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## Book Review - Ai Weiwei, 1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows: A Memoir, translated by Allan H. Barr (New York: Crown, 2021)

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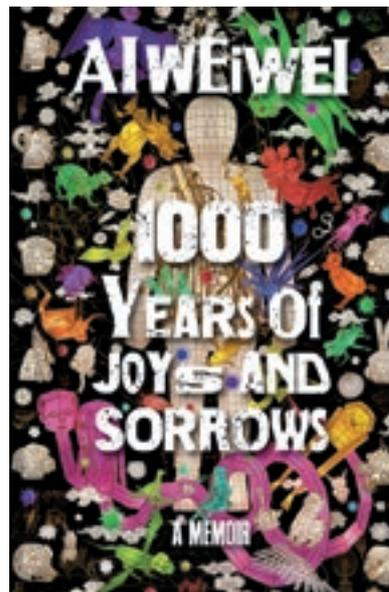
Bingyu Zheng

On February 4, 2022, the Beijing National Stadium (the “Bird’s Nest”), hosted the opening ceremony of the 2022 Winter Olympics. The dazzling show put on by the hosts no doubt intended to recall pleasant memories of the previous Olympics’ opening ceremony held at the same site in 2008, which was widely celebrated by international media for its spectacular pageantry. Yet while the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics was once hailed as the event that symbolized the People’s Republic of China’s successful modernization into a powerful yet respected member of the global community, the 2022 iteration began under a dark cloud of the many political controversies that currently

shadow the Chinese government. For outside observers, this contrast represents a dramatic transformation in China’s public image in the intervening decade, especially in the West, as the welcoming, gregarious nation that opened itself to the world for commerce and cultural exchange back then has now somehow morphed into an aggressive, domineering global threat that is increasingly coercive in its foreign diplomacy and oppressive in its domestic policy.

For the architect of the Bird’s Nest, however, this change in the public image of China, especially of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that has been in power since 1949, is exactly just that, the wearing away of a friendly façade that has allowed the rest of the world to recognize the true character of this regime. Ai Weiwei, whose memoir *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrow* was published, interestingly, just a few months before the 2022 opening ceremony, is today perhaps one of the most globally

renowned contemporary artists from China, as well as one of the harshest critics of the human rights record of its government. This book serves as the biography for both his father, Ai Qing, one of the most influential Chinese modern poets of the twentieth century, and for himself. The intimate details of their family life intersect with the major events that occurred in China throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including the May Fourth Movement, the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese Civil War, the Anti-Rightist Movement, the Cultural Revolution, the Four Modernizations, and the Tiananmen Square Massacre. While both the CCP and Western observers often focus on the tremendous amount of political, social, and cultural changes that China had undergone throughout these 120 years, Ai emphasizes instead the constancy and continuity in attitudes and behaviors across Chinese society from top to bottom during this span of time, showing how often history has repeated itself.



The memoir shows clear parallels between the lives of father and son. Both Ai Qing and Ai Weiwei were born in cataclysmic times in modern Chinese history, the former a year before the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the latter during the Anti-Rightist Campaign less than a decade after the CCP’s victory in the civil war. Both studied abroad in their youth (Ai Qing in Paris and Ai Weiwei in New York), but eventually returned home without any degree or diploma. Although father and son pursued different artistic genres, they shared a common uncompromising creative vision that emphasizes political and social engagement. As Ai Weiwei puts it, “if art cannot engage with life, it has no future” (256). Just as Ai Qing’s modern-style poetry was considered too radical by many of his contemporaries, Ai Weiwei’s abstract contemporary artwork was constantly met with scorn and bemusement.

Both shared a complicated relationship with the CCP. Its leaders past and present were eager to employ their talents and, more notably, their reputation when it was suitable for their needs, such as deploying both men to meet with international celebrities like Nobel Laureate Pablo Neruda in 1957 and Speaker Nancy Pelosi in 2009. But Ai Qing and Ai Weiwei’s unwillingness to silence themselves in the face

of political and social injustices would eventually lead the CCP to attack both father and son. Ai Qing was branded a “rightist” by Mao Zedong in 1957 and sent to Xinjiang to “reform through labor” for fifteen years. Ai Weiwei was secretly arrested and detained in 2011 for nearly two months, and he has been living in exile in Europe since 2015.

Despite the physical and mental torture they both endured at the hands of their government, neither man was willing to completely stifle their creative urges and turn away their critical eyes; they would remain steadfastly true to who they are, public scorn and political condemnations be damned. Despite receiving little direct professional or personal instructions from his father throughout his life, Ai Weiwei emphasizes that “a spiritual connection was forged between us,” and his father guided him like “a compass point” unconsciously, “like a star in the sky or a tree in a field” (208-09).

Through their eyes, abetted by Ai Qing’s poems and Ai Weiwei’s artworks that are constantly quoted or referenced throughout the book, we can also observe many continuities in the actions and attitudes from Mao Zedong’s regime of early PRC, to the *gaige kaifang* (“reform and opening up”) state of Deng Xiaoping, to the post-reform governments of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping. Despite the many times the CCP has changed its face to the international public, to Ai Weiwei, it has always remained the same authoritarian regime that is hostile to free expression and public criticism from its humble beginning in Yan’an in the 1930s to today. The memoir is keen to show that the institutions and mechanisms that enabled many of the events in recent years that attracted much negative attention from international media have been established for a long time. The re-education facilities and labor camps that are currently detaining Xinjiang ethnic minorities such as the Uyghurs were not dissimilar to those that Ai

Qing was exiled to in 1958, although their purpose has shifted from ideological reformation to cultural assimilation. The ways local CCP officials in Wuhan tried to suppress information regarding the initial outbreak of Covid-19 followed the same pattern as their fellow cadres who tried to prevent accurate reporting for many previous disasters, such as the SARS outbreak in 2003 and the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake. The recent disappearance then censorship of retired tennis player Peng Shuai after she revealed she was sexually assaulted by former vice-premier, Zhang Gaoli, on her microblog recalls Ai Weiwei’s own detainment, but they shared this same experience with countless people who dared to speak up against those in power throughout the past century of Chinese history. In many ways, Peng and Ai were the lucky ones, for their international fame that attracted so much attention forced the CCP to eventually release them, whereas countless others who lacked their celebrity suffered much worse fates.

For someone whose reputation was forged on iconoclastic creations and performances, the readers of *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows* may find Ai Weiwei’s writing surprisingly straightforward and lacking in flair. As Ai points out in his acknowledgements, this was a conscious choice made by himself and his collaborator, Allan Barr, an accomplished translator and scholar of both late imperial and modern Chinese literature (372). It is clear that Ai has no desire to leave any part of the story of his family open for interpretation, that he wishes for the thoughts and experiences of his father and him to be expressed as directly and plainly as possible. He is not writing this book for fervent fans of his art who are looking for deep dives into his creative process. While most of his significant artworks are mentioned with quick summaries of his intentions when producing them, they are not the focus of the memoir. He is especially disinterested in talking too much about his most famous

creation, the stadium that has been referred to by former IOC President Thomas Rogge as “one of the world’s new wonders,” as the Bird’s Nest has now been fully appropriated by a regime that represents the opposite of his values. Instead, the purpose of this book is to preserve memories, those of himself, of his family, and of countless others who shared the same history, so that they could be examined and understood by the next generation, including his son, Ai Lao.

For historians of modern China, or anybody who is interested in exploring the country’s recent past, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows* contributes a valuable perspective that is becoming increasingly endangered. Ai Weiwei is not interested in drowning wistfully in nostalgia; while writing about the past, he is very much looking toward the future. He finds the forgetfulness that is prevalent not only across Chinese society, but many other parts of the world, to be the prime obstacle for true progress. As he asserts poignantly at the end of the book, “Self-expression is central to human existence. Without the sound of human voices, without warmth and color in our lives, without attentive glances, earth is just an insensate rock suspended in space” (369). This may seem like an obvious statement, a platitude that few should find opposition to. Yet in China (and increasingly in many other parts of the world), many people are finding it more and more difficult to put this idea into action.



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