo Xilai, a political rising star who in 2013 was sentenced to life in prison for corruption, bribery, and abuse of power. While Ai sees himself as an outsider, he is also the ultimate insider: a princeling.

His father Ai Qing was a famous communist writer 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 to argue that the leadership should be more open to diverse ideas, Ai Qing engaged in a traditional intellectual critique of power (see Barmé 1999; Goldman 1967, 174–76).

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. 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.

Since the stories of court jesters have been shown prominently on Chinese television —which is tightly controlled by the party-state—it would seem that there is implicit support for a satirical view of the present among some leaders. By detaining Ai in 2011, the Chinese state certainly treated him like a court jester who had committed *lèse-majesté*. 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 did not respect the limits that have to exist in a "harmonious society" (*Global Times* 2011b, 2011a). The new fifth-generation leadership, however, seems less tolerant of jester-like figures: 2013 witnessed a new crackdown on advocates of political reform and independent voices on the Internet.

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." *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

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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*. The *coup de grâce* was when *ArtReview* chose Ai as the "most powerful artist in the world" (*ArtReview* 2011).

Although Ai is presented here as a powerful figure, we should remember that jesters are never in control of the game. He thus appreciates the problems of "being dissidented"—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?"[15] Ai thus gets caught in a Catch-22 situation when he is played by the system.

While Ai seems like a quintessential jester (for good and for ill), it is difficult to use this narrative to understand Jia Zhangke's work. If anything, his films are often criticized for being long, slow, and overly earnest. Rather than being a princeling, he comes from an average family in a small interior city. But like Ai, Jia tries to play with the system, and at times is played by the system. Jia plays with the system, on the one hand, to get his films distributed in China, and on the other, to attract foreign support from the international film festival circuit for his characteristically dystopian view of contemporary China.

At times, serving these two masters is difficult. For example, to the disappointment of many Western commentators, Jia decided to follow Beijing's lead and withdraw his films from the Melbourne International Film Festival in 2009. China urged its directors to boycott the festival to protest the prominent exhibition of *10 Conditions of Love*, a documentary about Uighur dissident Rebiya Kadeer whom Beijing sees as a terrorist who instigated July 2009's Xinjiang riots. (There is no evidence for this.) Jia gave an interesting explanation for withdrawing his two films:

> We have no interest in meddling with the festival's freedom of artistic exchange. Withdrawing from Melbourne is, rather, a kind of self-restraint. Xinjiang history is not something I'm well acquainted with, but the recent Urumqi violent incident was only two weeks ago, and I, at a minimum, should take a cautious approach. I don't want to do anything that would tarnish those who died. (Jia in Osnos 2009b)

Rather than being negative in the sense of protesting against either the Kadeer film or China's censorship of it, Jia focuses on doing his own work in a positive way—including preparations for the film he made for the Shanghai Expo 2010, *I Wish I Knew* (海上传奇, analyzed below). Rather than understand this as "self-censorship," it is more interesting to consider how Jia is able to avoid "being dissidented"; he thus is able to play the system to make fascinating films on topics of his own choosing. While Jia wants the flexibility to choose his battles, he sometimes is played by the system and gets caught in a no-win situation. After withdrawing from Melbourne, he was widely criticized for selling out to the state—including an intervention by Ai Weiwei (Ai 2010).

Like Lear's fool, both Ai Weiwei and Jia Zhangke often get caught between a rock and a hard place: "I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are: they'll have me

[15]Ai Weiwei, interview.

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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.4.186–88).

Three years after his release from illegal detention, Ai Weiwei has gone from a liminal figure who blurs the fields of art and politics to a figure who is in limbo. He had not engaged in political activities beyond those associated with his own legal case. Ai still did not 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.

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. His current political project uses the illegalities of the state's legal case against him as a teaching moment (see FakeCase.com, n.d.).

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 Braester 2005; Gold, Guthrie, and Wank 2002; Hildebrandt 2013). In New York in the 1980s, his East Village apartment was a meeting place for newly arrived Chinese filmmakers, 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 cultural broker, the go-to guy who brought people together and made things happen (see Braester 2005). 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, 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 2011c, 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 a broader European audience (Ai 2005).

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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. Ai's "citizens' investigation" in 2008 and his activities since his release from detention in 2011 both show how he has extended this role as a middleman to cyberspace; his microblog continues to serve as a public space that brings together young political activists.[16]

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 to talk about planning. You meet a lot of leaders in different provinces because we got involved in these projects."[17] 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 the "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: after the project did not work out, he apologized and paid Ai's expenses.

Ai Weiwei's art often addresses political topics that might make the Chinese party-state uneasy: *Remembering* (2009), the mosaic of school bags to mark the death of 5,212 school children in the Sichuan earthquake, for example. At times, however, his art chimes with the party-state's political and cultural campaigns. Ai's *Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads* (2011) exhibit in New York, for example, commemorates the many artifacts that were looted by the French and British armies when they torched Beijing's Palace of Perfect Brightness (圓明园) in 1860 (Ai 2011b). The exhibit, which was still touring the world in 2014, raises important cultural and political issues in ways that are quite harmonious with the party-state's goal of returning such plundered art to China.

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, CPPCC), an advisory body that meets annually alongside the National People's Congress. Although one would think that such offers ended in 2008 as a result of his activist response to the Sichuan earthquake, Ai reports that officials were asking him to join the CPPCC up until just a few months before his illegal detention in 2011: "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

[16]Anonymous young activist, interview with the author, Beijing, May 27, 2013; Ai Weiwei, interview.
[17]Ai Weiwei, interview.

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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."[18] (also see Barmé 2011).

Here Ai is thinking like Jia Zhangke, who, as mentioned above, now generally works within China's film system. Indeed, in 2010 Jia even worked directly with the propaganda system to make *I Wish I Knew*, the official film for Shanghai's World Expo 2010 that was shown ten times a day for 100 days at the Expo site. Although Jia was widely criticized by political activists for taking government funds to make this film (see Ai 2010), *I Wish I Knew* actually addresses many politically sensitive issues, including life during the Cultural Revolution and in pre-1949 Shanghai. Jia felt that showing the film to the Expo's broad audience would enable people to critically engage with China's messy contemporary history: "By the end of October, when the Expo is over, at least 200,000 people will have seen the film. This is a very good opportunity" (Jia in Agence France-Presse 2010).

In reference to his recent film, *A Touch of Sin* (天注定), which addresses the issue of violence in China and won best screenplay at Cannes in 2013, Jia explained how he was able to persuade China's censors: "During the censorship process, they said they were more concerned about certain bits of dialogue, which I felt didn't have a huge impact on the film. But they also made suggestions about taking out some of the more violent scenes. They didn't say I have to take it out; they were just suggesting I do that. I didn't want to change it, so explained my own view," and kept in the scenes (Jia in Wong 2013a).

But like with Ai's on-again, off-again invitation to join the CPPCC, for Jia the party-state is a fickle partner. Although *A Touch of Sin* gained the censors' approval, and was scheduled for release in the PRC in the autumn of 2013, as of this writing (August 2014), the film has yet to be distributed in China.

Even more than Jia, Ai Weiwei 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).

Ai's eighty-one-day illegal detention in 2011, however, shows the negative side of the middleman narrative's liminal politics. Instead of recognizing Ai as an artist, his captors often treated him like a con-artist. His situation and status remain characteristically unclear: Ai actually was never officially arrested, and two years after his release he was still under an informal form of house arrest.

Although the role of ideas is missing from the middleman narrative, its focus on connections and networks 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; Hildebrandt 2013). One of Ai's early comrades described his *modus operandi* as "Ai the Cobbler" (Huang 1989), who not only stitches together different objects and ideas in his art (most notably in *Shoes* [1987]), but also stitches together different people in networks.

[18]Ai Weiwei, interview.

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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."[19] 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 for "br[eaking] 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!" (Nietzsche [1887] 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.

Conclusion: Citizen Ai

Because the state is so strong in China, it is easy to frame politics in terms of officials versus dissidents. This approach has been most powerfully argued in the work of Merle Goldman, especially *From Comrade to Citizen* (Goldman 2005). But as my critique of the "Ai the Heroic Warrior" narrative showed, focusing dissidents who directly oppose the state takes too narrow a view of Chinese politics, and tends to reproduce state power even as activists resist it. Others look to NGOs as the site of civil society in China. In *Civil Society in China*, for example, Karla Simon (2013) traces a long history of NGOs in China to conclude that they are gaining influence as an independent force against the state. Timothy Hildebrandt (2013), on the other hand, persuasively explains that to be successful NGOs must work closely with the party-state as "service providers," rather than as independent sites of oppositional civil society. He concludes that NGO activism is self-limited, un-institutionalized, and thus unlikely to lead to political reform through a vibrant civil society. If most NGOs are actually GONGOs (government-organized NGOs) or even PONGOs (party-organized NGOs), then we have to look elsewhere for civil society.

This essay suggests that we need to widen our view of activism beyond dissidents and NGOs to include the artists, filmmakers, bloggers, novelists, and scholars who work within the system. Here I will summarize the three narratives in order to propose a fourth

[19]Ai Weiwei, interview.

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narrative—"Ai the Citizen Intellectual"—to argue that civil society is being created in post-socialist China through the small-scale work of such individuals and informal groups.

Ai Weiwei is a complex figure who mixes art and politics in interesting—and often contradictory—ways. To make sense of his work, this essay employs three narratives: 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, where activists weave together East and West, young and old people, 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. 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 practice has 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 also is played by it.

The middleman narrative is useful because it shifts away from seeing politics in terms of ideas and audiences (and agency and structure), 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 for 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, and individual activity and community building (see Pieke 2004; Yurchak 2006). Citizen intellectuals thus do not worry about contradictions, because they value the multivalent ironic tension that holds "incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true" (Haraway 1991, 149).

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 (see Shen 2010), 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 (80, 100–103). Havel 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" (108).

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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 postsocialist China is in a similar situation to that of late-socialist countries in Eastern Europe in the 1980s (see Yurchak 2006). 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 intense 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 organizations. 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).[20]

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 up 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 different from the public intellectuals found in more liberal societies (Liu and McCormick 2011). 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 (see Davies 2007). "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 filmmaker Jia Zhangke 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* (中国梦, 2013) of building up the PRC's military power to challenge America was written as a

[20]For a sense of the wide variety of activities engaged in by citizen intellectuals in contemporary China, see the essays on "The China Story" website, hosted by the China in the World project at the Australian National University (http://www.thechinastory.org).

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personal commentary rather than an official statement from the People's Liberation Army. 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 "Vaclav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent" in 2012 (Human Rights Foundation 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.

Ai's art-activism is certainly unique, growing out of multiple contexts that other Chinese citizen intellectuals do not share, for example, his princeling background and his decade in New York. But as the comparison with Jia Zhangke shows, Ai is part of a broader movement of citizen intellectuals who are trying to navigate the shifting terrain of Chinese culture and politics. Rather than having to judge their activity in terms of "dissident" versus "official intellectual," the four narratives allow us to have a more nuanced view: while Ai may play the heroic warrior more than Jia, he also works with the state as a broker. Although Jia sometimes works closely with the state, his films also pursue the grand objectives of freedom and social justice. Rather than seeing Ai's and Jia's work as a set of contradictions, the flexibility of the citizen intellectual narrative allows us to put such individual events and activities into a broader and more nuanced context. In this way, Ai and Jia are examples of how citizen intellectuals are creating civil society in new ways in postsocialist China.

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