

Zheng Shengtian

A Conversation with Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei's studio, Caochangdi, Beijing

July 19, 2013

Zheng Shengtian: When people talk about you, they often mention that you were a son of the poet Ai Qing.¹ Ai Qing was wrongly convicted during the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957. You were born in the same year. Can you talk about your childhood following that? What did “Rightist” mean to you back then? My father was labeled a “Rightist” as well, and so was my eldest brother. I know very well what it feels like when your family members are accused of such a political crime. At school, you instantly felt the blow coming at you.

Ai Weiwei at his studio. Photo: Don Li-Leger.

Ai Weiwei: I need to rewind my memory, though.

Zheng Shengtian: Was your father convicted before you were born?

Ai Weiwei: At the time I was born, my father already had been labeled a “Rightist.” I was born on May 18, 1957. The date was written on my birth certificate, which I did not see until two years ago. For a long time, even my mother could not recall the exact date. My father was in Shanghai, but the Writer’s Association wanted him back in Beijing when my mother was about to deliver. My parents had planned to stay in Shanghai with Liu Haisu.² I would have been a Shanghainese if they did, but I was very lucky to have been born in Beijing.

Soon after I was born, my parents were relocated to Northeast China and worked at the No. 852 Military Plantation. They brought me with them. I cannot remember many details about the place because I was too young. All I can recall are some photographs, and in one of them my father looked incredibly thin. I had never seen him so thin before. At that time, I was like every kid in the neighbourhood: I was dirty, wearing torn clothing, and roaming all day in the vicinity of the plantation picking mushrooms. My father’s job was to cut lumber. Some time later, we were transferred to Xinjiang province through the favour of Wang Zhen,³ who was a friend of my father’s during the Yan’an period. Back then my dad was with a team of performers who went to Nanniwan to entertain Wang Zhen’s military troop.⁴ Our lives in Xinjiang were relatively peaceful, and although he was punished as a “Rightist,” my father somehow maintained a privileged status equivalent to a division commander of the army. The place where we stayed in Xinjiang was a military farm. As I remember it, my father was idle all day. He frequented a botanical garden nearby to pass time, since he was not allowed to write.



Zheng Shengtian: Did they treat you well in terms of material necessities?

Ai Weiwei: Our family was given two rooms. They were dormitory rooms in the Soviet style. The monthly ration included two packages of Peony brand cigarettes. I was collecting cigarette packages at the time, so I was hoping my father could finish his cigarettes quickly, just so I could get the package. I remember the Peony label was blue, which was indicative of better quality cigarettes, and only those with higher status could have access to them. The monthly wage was two hundred yuan, which was not bad at the time.

Zheng Shengtian: Did you go to kindergarten?

Ai Weiwei: Yes. We were living in the headquarters of the No. 8 Agricultural Division. Our neighbours were all staff and cadres from the division. My dad often played chess with a former Kuomintang (KMT) deputy division commander who defected to the communist army. There were times when they got into arguments while playing chess. Among the communist residents, this former KMT commander had a distinct aura of style. Then, when I was nine, the Cultural Revolution started. The division headquarters became unsettled right away because of its paramilitary features. There was a militia troop named the “Armed Branch” in the region.

On January 26, Xinjiang fired the first shot of China’s Cultural Revolution. I remember hearing lots of explosive noises. I saw my family boarding up the door. I heard running footsteps on our rooftop. Because the rooftop was made of tiles, which were not soundproof, I could hear the bullets whistling by. The next morning, I saw my family was in a panic. Children could easily sense the magnitude of fear emanating from the adults. Outdoors, I saw a crowd had gathered, and I saw dead bodies on the ground. One of them was my schoolmate Ma Lu. He had been out carrying water and unfortunately was caught in the shooting. It was a very cold night. The temperature in January in Xinjiang can drop to -30 degrees Celsius. I saw Ma Lu had been hit in his body, and bullets had pierced through his fingers. The bucket of water had frozen into ice.

Zheng Shengtian: Were you an elementary student?

Ai Weiwei: Yes. I was only nine years old. The atmosphere was frightening. The number of deaths that resulted from the incident was less than ten, but the victims had been shot dead in various locations around the division headquarters. Rumours were spreading about the possible places where the troop-shooters entered the headquarters, where they exited after the mission was accomplished, and the possible angles from which the bullets were shot. There were even illustrations posted on the wall. I, as a kid, was very curious about what the adults had to say about this incident. Soon after that, I remember, there were big character posters against my father, and overnight they had filled up the walls in the headquarters. On these posters were written slogans like “smashing someone’s nasty head,” “peeling someone’s camouflage skin,” and so on. I was more confused than frightened. I had been desensitized by the constant exposure to these

kinds of verbal attacks since I was little, and this attack seemed to be a bluff because it did not correspond to real physical harm. I was aware that something bad was happening, but I was not intensely frightened.

However, the adults were very frightened. I saw my father in great fear, and his fear increased as he was prosecuted repeatedly in the non-stop political campaigns that had been getting more and more intense since 1957. In the end he broke down. He was known to have attempted suicide three times; fortunately he failed. He must have been in a very desperate state of mind. He wanted to take his own life despite the fact that four children were relying on him, and that he had survived so much suffering already. Soon after that, we were exiled to the most remote military location on the border of the northern desert. The place was nicknamed Little Siberia, and the military unit was known as No. 8 Company of No. 2 Battalion of the No. 144 Regiment.

I was with him on a military truck when we were travelling to this new place. Our belongings were light. We had no furniture because the furniture we had been using belonged to the military. We did not have books because I had burnt them all, as I was told to do by my father. He used to have a big collection of books. I think there might have been at least a few thousand. Some books came from abroad. They were very beautiful books with pictures. Some of them would not ignite. I had to tear out the pages and throw them into the flames. Some books had beautiful gilt-stamped religious pictures, and casing made of gilt-stamped linen. I gave these cases to my classmates, and they were amazed. None of them had seen books as beautiful as that.

Zheng Shengtian: Were these books from his collection in Beijing that he later brought over to Xinjiang?

Ai Weiwei: Yes, the books were shipped from Beijing. Some had been brought back from abroad when he traveled. He liked books very much. However, he had them burnt to ashes in order to save us from trouble. If he had not done that, the Red Guards would have kicked open our door and searched his books to look for any evidence of a “crime.” Therefore, my parents had to destroy all the traces of their past.

Zheng Shengtian: Did you ever witness your father being publicly denounced and physically humiliated?

Ai Weiwei: After we were sent to the remote farm of the 8th Company, my father was repeatedly condemned and denounced in the general meetings that were held specifically for that purpose. Since these public meetings were held weekly, and sometimes even daily, I certainly had seen my father being publicly humiliated. Witnessing this made me very uncomfortable. After all, he was my father. I saw him forced to march through the neighbourhood lanes with a broken kitchen pan in hand. As he drummed the pan, he had to shout out his confession: “I am a criminal and



Ai Weiwei with one of his cats.
Photo: Don Li-Leger.

I am a Rightist, for I am against the Party and Socialism.” Behind him, there were children throwing stones at him.

There was one moment that struck me deeply. Late one night, he had not returned home from the denouncement meeting. The meeting was held in the battalion instead of the company. The “Rightists” who were perceived to be most reactionary in the region were gathered together for the denouncement. My father was condemned as the “biggest Rightist of all,” and his crime was described as “the most heinous.” The funny thing was that the locals who accused him knew little about what he had done. They spoke of him as the “reactionary novelist,” which was not true since my father had never written a novel. In the denouncement meeting, he had to arch his back. Behind him stood a Red Guard, who was holding a red-tasseled spear and poked him aggressively. Then, a bottle of black ink was splashed on him from head to toe. So, on this particular evening, he was condemned in the battalion until late into the night. Back then, we had no electricity at home; not only we did not have an electrical lamp, we also didn’t have an oil lamp. We lit our room with a makeshift lamp that was made with a medical bottle that we took from the clinic. We filled it with oil and then we drilled a hole through the metal cover and secured a shoelace in it as the wick. This “lamp” generated a lot of smoke that would blacken my nose overnight.

So I was waiting for him to return home that night. When he stepped into the room, I was frightened by his look. His face was all covered in black ink. He tried to wash himself and go to sleep, but the ink wasn’t easy to wash away because we did not have soap. His face remained black for many days. We were very poor.

Zheng Shengtian: During those days, what happened to you? Was there any discrimination against you at school?

Ai Weiwei: My schoolmates were nice to me. There was no discrimination because I studied well at school and was favoured by my teachers and classmates. They were a bit vigilant, however, because I was a son of someone who belonged to the “Five Black Categories.”²⁵ When they elected the class representatives, for example, I got the most votes, but I was not

assigned to be the monitor of the class. The best position I might get was commissary in charge of studies. Everybody knew that my family background was problematic.

Zheng Shengtian: Had you started to learn drawing and painting at that time?

Ai Weiwei: No. I had never liked art, to be honest.

Zheng Shengtian: When did you start to learn art?

Ai Weiwei: Back then I was very impressed by my father's drawing skills. I saw him using a pen to draw a plant leaf, or to delineate the contour of my mother at sleep. With only a few strokes, the forms emerged with clarity. I thought that was great. Few people had that kind of ability. He certainly had great artistic talent. He could have been a remarkable visual artist if he had not given up drawing for writing poems. He did not exert much influence on me, though. Because he took delight in talking about art, I began to feel close to it. Moreover, we had previously had many art books at home.

Zheng Shengtian: Had he not encouraged you to do some painting?

Ai Weiwei: Never. In the political climate of those days, he could not do that. Instead, he was hoping I would become a worker. By worker, I mean in the sense of an employee, and not necessarily a worker in manufacturing. The truth was that artists were all very unlucky back then. Making art seemed absurd. Therefore, he had never hoped for any of his children to carry on his legacy in art. He wanted us to be decent workers. Being a worker back then was a rather satisfactory choice.

Zheng Shengtian: That's right. The worker in those days was most honoured.

Ai Weiwei: You just do what you ought to do. That's why he didn't encourage us to paint or write poems. I looked at him with sympathy. He was a poet who was deprived of the privilege of writing. That was miserable, wasn't it? He had profound knowledge of aesthetics, and he wrote about theories of poetry in his twenties. He didn't have a chance to pursue it, however, and his writing only caused him trouble. I did not start learning arts until I graduated from middle school. Having said that, I did have some advantages over my peers in artmaking because I had been working on wall posters on the blackboard in school.

Zheng Shengtian: What was the most significant influence that you gained from your father?

Ai Weiwei: I think it has to be his moral conduct. He was an honest man. He was punctual. He lived an austere life. A simple pair of cloth shoes was what he had for a year, and the same clothes for several years. He was

warm to his friends. He always spoke the truth. He showed genuine feelings of delight and sadness. His straightforwardness very often embarrassed everyone around him.

Zheng Shengtian: This is known as “to teach by example.” Rather than being taught by his lecturing, you learned by observing what he did.

Ai Weiwei: He never lectured us.

Zheng Shengtian: Did he never attempt to teach you directly through conversation?

Ai Weiwei: In his entire life, my father never set aside time to lecture us. He showed us only by example. He would set the dinner table attentively, positioning the chopsticks in perfect order. Before bedtime, he took off his shoes and aligned them with each other. His job was to clean the public outhouse in the village. Those outhouses were filthy, but those ones under his care were very clean. He spread sand on the floor. He cleaned every toilet thoroughly, without complaining. He never spoke of anyone who gave him a hard time. Having lived through so much suffering during the Cultural Revolution, he never grumbled. He was very tolerant and forgiving.

Zheng Shengtian: Was he not feeling that he was unjustly treated?

Ai Weiwei: He certainly knew that what had been done to him was absurd. That’s for sure. However, he had never cried out for sympathy. The only times he talked about the injustices was when people drew it out of him. He commented when the atrocity of the Cultural Revolution was over: “After twenties years of injustice, I was given only three words: *gao cuo le* (it was a mistake).” The government has never admitted they were wrong.

Zheng Shengtian: In your childhood memory, did your mother show any sign of resentful feelings about the injustices against your family?

Ai Weiwei: As a woman, she sometimes had those feelings; however, she was a frank and cheerful person. Had she not had that personality, she would have left my dad for good. When all this misfortune took a toll on us, she was only twenty-four, and things could only get worse. She was assigned to raise cattle at the farm, and she was accused of stealing the cattle feed for her family. Can you imagine the situation we were in? Why on earth would we steal and eat cattle feed? Yet, the accusation was believed to be solid evidence for her “crime.”

Zheng Shengtian: So your lives on the remote farm were the hardest for your family?

Ai Weiwei: Yes. That time was quite difficult for us.

Zheng Shengtian: Was Wang Zhen not protecting your family any more?

Ai Weiwei: He himself was doomed. In those days, my father was on the verge of death. One day he had me sit beside his bed, and said to me he was soon to die. His physical health was ruined by hard labour. He was assigned tens of washrooms to clean. It was wintertime and all the toilets were frozen. He had to break the ice and move it out with his bare hands. The ice was just too heavy for him, and in the end, he got a hernia. One of his eyes became blind because of malnutrition. The food we had was no more than vegetable soup. So he was telling me that he was soon to die. He wrote two names for me on a piece of newspaper. These people, he said, would probably adopt me. I took a look and noticed the two names were Jiang Haiji and Jiang Haitao, his two siblings. It was only then that I knew he had brothers. I remember this very well because it showed how little communication I had had with my father!

Zheng Shengtian: Did your father have a southern accent?

Ai Weiwei: He was born in the southeastern province of Zhejiang. Although he stayed in the north most of his life, he still sounded like someone from Zhejiang when he spoke.

Zheng Shengtian: How was your life after your family returned to Beijing at the end of the Cultural Revolution?

Ai Weiwei: My father went to Beijing to see doctors, but we did not officially move back here. At that time, his “Rightist hat” had been removed; however, he was still not granted permission to come back to Beijing. He came here in the name of medical treatment for his eye. He sought shelter at a worker’s home. We of course followed him back to Beijing, which made him unhappy. When he was angry, he said to me: “Look at your classmates. They have already gone to the village.”⁶ He was unhappy to see me idle at home. At this time, Jiang Feng,⁷ Zhang Ding,⁸ and some other old colleagues of my father were also idle. Their positions had not been reinstated. But as the political air had loosened up a bit, these people offered to teach me drawing. I took them up on the offer only because there was no place for me at home, and the atmosphere of the society was very oppressive and critically political. That was in the years 1976 and 1977. I went out drawing at the Beijing Railway Station, the Summer Palace, and other places around the city. I took it as an escape, and that was the only reason I started to learn drawing.

Zheng Shengtian: Had anyone given you a tutorial?

Ai Weiwei: Huang Yongyu,⁹ Zheng Ke,¹⁰ and some others, such as Xu Lin lu.¹¹ I learned line drawing from Zhang Ding. These people were all out of jobs. They used to be labeled *niu gui she shen* (evil people of all kinds).

Zheng Shengtian: What made you decide to apply to the Beijing Film Academy?

Ai Weiwei: It was Zheng Ke's idea. Zheng Ke was a professor from the Central Academy of Arts and Design, originally from Hong Kong. After I finished junior high, I had hoped not to go to college because of my bad experiences in schools. On the last day to sign up for the university entrance exam, however, Zheng Ke urged me to apply, saying: "University enrollments are back to normal, and you must go and try it." I listened to him and took the exam with two others who studied drawing together with me. I was admitted to the Beijing Film Academy and became part of the first generation of students since the university resumed its normal program of education. I studied at the Department of Set Design. Two years later, I went to the United States because my girlfriend helped me with the application for studying abroad and private sponsorship. So I started to learn English, did some part-time jobs, and took the TOEFL test in order to get into the U.S. art schools.

Zheng Shengtian: In the two years at the Beijing Film Academy, how were your studies?

Ai Weiwei: I remember the chair of the department was Ge Weimo.¹²

Zheng Shengtian: And among the senior teachers was Li Zongjin?¹³

Ai Weiwei: Li Zongjin had long since retired by the time I was there. He was an old friend of my family, and an old "Rightist." In terms of my study at the Academy, my paintings were not conventional. They looked post-Impressionistic. By the today's standards, they were conventional, but they were perceived outrageous at that time and disliked by my teachers. At the end of the semester, we had a class critique. The teacher purposely skipped my paintings. Perhaps in his eye, I was the sort of person who did not abide by school rules and norms and therefore unworthy of his critique. I did not care, since I was planning to go the U.S. anyway.

Zheng Shengtian: So you quit the Academy and went to the U.S. in 1981. That was the same year I went to the U.S.

Ai Weiwei: We have similar experiences.

Zheng Shengtian: I went there in September.

Ai Weiwei: I was there in February.

Zheng Shengtian: Was it about the same time as Chen Yifei's¹⁴ arrival in the U.S.?

Ai Weiwei: He was there a bit earlier than me. Chen Danqing¹⁵ and I arrived about the same time.

Zheng Shengtian: Can we talk about your life in the U.S.? What struck you most when you went to the United States?

Ai Weiwei: When my plane flew over New York City and prepared to land at night, I saw the dazzling sea of light.

Zheng Shengtian: Do you mean the first time you arrived in New York?

Ai Weiwei: Right. As I remember, the scene was like molten steel coming out of a furnace. The beautiful nightscape was contrary to the image I had about the imperialist states, as we had been informed that “day by day, the enemies are tumbling, and day by day we are getting stronger.” The moment I landed in New York, I couldn’t believe how incredibly remarkable the city was.

Zheng Shengtian: During those days in New York, Chinese artists had to draw portraits on the street to earn money. I knew some of them well, such as Lin Lin and Chen Danqing. Every time I went to New York, I would go visit and some of you on the street. How important was this kind of experience to you?

Ai Weiwei: My experience in the U.S. was the most important experience of my life. There I learned about personal freedom, independence, and the relationship between the individual and the state, as well as the power structure of that society—and art, of course. I learned a lot. Everyday I would immerse myself in city life. My experience was different from the majority of Chinese, who lived in Flushing and other parts of Queens—I lived right there in Manhattan. I took part-time jobs. When my visa expired, I became illegal, and I quit school. All the time I just hung around. I was really “in” compared to my other Chinese friends. Have you seen the catalogue published by Three Shadows Photography Art Centre in Beijing with the many photographs that I took in New York?

Zheng Shengtian: I saw it and liked it. I have been planning to bring this exhibition to Vancouver, but it has not happened yet. I still want to do it. The moments shown in those photographs are intimate for me, too. I would like to know if you felt you were part of the New York scene, or still an outsider.

Ai Weiwei: I was not one of them. I felt that I had been utterly a creature roaming outside. However, compared with other Chinese artists, Lin Lin and I were quite deeply engaged with the local culture. We were young at the time and soon identified with the values of the free world because of our recent history. We hated totalitarian society very much and longed for the so-called free world. Later, we became more critical of the U.S. when we found out the country didn’t have as much freedom as it claimed. I did not desire money. Even though we were struggling financially and we had difficulty overcoming cultural barriers and assimilating ourselves into the mainstream, I was experiencing a new life that was more truthful than my previous one. This experience had a huge impact on me.

Zheng Shengtian: Right. We can see that from some of your works. At that time, migrant Chinese artists had two kinds of dreams. One kind of artist ambitiously believed that although he or she was now a street artist,



eventually his or her work would be exhibited at art museums. The other kind was more concerned about how to earn more money and buy a house in the U.S. someday. What was your position?

Ai Weiwei: Neither of them. First of all, I did not have high hopes. I had previously thought of working hard to become a good artist in New York but soon ruled out that possibility after I realized the complexity of cultural differences. Therefore, I didn't think I had a chance. If there was no possibility, I thought, I shouldn't maintain any desire for it. Perhaps under the influence of Marcel Duchamp, I came to realize that art is an attitude, a way of life. Therefore, I literally gave up painting. I frequently changed my living places, and each time I moved I had to throw away my paintings. After I moved a few times, I decided not to paint any more. My paintings took up lots of space in my small room, and I didn't have a place to exhibit. Even if I had, what could I have gotten from the exhibition? I was not so much interested in selling them. For example, I took part in an exhibition in New York. When it was over, none of my paintings sold. To compensate me for my effort, the organizer bought several of them for three hundred dollars. I took it as a joke. Back in the mid-1980s, there were only about fifty artists in the U.S. doing well in the art market. So I completely gave up hope about being an artist in New York. You mentioned that some Chinese artists were trying to earn money. Those aspects of the "American dream": making money, establishing a stable career, and achieving higher social status were the things I was least interested in. My indifference toward money and social status perhaps came from my earlier experiences. I had never heard my father utter the word "money." Our family did not have enough money, so we just muddled along with no thought of tomorrow.

Zheng Shengtian: What did you hope for in New York? Did you just drift through life?

Ai Weiwei: At that time I had no hope; I had only despair. Every morning I got up, and I had no clue about how to spend the day. Sometimes I would walk the streets, without any reason or any direction.

Zheng Shengtian: Some despairing artists in New York indulged in drugs and alcohol. Were you one of them?

Ai Weiwei: To me, drinking was too expensive. So was doing drugs.

Left: Ai Weiwei, *Lower East Side Restaurant*, 1988, from the series *New York Photographs*, black-and-white photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Ai Weiwei, *Self-Portrait, East 3rd Street Apartment*, 1986, from the series *New York Photographs*, black-and-white photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

When my friends bought marijuana, I would smoke it. I kind of liked marijuana, but I rarely bought it for myself. Twenty dollars for a small package was too costly for me.

Zheng Shengtian: Last year, through a friend, I was introduced to an elderly couple in San Francisco. They told me that when you had just arrived in the U.S. in the 1980s, you exhibited your sketches and watercolour paintings at the SF Chinese Cultural Center. They visited the show and bought some of your work. Do you remember that?

Ai Weiwei: I do. He was my English teacher. He taught us to sing English songs like *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*. Then he learned that I had some paintings, and he bought them. Recently I heard that he sold the paintings to a collector. I am happy for him.

Zheng Shengtian: It was I who connected him to the collector.

Ai Weiwei: Oh. He was fortunate to have your help. Those paintings were made when I was in China.

Zheng Shengtian: Recently, Alison Klayman made the documentary film *Never Sorry* (2012) about your story. It was widely praised. But if we are chatting as friends, would you say you really have never felt sorry in your life? Have you not done anything that you regret? Even in your childhood, did you do something wrong that upset your parents and that made you regretful?

Ai Weiwei: Of course I have. I have regretted many things, for example, my early education. Growing up during the Cultural Revolution, I was given little education. However, this was not something my regrets could help. We lived in a fast-developing society. If you were put on one path for your life, you were deprived of the opportunity to explore another one that might also work for you. You would never know which path could have been the best for you. I think life is arbitrary. My birth in Beijing, my encounters, and my present life are all arbitrary. Had I been well educated, I might have been a scientist. Who knows? Now, obviously, I don't have this opportunity—am I right?

Zheng Shengtian: Have you ever made a decision that you later regretted?

Ai Weiwei: I really don't think too much about this. I am adaptive to different circumstances. Had I not been living in China, I could make a living elsewhere. I have the ability to survive.

Zheng Shengtian: My last question. This morning I asked Don Li-Leger (videographer of this interview): If you were given a chance to ask one question of Ai Weiwei, what would it be? He thought about it and said: I want to know his motivation. So I want to pass this question on to you. As an artist and activist, what has been your motivation?



Zheng Shengtian and Ai Weiwei. Photo: Don Li-Leger.

Ai Weiwei: My answer may sound like a cliché. I think you only live once. A life is like the fortune that is owned by every one of us. We all have dreams. We are entitled to be happy about it, to be enthusiastic, or even frightened about it. This entitlement cannot be explained, and it cannot be known to where it leads. However, this life is going to be taken away from us. All the possibilities will be gone at the end. Therefore, I hate any power or system that deprives people of their most basic natural rights and their happiness. I am an artist. Some people also call me an activist. In fact, I am interested in understanding the rights of human expression and the possible ways of expression. I think that the right to express oneself is the essence of life. Without it, life has no form. This is what I came to believe after going through many troubles and difficulties.

Zheng Shengtian: Are you saying that you had not planned to be an activist in the first place?

Ai Weiwei: No. I became who I am because I encountered many things in which I had to make a simple decision: to speak the truth or remain silent to avoid risk. I would certainly analyze the risk factors. But how dangerous could it be? In deciding to return to China, the first question I asked myself was how much danger I would be facing. Everybody assumed that people like Lin Lin and I were unlikely to return to China. However, I returned and kept asking myself: how dangerous could it be? During those eighty-one days when I was imprisoned last year, I was fairly calm. I have always admired my father for his six-year imprisonment by the KMT government in the 1930s.¹⁶ Now I was thrown into prison, too. I thought my father and I were now even. Our “crime” was similar, too. He was accused of “disrupting public order,” and my indictment was “inciting subversion of the state.” My crime was as severe as his, and my sentence seemed to be more than his. When I was detained, I was told that I would be locked up in prison for thirteen years, and my dad was sentenced only to six years. I said to the people who detained me that my arrest reminded me of what happened to my father eighty years ago. They replied that it is a different era now.

Zheng Shengtian: Do you know why, instead of in thirteen years, you were released in three months?

Ai Weiwei: The funniest thing is, we will never know why things are the way they are.

Zheng Shengtian: There must be some inside story.

Ai Weiwei: I want to ask you. What is the reason? Please tell me. [Laughs.]

Zheng Shengtian: I don't know. Last month I was at the Venice Biennale. I heard there were more than a thousand Chinese artists coming for the event. This reminds me of your installation *Fairytales*, at documenta 12, in Kassel. You brought one thousand and three Chinese to Kassel. You seemed to have foresight that was vindicated at Venice. You predicted the "Chinese invasion" of Europe—or we could say that you made a rehearsal of it at Kassel. How did you come up with this idea of bringing a thousand Chinese to Europe? Did you predict what would later happen, or was it just a coincidence?

Ai Weiwei: I don't know. In my opinion, China was an old country and had been preserved as if it were a fossil. I knew that when it joined the world, it would change the world's landscape.

Zheng Shengtian: First I saw the Chinese in Kassel; then, I saw the Chinese artists in Venice. It seems that history is replicating itself. Only this time, the crowd was intimidating.

Ai Weiwei: I often walk on the streets or in the subway station. Everywhere I go, I see lots of people. I say to myself: There are way too many Chinese, which is frightening. When the staff of our company [studio] dine together, I think: Wow! There are so many Chinese who consume a lot of things everyday. That is tough.

Zheng Shengtian: Let's stop here. Thank you for your time.

Transcribed and translated by Dongyue Su.

Notes

- ¹ Ai Qing (1910–96) was a leading figure in modern Chinese poetry in the twentieth century.
- ² Liu Haisu (1896–1994) was a Chinese artist and founder of Shanghai Institute of Fine Arts.
- ³ Wang Zhen (1908–93) was leader of the Chinese Communist Party and onetime general of the People's Liberation Army.
- ⁴ Nanniwang was an area of desolate land in Yan'an. It was transformed into cultivated land thanks to the efforts of Wang Zhen's troops in the 1940s.
- ⁵ The "Five Black Categories" were the targets of denouncement during the Cultural Revolution. They included landlords, rich farmers, counter-revolutionaries, criminals, and Rightists.
- ⁶ The phrase *chadui*, or join the farm team, referred to a political movement generally called "sent to countryside" from approximately 1968 to 1976, in which a huge number of urban youth migrated to the countryside.
- ⁷ Jiang Feng (1910–82) was a Chinese artist and former leader of the Chinese Artist Association.
- ⁸ Zhang Ding (1917–2010) was a Chinese artist and former President of the Central Academy of Arts and Design.
- ⁹ Huang Yongyu (1924–) is a Chinese artist specializing in ink painting and printmaking.
- ¹⁰ Zhen Ke (1906–87) was a Chinese designer.
- ¹¹ Xu Linlu (1916–) is a Chinese artist specializing in ink painting.
- ¹² Ge Weimo (1929–) is a Chinese artist specializing in oil painting.
- ¹³ Li Zongjin (1916–1977) was a Chinese artist specializing in oil painting.
- ¹⁴ Chen Yifei (1946–2005) was a Chinese artist specializing in oil painting.
- ¹⁵ Chen Danqing (1953–) is a Chinese artist and writer.
- ¹⁶ Ai Qing was sentenced to six years because of his Leftist political views, but he was released earlier than he should have been. The Kuomintang was the government of the Republic of China from 1927 to 1949.