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1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows: A Memoir by Ai Weiwei
(review)

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1000 YEARS OF JOYS AND SORROWS: A MEMOIR

Ai Weiwei

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Jan Garden Castro

Ai Weiwei's remarkable memoir offers close-up accounts of his poet father's early literary feats and his own later art inventions. Each achieved success, but each was also severely punished for his creations under authoritarian leaders in China. The title *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows* comes from his father's poem set in Xinjiang province:

Of a thousand years of joys and sorrows
Not a trace can be found
You who are living, live the best life you can
Don't count on the earth to preserve memory

This 1980 poem may nod to Gabriel García Márquez's *100 Years of Solitude*, published in 1967. Ai doesn't drive home the deeper truth about the history of Xinjiang. This ancient northern area is/was home of many, including Uyghurs, an ancient culture; they now occupy the same forced retraining camps where Ai and his father lived in an underground dirt hovel. In Xinjiang, family, spiritual, and literary and artistic traditions have been replaced by absolute allegiance to the state. Individualism has been replaced by conformity.

Ai illustrated this point in *Fairytale* (2007), a "live" art exhibition for Documenta in Kassel, Germany—1,001 Chinese citizens all dressed alike attended an international art exhibition—an unheard-of feat. It was, Ai notes, a "newly born art growing inside me," one about social engagement and

bringing East and West together. Ai only hints at the huge amount of work involved to secure passports, travel permits, clothing, food, and housing for 1,001 Chinese people. What made this art? Volunteer participants were seeing places beyond their locality for the *first time in their lives*. Non-China fairgoers could see, in a glance, how obedient 1,001 humans can be. The art of social engagement is a visceral way to teach hard-to-learn humanist lessons.

Ai's and his father's stories are difficult to sum up. Ai's father, Gao Jian, known as Ai Qing, was forty-seven when Ai was born, in 1957, to his third wife—in a country where more than one marriage is frowned upon. Ai's father never spoke of his earlier life and suffering; his life was devoted to reading and writing. Ai senior's long life started with his birth in 1910 in Jinhua into a "reformist" family considered progressive. He grew up in buildings "whose every warp and woof were imbued with Confucian teachings . . . carried on from one generation to another over many centuries." After studying in Paris, he was inspired to write egalitarian poetry; upon his return to China, his revolutionary direction caused so sharp a rift with his parents that he did not attend their funerals. At the same time, the Russian and Chinese Revolutions, the stock market crash of 1929, the Great Depression, and the second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) caused great turbulence in Asia.

Ai Qing was in the vanguard of intellectuals supporting the Communist direction and was personally consulted by the young Mao as the Communist Party was struggling to gain popular support over the Nationalists. Then Ai senior was branded a rightist for defending freedom of thought and speech—for siding with other writers over Party censors. He was punished severely once before Ai Weiwei was born and once when Ai junior was ten, around 1967. His father, accused of leading a bourgeois life, was exiled to "Little Siberia," a desert border area for offenders in the "Five Black Categories"—landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements, and rightists (his father) and their children. Ai's mother stayed behind with her youngest son, and his older brother was sent to another production corps—a paramilitary government unit within the state.

Ai's memoir sparkles with specifics, mentioning, for example, how, upon entering their dirt hut in Little Siberia, his father gashed his head on the ceiling; they dug out a foot of earth to create standing room, and dealt with rat and bedbug infestations. Ai became responsible for getting the chimney to

work and helping his father survive. The father was required to work away from others, at first to prune trees, then to clean the latrines and to stand nightly at the dining hall entrance announcing to all that he was a rightist. Ai the younger found joy in harvesting summer crops, including large watermelons: “my playmates and I would plunge our hands into the bright red pulp, scoop out huge mouthfuls, and gulp them down,” being careful to save the seeds for next year’s crop.

Ironically, the father’s poetry was widely read and periodically honored in China and internationally, including by Pablo Neruda and Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg warmly remembered meeting the father in China, and he became the son’s friend in New York.

Ai junior’s early education in China taught him that westerners and Taiwanese are imperialists, colonizers, and reactionaries from whom Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, and the peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America need to liberate themselves. During his time in Philadelphia, Berkeley, and New York from roughly 1981 to 1993, Ai junior supported himself by doing practical jobs and selling his art on the street. At some point after his return to China, he began using the middle finger (fuck you) sign in graphics, in photos, and in letters. He gave Chinese Ministry of Commerce officials three different name choices when he registered his art corporation, each a version of “fake” or “fuck you.” Ai tells readers: “One way or another, the name should warn you that it’s a mistake to always take me seriously.” Intentionally provocative, Ai employs irony, contrasting values and styles, and performance strategies to engage viewers to consider many viewpoints simultaneously. These strategies have been misunderstood by many in East and West and were especially unwelcome in China.

One example of Ai’s world-class projects is the Bird’s Nest Stadium built for the 2008 Olympics with German architects Herzog and de Meuron. The project began in late 2002 and was completed despite numerous setbacks—including the SARS epidemic, budget cutbacks, and a mammoth earthquake in Sichuan province. Over 69,000 people lost their lives, including 5,196 children. Wikipedia reports that “over 7000 inadequately engineered school-rooms collapsed,” as censors silenced parents protesting the loss of their only child. As Ai was helping the protesting parents and creating *Straight* (2008–

12) and *Namelist* (2008–11) to commemorate the human losses, he was severely beaten (2009) and given a concussion. *Straight* straightened 90,000 tons of rebar beams from mangled buildings, and *Namelist* lists each child lost in the earthquake.

Ai has mounted many huge traveling solo exhibitions worldwide, including *Good Fences Make Good Neighbors* throughout New York City, a performance piece about covert surveillance at the 63rd Street Armory, and *Straight* and *Namelist* at the Brooklyn Art Museum. His art simultaneously bears witness to history, revisits classic objects, and invents new art forms in sculpture and in mixed media. Ai's art aims to forge understandings between old and new, participants and viewers.

The artist's body of work includes photography and film documenting China's secretive penal system and his own incarceration on false charges for tax evasion. *Human Flow* (2017) is a documentary about the immigrant crisis made after Ai himself was in exile. The artist's exhibition at MMCA in Seoul through April 2022 included *Coronation* (2020), a film made in Wuhan City in lockdown, and *Omni* (2019), a virtual reality video immersing viewers in migrant experiences.

The memoir mentions yet does not dwell on some subjects beyond its immediate scope. It briefly notes how Ai's popularity spread through internet apps before bureaucrats began to censor them. It understates the amount of art that Ai has created as well as thousands who have participated joyfully in that art's creation and earned a living from it. Some collaborators and other independent thinkers have subsequently suffered harassment or worse from Chinese authorities. He makes it clear that many (or most) who also dare to speak up for human rights in China have been "disappeared," murdered, and then classed as "self-suicides," or framed because they got in the way of controlling Chinese officials.

Toward the end of the memoir, Ai mentions, in passing, that his name is being erased from Chinese exhibitions and collections, causing many in China to turn their backs on him.

Ai only touches upon women's and environmental issues in the immediate scope of this memoir. For example, he mentions that his father and Ai

junior's mother, Gao Ying, had trouble divorcing their spouses and marrying each other. Also outside the scope are immense questions about China today.

Ai personalizes the memoir by including his and Ai Qing's sketches—one of his mother.

His direct message to US readers is that conservative forces are at work not only in China but also here. Even if US diplomats boycotted the 2022 Olympic Winter Games, our athletes participated, and this, in effect, legitimized China even as Peng, a female tennis champ in China, has been scrubbed from websites and is no longer seen in public since naming the senior Chinese official who raped her.

In *Hyperallergic's* December 18, 2021, "Best Books of the Year" edition, Hrag Vartanian rated *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows* number 1, stating, "Overall, I often felt like I was given a decoder ring to Weiwei's practice, realizing what significance ceramics, newspapers, and other quotidian materials had for his work." To me, this book also decodes totalitarian tactics such as dividing interest groups against each other to dominate all. Ai Weiwei's memoir narrates how both father and son honor earth and its peoples; he invites us to care, as he does, about humans worldwide struggling to survive.

JAN GARDEN CASTRO is a contributing editor for *Sculpture Magazine*. *Suntup's* limited edition of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* features Castro's afterword. Her website is jancastro.com.