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# From Revolutionary to Civil Activism: May Fourth Intellectual Guo Moruo and Post-Cultural Revolution Artist Ai Weiwei

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FROM REVOLUTIONARY TO CIVIL ACTIVISM: MAY FOURTH  
INTELLECTUAL GUO MORUO AND POST-CULTURAL REVOLUTION ARTIST  
AI WEIWEI

by

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## ABSTRACT

The beginning of the twentieth century in China is marked by intellectual-led revolutionary activism that looks for a modern national collective that distinguishes from the dynastic past and the semi-colonized current. Intellectual Guo Moruo is devoted to the historical trend through a dual-identity as a cultural leader and a lyrical poet. This element of activism has evolved along with the twentieth century up until post-Cultural Revolution China, when the coming of the Internet and digital technology allowed for new forms of activism, such as online mobilization and digital-camera videos as critical social engagement. Artist Ai Weiwei emerges as a leading civil activist at the time. However, how the different historical times produce room for different forms of activist engagement, and how the new form of activist practices in return shapes the societal body, remains unstudied. This project examines modern Chinese activism through a comparative study of Guo Moruo's revolutionary activism in the May Fourth era and Ai Weiwei's civil activism in the post-Cultural Revolution times. Special focus is paid to Guo's literary practice in lyrical poetry and his cultural practice as a leader in a literary society (Creation Society), as well as Ai's civil practice in online activist projects, and his visual practice in the documentary-making post Sichuan earthquake. This project decodes the various powers exemplified through different activist forms, particularly poetry and documentaries, in order to understand the complexity embedded in China's modern activism that has witnessed every critical transition in China's long century of modernization.

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## INTRODUCTION

In February 1920, ten months after the beginning of the May Fourth activism (1919), the 28-year-old poet Guo Moruo (1892/11/16- 1978/6/12) howled:

I am the Heavenly Hound!

I swallow the moon,

I swallow the sun,

I swallow all the stars,

I swallow the universe,

I am I!

I am the light of the moon,

I am the light of the sun, I am the light of all the stars,

I am X-ray beams,

I am the amassed Energy of the entire universe!

.....

I burn as if a raging fire,

I howl as if the ocean,

... I am I!

I am to burst out! (*Nüshen* 女神, 61)

Guo elucidates his revolutionary activist call by reimagining the mythological figure Heavenly Hound (*tiangou* 天狗) as a rebellious hero who intends to join the trend with a

self-sacrificial “burning.” Guo first affirms Heavenly Hound’s mythological implication as a negative saboteur who swallows the moon, sun, stars, indeed the entire universe: all the essential energy sources in world. In the second stanza, Guo redefines Heavenly Hound as the light of the moon, sun, stars, X-ray, and the entire universe, washing out the negative implications. In the third stanza, Guo praises the energy contained in Heavenly Hound. Following that, in a self-sacrificial and self-cannibalistic way of expression, Guo elevates Heavenly Hound to a rebellious hero who aims for power while firmly claiming the self and the self’s burning sacrifice towards a higher purpose. With this free verse-style vernacular, Guo embodied his revolutionary ambitions through the lyrical voice of Heavenly Hound. That is, he is going to participate in the revolution, analogous to how the Heavenly Hound burns himself out. This powerful activist call has laid the foundation for all the other literary creations of Guo Moruo’s pre-1949 life.

This factor of sacrifice in the form of burning oneself with a higher purpose is again witnessed in the 21st-century activist Ai Weiwei (1957- ). In 2017, Ai stated that: “I don’t need anything. I just want to burn myself out. It’s life; you better use it” (*Humanity*, 93). That was the time when he started making documentaries about the international refugee crisis, after fighting for human rights in China for years. One may read this statement as a brief conclusion of Ai’s activist pursuits: personally, the life-long commitment for Ai is to make use of his life as a civil activist as if burning out the energy he has; publicly, he advocates for grassroots activism that relies on every citizen’s responsive action in dealing with social issues.

Regardless of the shared self-sacrificial determination, Guo and Ai both take on the conception of “revolution” but contribute different understandings to it. While Guo,

as a co-founder of the literary society “Creation Society” (*chuangzao she* 创造社; 1921-1929), was advocating a practical revolution that stretches from the literary field to the political field at the fortnight of Chinese modern revolution, the word “revolution” is taken up by Ai, as a co-founder of the post-Mao avant-garde artistic society “Stars” (Xing Xing 星星; 1979-1983) as a conception for their own exploration of truth and answers at an age of officially enforced silence after the Cultural Revolution.

In addition, the understanding of a higher purpose varies for Guo and Ai. They are both confronted by enormous historical powers; for Guo, it is historical turmoil whereas for Ai it is state power. They are both trapped in the historical junction and call out for social changes; both Guo and Ai’s activist tools are marked by the technological improvement and the political atmosphere of the time. Guo’s rise to fame contributes to his lyrical poems, which emerged with print technology and the crisis of founding a new national identity. Ai’s public call for human rights is shaped by the rise of the Internet, modern technology, and tightening political control. They are both towering figures who gained recognition in multiple fields: Ai is an internationally award-winning artist, sculptor, designer, documentary-maker, and an influential blogger and civil activist in the contemporary world; the multiplicity of Guo’s achievements and influence in poetry, drama, academic history research, and politics in return affirms how much of a revolutionary activist he truly is in 1920s China: the most widely-read lyrical poet, the leader of one of the most influential literary societies, and a prolific essayist. At the core of their calling, they both look for a society where individuals are valued, yet they are treated differently by the nation. Consequently, Guo Moruo was deemed to be a hero and secures a high position under Communist rule, whereas Ai is deemed a dissident and

arrested and chased from his homeland, though living with fame and capital abroad. Both activists got wealth and power through their protest: the effect of their “burning,” not only lies on a self-sacrifice, but also a self-elevation. Both the striking similarities and sharp contrasts between the two activists bring this project to the examination of trends of activism and the historical time that served as their setting.

During the May Fourth Movement, Chinese intellectuals have been haunted by the political turmoil of modernization due to the end of dynastic history, and have sought to form a new conception of “China” through their individual activist projects. According to Wang Hui, this activism originating from student movements has shaped 20th century China (qtd. in Wang Pu 21). In addition, we see another summit of activism in the mid-20th century’s Cultural Revolution when almost every social member was involved, and societal dysfunctions were happening everywhere. The coming of the Internet era allowed for new tropes of activism in that it is ubiquitously available, though at the same time undergoing forces of censorship. Adopting the historical trajectory of activism from 1919, this project aims to conceptualize a framework of Chinese modern activism and its interaction with cultural production that tentatively seeks to answer the following questions: What distinguishes Chinese activism from its western global conceptualization? How is it conceived differently across China’s different time periods? How does it engage with the social and political dynamics, and how is its agency functioning to impact society? How does the room for social movement change with the shifting inner workings of the political system?

In order to answer these questions, in the first section, this paper will examine the historical and contemporary range of the term “activism” in China, highlighting the

significance of the May Fourth period and the digital age. In the second section, this paper will delve into the very first peak of modern Chinese activism demonstrated in the cultural field: May Fourth activism, analyzing its workings through the lyrical poet Guo Moruo's role and his literary practices. It situates Guo Moruo at the center of the field of May Fourth revolutionary production to construct the dual role of poet and activist. Within this field of cultural production, Guo Moruo distinguished himself from other May Fourth intellectuals by his identification of *Zeitgeist*, or "spirit of the time" (*shidai jingshen* 时代精神), as the combination of revolution and literature, and his literary practices in New Poetry. As a May Fourth intellectual, he wrote on public issues to influence popular opinion, like Lu Xun. As an activist, he directly participated in the process of revolution, far beyond poetry writings. David Roy conceptualizes Guo Moruo as the most versatile Chinese intellectual of modern China since "there is hardly an area of twentieth-century Chinese cultural life in which his influence has not been felt...[He] has made substantial contributions in...poetry, drama, fiction, autobiography, translation, intellectual and cultural history, archeology, paleography, and cultural and political propaganda" (1971, qtd. in Wang Pu 12). As such, this project will explore Guo's activist practices hand in hand with his lyrical poetry, analyzing the effects of this vernacular form. With the defiant role of a lyrical poet, Guo's practices multiply into other cultural and political areas: the glorious poet of a literary society and the political leader who searches for a new national identity. In a larger sense, the intellectuals at the beginning of 20th century China are all activists and their pursuit of finding a new China, by an iconoclasm of the past, is an activist's aim. Thus, their cultural production not only

becomes the embodiment of new subjectivities, but also a way to demonstrate activist objectives.

In the third section, turning to Ai Weiwei, the examination lies in his online practices exemplified by his prolific writing that calls out the activist civil projects, his artworks' representations, and the visual representation of his documentaries. With the grounding of the online sphere, Ai's artwork and documentaries are able to go beyond the political turmoil and voice the opinion at such a wide scope, which made him into a combination of civil hero and official dissident. In particular, he produced groundbreaking art projects and a series of documentaries surrounding his activist project in looking for children's names in the period of the post-Sichuan earthquake, in which he also defended other activists and got himself confined to detention. These artistic representations and documentaries spread globally and exemplify the power of his activism embodied in multiple forms.

Accordingly, an investigation into Guo's and Ai's different forms of activist production will help answer these questions: how is activism exemplified differently in revolutionary time and then contemporary time (the beginning of the twentieth century)? How have the objectives and challenges changed for the intellectuals? Most importantly, how is a different form or medium of cultural production working precisely in order to achieve its activist goal? How is Guo Moruo's New Poetry contributing to the iconoclasm and revolution during the May Fourth period? How is Ai's documentary functioning within the 21st century's phenomenon of online activism?

## CHAPTER 1

### CHINESE MODERNITY AND ACTIVISM

The term activism (*Aktivismus*), was coined in 1915 by the publicist Kurt Hiller (1885-1972) and accepted into American's public discourse in 1960s, denoting political and societal related advocacy in energetic action (Wurgaft 1-12). An activist, therefore, can be understood as a person who advocates a doctrine of action. Today, activism is recognized globally. This range of activism functions as a way of voicing ordinary people's opinions and resentment, strictly relating to the search for justice and the expansion of rights. In the west, activist actions are within bounds, legal, and necessary for the democratic part of the social contract, though activists are also frequently beaten, tear gassed, imprisoned and on occasion killed by the police. In contrast, in contemporary mainland China, no equivalent of "activism" is adopted in public discussion. Instead, in the official discourse, the Chinese translation of activism as *xingdong zhuyi* 行动主义 is replaced by "radicalism" *jijin zhuyi* 激进主义, and activist actions are normally called "riots" and activists are at best considered dissidents, at worst criminals.<sup>1</sup> Even though Cultural Revolution has been officially criticized by official government document in June 1981, and Deng Xiaoping proposed "seek truth from facts" to ensure the insistence in truth rather than officially made-up stories, the shock of June

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<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the voices raised by activists are hardly seen by common citizens. In 2015, Scholar Yu Tianqi specifically noted that the representations of China's "socially and geographically marginalized individuals and groups" by independent documentaries are mostly unheard by Chinese citizens (58).

Fourth and the fear of chaos keep seizing the Party's ideology, making them unable to let go of the right of defining social action (Lu 18). Therefore, what this project tries to do essentially is to also ask for a reconsideration of different social forces that may complicate, vitalize, or interrupt the social relations and how they interact with the societal dynamics, rather than simply illegalize them. Regardless of the vacancy of public discussion and presentation of activism as a concept in Chinese society, activism was actually the driving force for Chinese modernization dating back to the beginning of the 20th century. Throughout the 20th century, activism has been conducted in different forms and reflected corresponding perspectives of the historical time. Examining the genealogy of Chinese modernization, four peaks of activism mark the modern trajectory of Chinese history, dividing modern Chinese history into two parts: revolutionary activism peaked at May Fourth (1919) and the new multiple forms of contentious activism that mostly emerged after June Fourth (1989)<sup>2</sup>, each contributing to the formation and transformation of a modern China.<sup>3</sup>

Though the beginning of Chinese modern activism can be traced back to the Late Qing, May Fourth Movement in 1919, the time of "Enlightenment" in many May Fourth intellectuals' minds and the high starting point of Chinese modern revolution, is the first time when a national "Movement" is recognized. Scholar Rudolf Wagner has defined May Fourth as "the first in China to be consciously crafted in a new form of social action, the 'movement'" (66). In other words, activism originates in modern China hand in hand

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<sup>2</sup> Tiananmen had been a location for grassroots protests many times before this. Also, there are state sanctioned protests such as anti-Japanese protests every few years and anti-African student protests in 1988.

with the emergence of the first “mass movement,” (*qunzhong yundong* 群众运动) which is consciously named by the student leaders on May 3, 1919, as a student movement that soon upgraded to a national level. Its modern element is also presented by the print modernism that the term “May Fourth Movement” is fixed by the publication of the essay “The Spirits of the May Fourth Movement” (*Wusi yundong de jingshen* 五四运动的精神) by Luo Jialun 罗家伦 (1896-1969) on May 26, 1919. Furthermore, the spread of this notion is a modern phenomenon appropriated into China as Wagner notes that the term “movement” is a “Japanese/Western concept” that implies “a closed modernist, moralistic, and rational agenda” (66), which again reflects the intrinsic relation between Chinese modernity and the capitalist power: the West or Japan. This early activism calls out a break from the tradition and an embrace of the modern spirit. Consequently, the early modern Chinese activism which stretched from the Late Qing to 1930s is marked by a nationalist understanding of modernity: struggle for a revolution that will drive Chinese nation to an advanced, rational, and modernist state.

The second peak, featuring the Red Guard generation, witnessed the formation of the first political group after the end of the May Fourth revolution and the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. According to Yang Guobin, a prominent scholar in Chinese Internet studies, “the Red Guard generation refers to members of the age cohort born around 1949 who experienced the Red Guard movement” (5). In this sense, this is just the next “political” generation after the May Fourth generation of revolution. Yet the influence of revolution does not die down, its symbolic violence embodied in the ruling logic of the Chinese Communist Party during the revolutionary period transforms into new forms of violence and “significantly influenced factionalism and the escalation of

violence” (Yang 2). Specifically, the political culture of the 1950s and early 1960s affected the Red Guard generation due to “the sacralization of the Chinese communist revolutionary tradition and the deliberate and sustained media campaigns to cultivate Chinese youth into revolutionary successors,” a system of education for activists (Yang 2). In this aspect, the Red Guard activism is still a continuation of the May Fourth revolutionary calling.

The shared historical experience that formed the Red Guard generation of activists functions as a transitional period that invites the high peak of this revolutionary activism since Late Qing. The third peak features the end of the 1980s, marked by the Tiananmen Movement on June 4th, 1989, which is commonly referred to as June Fourth<sup>4</sup> and remains a taboo in today’s Chinese public sphere. According to Dan Edwards, the Maoist era is a state of domination in Michel Foucault’s theorization that “when a field of power relations is immobilized and any possibility of reversibility is forcibly blocked, the result is a state of domination” (11). While that era featuring state of domination ended with the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, the Party reverted back to a state of domination “through the imposition of martial law in response to a series of nationwide protests against corruption, cronyism and political authoritarianism that became known as the ‘Tiananmen Movement’” (Edwards 13). Scholar Philip Cunningham defines this new trend of student activism as “the new May Fourth spirit,” where it has been interpreted by students as “defiance in the face of danger,” “knock down the old,” “make way for the new,” and “challenge authority” (33). The wide-scope student demonstrations were brutally crushed, and the Chinese government has since gone down a different path,

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<sup>4</sup> This is also commonly referred to as the Tiananmen protests/ massacre/ event.

responding to these kinds of activist issues with unquestionable authority, silence, and repression. The aftershock of this type of revolutionary activism has shaped the policy of Chinese Communist party (CCP) until today, marked by strict ideological control and censorship.

Since the June Fourth, the tightened political control and the coming of the digital age led to a new peak of activism marked by its multiplicity in form and its contentious nature in the contemporary Chinese world. Due to the strict ideological control, activism's global denotation, which largely concerns civic engagement such as mass protests (*qunzhong yundong* 群众运动) in a contemporary context, does not apply to China. Reflecting on the historical lesson taught by the powerful revolutionary activism, the Chinese government drew up a systematic censorship map that prevents any unsanctioned public discourse that denotes heterodoxy and monitors any unofficial groups' activities. Correspondingly, Chinese activism has explored a different route that looks for survival in creative ways such as underground filmmaking/documentaries, artistic demonstrations, or grassroots online contestation marked by artful hidden communication. The activism in the daily life context is strictly limited, unable to spread widely, whereas activism in the virtual field such as artwork, literature, films, and the Internet exerts more agency, though it is heavily censored, as well. In this context, the online sphere rises as the main battlefield for activists' communication. Nevertheless, only when a rare issue strikes the society and the society turns into a state of chaos does online activism find a platform for expression, responding to social issues. Even then, it still faces severe repression. The Sichuan earthquake marked a moment of chaos in this sense, which will serve as the focus of the Ai Weiwei chapter.

The two central figures of this project, Guo Moruo and Ai Weiwei, both represent the prominent activism in modern Chinese history: the revolutionary activism that haunts 20th century China up through the 1990s and the civil activism that exemplifies agency in a survival mode for public discourse from the 1990s to today. They both respond to the historical call with their own way of advocacy: lyrical poetry, historical plays, online blogs, independent documentary, and artworks. A close examination of the two figures aims at discovering new possibilities in understanding Chinese modernity outside of the East-West dichotomy and the dynamics of contemporary Chinese society.

## CHAPTER 2

### GUO MORUO'S REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVISM AS A LYRICAL INTELLECTUAL AT THE MAY FOURTH TIMES

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed massive social transformation and political turmoil in China: the struggle between the fallen dynastic ideology and the coming of the modern age; the confusion between the traditional literary forms and the advocacy of vernacular forms; and the contrast between Chinese and Western values. Guo Moruo, the May Fourth lyrical poet and revolutionary activist, advocated for social change through his characterization of the goddess as a border figure that distinguishes the antiquity of the Chinese ethnicity and the dawn of a new society marked by revolution, and in the meantime led the activist literary community to call for change. This chapter first looks into Guo's literary practices in the poem *The Rebirth of the Goddess* (1921) and examines how the figure of the goddess creates a border space that helps view New Poetry as a kind of revolutionary activist power that will benefit Guo's construction of *Zeitgeist* as the combination of "literature" and "revolution." This poetic creation symbolizes the fundamental seed of activism Guo as a rising lyrical poet has configured and leads him to become a prominent figure in literary field that impacts artistic and other cultural fields of post-May Fourth China. This chapter then situates Guo as a cultural-political intellectual and activist at the peak of Chinese revolution of national crisis by discussing his communal practices through literary societies, particularly the Creation Society. Accordingly, this section argues that Guo's

characterization of the goddess as a border figure explicates the space between the dynastic past and the modern age; Western values and Chinese aesthetics; traditional language and New Poetry. In addition, Guo's practices as an intellectual activist leader through literary societies in the public sphere exemplifies the formation of May Fourth revolutionary activism in its utmost socialized and collective way. This top-down activist call from an intellectual lays the foundation of Guo's activism, in contrast to Ai Weiwei's reliance on grassroots engagement. The national outcry of a new identity configured in lyrical poems, the transformation of a turbulent historical time into a dialectical border space, the collective social anxiety bound together through different literary societies, therefore, together negotiate the boundaries embedded within these concepts and shed light on our understanding of the Chinese revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century.

### **2.1 The Poet as the Hero: The *Goddess* and Lyrical Activism**

Guo Moruo was born in China at the turn of the twentieth century, educated first by traditional texts and then by modern thinking in Japan. This life experience offers us a point of departure in situating Guo at the peak of the Chinese nation's dual crisis: national identity crisis caused by the downfall of dynastic tradition, and the intellectual crisis caused by "the tension between China's traditional ideological value system and the modern Western thinking that had invaded the country" since the Opium War (1839-1842) (Chen 91). The fall of Qing dynasty and the invasion of foreign powers devastated Chinese traditional ideologies and forced people to reflect on the possible "weakness"

embedded in it. This identity crisis has shaped the beginning of twentieth-century China and haunted Chinese intellectuals.

What this national identity crisis elucidates was actually an activist task of imagining a modern Chinese community for intellectuals. In order to save the falling country, intellectuals were eager to form a new Chinese cultural identity, and in the end, to imagine a modern Chinese community through the influential act of writing. Étienne Balibar argues that what lies in the national identity is an invariant substance handed down from generation to generation on a “stable territory” and under a “univocal designation” (86). Thus, on an ideological level, the nation-formation task for intellectuals at this time is to reinvent or imagine a new univocal designation, in this case, a modern set of ideology or collective narratives that not only associate with the tradition but also lives up to the modern task.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, the basic component of this modern community, people, therefore, also asks for a transformation. Viewing the individual-collective relation in this nation-formation task, Balibar further notes that the link between individual and social institution is imaginary due to its basis on “the projection of individual existence into the weft of a collective narrative, on the recognition of a common name and on traditions lived as the trace of an immemorial past,” yet more “real” in the sense that the individual relies on this national projection of a boundary to recognize his existence as one of the “people” of a state (93). As Immanuel Wallerstein

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<sup>5</sup> The beginning of Chinese modernity has been debated by scholars. David Der-wei Wang has argued about the beginning of Chinese modernity lies in late Qing by analyzing late Qing fiction in his 1997 book *Fin-de-siècle splendor: repressed modernities of late Qing fiction, 1849-1911*. Here I still set the first peak of Chinese modern activism at the May Fourth period, because it’s the confused time after the fall of the dynastic history in 1911, the first national recognized “movement,” and the high moment of struggling of a founding of a modern nation.

points out, “peoplehood” is not merely constructed “but one which, in each particular instance, has consistently changing boundaries” (77). And the inconsistency in the construction of peoplehood during the May Fourth time means that the century-old social relations do not work in the modern times. From this perspective, the literary narratives at the time, therefore, carry this responsibility, consciously, or unconsciously, of constructing boundaries that shape the collective identity of people and provide ideological guidance. By imagining a new constitution of a specific ideological form, the process of unification may then happen and help the community recognize itself “in the institution of the state,” and “recognizes that state as ‘its own’ in opposition to other states” (93), and consequently forms a new boundary for its modern national identity. As such, the “national-popular will” is formed to “make the people produce itself continually as a national community” (93).

Confronted by this urgent need of a national crisis to construct a modern ideology and imagine a modern community, intellectuals are caught up in a dialectical space that is occupied by the decaying traditional ideology and the intruding modern social values, struggling for a solution in ideological guidance that is able to imagine the modern community and save the country. This turbulence climaxed during the May Fourth Movement and resulted in an iconoclasm, which witnesses the large-scale criticizing of Confucian ideology. Some intellectuals would, if they could, do away with it completely, an intentional discontinuity yet an unavoidable continuity of tradition. This particular historical time accordingly transforms into a dialectical space that traps the individuals and asks for the dawn of new ideological creation. According to Kirk Denton, “a broad range of writers in the Republican-era literary field were motivated by a very traditional

desire to affect social transformation and assert themselves in a meaningful way into history” (46). Intellectuals such as Lu Xun (鲁迅; 1881-1936) and Chen Duxiu (陈独秀; 1879-1942) all rise up to shoulder this task. The leftists largely proposed the notion of a “revolution” that is going to fundamentally transform the Chinese nation. Key speakers of that time have embraced this trend: Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培; 1868-1940) proposed “aesthetic education as a substitute for religion” and Chen Duxiu advocated a “revolution in art.” Lu Xun gave up medical studies and adopted literature as the tool to cure people’s mental corruption and cast criticism on Confucian *lijiao* ethnics, defining them as cannibalistic ideology. He endorsed the Woodcut Movement as public art (*dazhong yishu* 大众艺术) in order to serve the need of idea-spreading for the revolution. Guo Moruo takes on this activist task in two ways: first, his direct cultural practices through leading Creation Society; Second, he frames revolution in his own intellectual creation: New Poetry.

Inspired by the free verse of Walt Whitman (1819-92), Guo reimagines the legendary figure (*niwa* 女娲) from Chinese mythological literature into a border figure that stands in the dialectical space of tradition and modernity, pointing out new possibilities for the Chinese nation in order to solve this national crisis. The poem first appeared on the scene of New Poetry, helping Guo make a debut as a lyrical vernacular poet. Standing at the historical juncture, Guo Moruo answers the nationalist calling of revolution with a lyrical creation. He identified the *Zeitgeist* as the key to solving the national crisis (Wang 2). Furthermore, he specifies that the *Zeitgeist* equals revolution and literature. Literature is not only the embodiment of revolution but also a powerful means to call upon it.

To spread this idea and to exemplify this power embedded within, Guo continues to create literary figures that stand at the dialectical space of tradition and modernity. What Guo Moruo identifies as the savior can be understood in two ways: first, a hero-poet figure that is represented by himself as a lyrical poet; second, the mythical figure that stands at the space between the past and the contemporary, while pointing to the bright future. These two roles mutually affirm each other: the poet functions as a hero by imagining and creating the mythical figure while the mythical figure's successful embodiment of tradition and modernity reaffirms the power of the poet.

One distinctive feature of the intellectuals' collective effort in meeting this nation formation task at the time is the mounting of literary societies. According to Michel Hockx, intellectuals tend to form literary societies so as to exemplify a collective agency in the nation-formation project (233). Guo Moruo, with other students in Japan, founded the Creation Society in 1921. Together with Yu Dafu, Cheng Fangwu, and other intellectuals, they published the *Creation Quarterly* (*chuangzao jikan* 创造季刊), a widely adopted medium for mass communication and idea-spreading at the time. Moreover, the manifesto of the Creation Society, which is Guo's poem "The Creator," relies on the reconfiguration of the ultimate Chinese mythological figure *Pangu* 盘古. Lee Ou-fan argued that this poem "signified the consummation of a spectacular process which led Kuo to assume the new role of hero-poet" (188). In this poem, Guo calls upon this dynamism that invokes the origin of cosmic forces and reattributes this force to the figuration of the poet through his lyrical calling. As such, Guo forms a hero-poet constitution that looms large in his early poetry writing. In the poem, Guo writes:

I conjure the first God of man,

I conjure P'an Ku, founder of heaven and Earth.

He is the Spirit of Creation,

He is the pain of birth; (qtd. in Lee, 189)

Firstly, the Pangu is affirmed as the “first God of man,” apparently the creator. However, the poet is the one that can conjure Pangu and announce Pangu’s divine status. In this sense, the poet stands at the space between the reader and the creator, addressing the essence of the creator and functions as a hero that can spread the true meanings of the creator. Consequently, the hero-poet construction is made by this affirmation of his critical role that the people must rely on the poet’s voice to get close to the creator, akin to the role of the priest in Christianity.

This hero-poet construction is prominent in *The Rebirth of the Goddess*.

Throughout the poem, the goddess, who is reborn from the mythological figure *nüwa* 女娲 who once saved the Earth by fixing the fallen sky, is a hopeful and encompassing figure that discusses with other companions about how to create a new sun while the battle between Gonggong 共工 and Zhuanxu 颛顼, two mythological figures, has damaged the world. The sublimity and dynamism are all attributed to the figure of the goddess. At the end of the poem, Guo writes:

“Ladies and gentlemen, you have become tired of living in the fetid gloom of this dark world. You surely thirst for light. Your poet, having dramatized so far, writes no more. He has, in fact, fled beyond the sea to create new light and heat. Ladies and gentlemen, do you await the appearance of a new sun? You are bid to create it for yourselves. We will meet again under the new sun.” (27)

In this paragraph, the force embedded within the narrative voice throughout this poem is redirected to the audience. The narrator addresses that the poet has completed the task of writing the historical drama and conveying the message of revolution, now the poet is headed toward the practical aspect of the revolution to “create new light and heat.” At this moment, the narrator empowers the audience by calling upon an empathy of “revolution” that the audience is “bid to create” for themselves. In other words, the message of revolution shall be and can be reproduced and spread around by the audience and together the audience will meet with the poet again when the revolution succeeds. They will finally stand under the “new sun” together. This empowerment of the audience reflects another aspect of the hero-poet imagination: every audience and every reader of the poem are transformed by the act of “reading” the poem and reevaluate the poet as a revolutionary hero who is going to create the new sun. With this new conception of the poet as the hero, the readers are accordingly transformed into the fighters among the revolution, reproducing the power of revolution. This empowerment of the individual is a strong weapon that Guo Moruo adopts by writing the vernacular poem and his creation of the vernacular form. In addition, by this configuration of a poet who claims the status in the real world as almost equal to the goddess in the poem, the goddess as the savior in the battle represents the poet’s configuration as the leader in the revolution. From this perspective of hero-poet construction, the border figure goddess blurs the boundary between reality and imagination and function as a link that transforms the power within the poem into the practical field of revolution. Guo creates this transformative border space that creates the new type of readers he wants: the readers who believe in revolution. Thus, Guo’s poetry becomes the perfect tool for a revolutionary activist calling, and the

boundary between the tradition and modernity is formed by the creation of the goddess that elucidates the necessity of the revolution.

In addition to the explication of the space between tradition and modernity, Guo's poetry also carves out the space between classical Chinese and new poetry. Standing at the historical intersection, Guo Moruo faced three challenges that are associated with the act of writing: first, May Fourth intellectual's iconoclastic pursuits of a new culture; second, the demand for the new readership arose with modern education, printing, and mass communication; third, the blurred boundaries that the Chinese language contains. With the figure of the goddess, Guo ventures to shoulder this task and form a new national identity in order to create a new Chinese community that shares the same language holds the same ideology and has the same ethnicity.

The first problem lies in May Fourth iconoclasm and the rise of vernacular language strengthened by the May Fourth intellectuals' promotion. As a result, classical Chinese was unwelcomed by intellectuals. On the one hand, it symbolizes the allegedly cannibalistic Confucian ideology and can no longer hold up to the current need of imagining a new national identity; on the other, "the common flaw of classical literature is that it cannot be negotiated by ordinary people" (qtd. in Hutters 153). The earliest proposal of vernacular language can be traced back to Qiu Tingliang (1857-1943) where he illustrates his belief that "extending the realm of popular mobilization for national renewal could only be accomplished by simplifying the written language and thereby enabling a larger body of readers to receive new ideas" (Hutters 151). Qiu wrote the essay two years after Qing China's devastating defeat by the Japanese force, a time marked by the political capital that this reaction carries. Accordingly, the vernacular language

(*baihua* 白话) promoted by the May Fourth intellectuals as the literary language is, in fact, an intellectual medium, and even an institution of modernization (Wang 233).

Fundamentally, the rise of modern print technology, the formation of mass readership through the modern education system, and the expansion of public communication together give rise to the new writer-reader dynamics and a well-developed space for the spreading, reading and discussing of literary works that fuel the intellectuals' cultural creation. Readers long for vernacular literature. Since the Late Qing, the improvement of print technology and the development of journalism have led to the thriving of vernacular novels (Jiang 20). Benedict Anderson claims that the emergence of print capitalism enables the modern task of imagining a national identity through the act of reading novels, newspapers and listening to daily news (25). The rise of modern education also contributes to the formation of this culture-hungry space. Since the Late Qing, the abolition of the Imperial Examination System comes together with the rise of modern education (*xinxue* 新学) (49). According to Jiang Tao, at the beginning of the May Fourth Movement, there were about ten million people that had received a modern education, forming the modern reader community. Gellner elucidates the function of modern education as a privilege and gives access to knowledge and, most important of all, standardized education helps form this "mobile, literate, culturally standardized, interchangeable population" that is loyal to modern culture (38). Due to the influence of the May Fourth Movement, students rush to modern education, forming the first group of readers that are for the transmission of the modern construction of a new national identity (49). Though these new intellectuals only take up three percent of the

general population, they nevertheless have made an uncountable impact in the long march of Chinese modernization.

In considering the term “modern Chinese literature,” scholar Zhang Yingjin revises the boundaries this notion contains and concludes that modern Chinese literature “designates diverse literary genres and types, ethnic origins, and geopolitical territories” (3). Specifically, modern Chinese literature at the beginning of the twentieth-century points to “New Literature” (*xin wenxue* 新文学), which is identified as “New” due to its usage of the modern language: vernacular. Then Zhang points out the problematic boundaries in the understanding of “Chinese”: the understanding of the term is blurred because it can include both Han and other ethnic minorities, PRC and other areas that speak Chinese, or exclude part of it when translated differently.

Nevertheless, Guo manages to answer all the questions posed to a May Fourth intellectual. Fundamentally, the act of writing in vernacular publicly and publishing his first New Poetry collection are the most demonstrative response to the demand of the May Fourth iconoclasm and the demand of modern readership. Anderson argues about the primordial nature that was embedded in language for it is “rooted beyond almost anything else in contemporary societies” (145). This points to two aspects of the May Fourth creation of a national identity: on the one hand, the classical Chinese is condemned for its association with Confucian *lijiao* 礼教 ethics and values; on the other hand, the classical Chinese is reinvented as the vernacular language that is expected to have left all the despised features of classical Chinese and the capability of generating the modern formation of a Chinese identity. The continuity of tradition is at once cut off yet reconnected by the vernacular language. This dialectical relation continues in New

Poetry. Written in vernacular Chinese, New Poetry becomes the perfect tool for imagining the modern readers that are well-educated, literary, and revolutionary-oriented. The publication of his New Poetry provides a public space for readers and intellectuals to discuss vernacular literature and modern issues. From 1918 to 1920, there are 18 new poem collections in total, and *Nüshen* 女神 is the most popular one among them, shaping the formation of modern readers (Jiang 9).

In trend with the national task of reforming Chinese culture, Guo's lyrical voice at the time has exemplified the revolutionary power. This new lyrical voice will not be presented in classical Chinese literature's form. Sheng Congwen (沈从文; 1902- 1988) commented that "the greatest achievement of the Creation Society lay in 'presenting us with a new school that was bent on screaming our own anguish, and in teaching us how to scream'" (Denton 109). Specifically, David Der-wei Wang sees "lyricism" as a "poetics of selfhood that informs the historical moment and helps define Chinese modernity in a different light," thereby reviving the interest in "the lyrical" (*shuqing* 抒情) (qtd. in Wang Pu 42). Wang Pu argued that Guo's original creation of Chinese vernacular lyricalism is presented through the apostrophic form as a "latent rhetorical condition for revolutionary politics" (42).

Lastly, the goddess's intentional root in Chinese ancient myth resolves the blurring boundaries that "Chinese literature" contains and legitimizes the revolution for modernity. To root the Chineseness far before the real history of divisions and pledge legitimacy by claiming the rebirth of this mythological yet popularized figure *nüwa* (Chinese) as the modern goddess, Guo avoids the confusing boundaries "Chinese culture"

contains. By this creation of the fictive ethnicity, it further strengthens the unified call of a modern revolution.

The other side of Goddess points us to the space between Western modern values and Chinese Confucian ideology. I elaborate on this from two perspectives: the absorption of Western values and the reinvention of the traditional Chinese legendary figure by Guo Moruo in his own literary creation, represented by the Goddess.

In the formation of the Goddess, readers see very clearly the intersection between the embrace of Western romanticism and the rewriting of Chinese myth. Lee Ou-fan explicates that Guo's massive reading of Chinese and Western authors such as Chuang Tzu, Wang Yangming, Goethe, and Spinoza help proclaim Guo as an ardent believer of pantheism and finally led him to Western romanticism (183). Guo himself writes that Confucius is a pantheist and shares the same mythological views with Spinoza, and the Confucius in Guo's mind is a genius who contains the great thoughts both of Kant and Goethe (137). In Guo's poetry collection *The Goddess*, Guo frequently draws on the almighty power of nature and calls upon a romanticized subjective appreciation of nature's power, appreciating the land of the East. Guo further explains that "pantheism means atheism. All nature is the manifestation of God. Therefore I am God; all nature is a manifestation of myself" (qtd. in Lee 183). Accordingly, the figure of the goddess can be understood as the manifestation of God and nature, and in the end, the hero-poet: Guo Moruo himself. The space the goddess is creating denotes the space the poet is creating by writing vernacular lyrical poetry.

The whole setting of the poem resides in ancient China, and particularly, Gonggong and Zhuanxu are having a battle with each other, leading out the necessary

presence of the goddess as the savior. In the vocabulary Guo Moruo chose, we see a clear combination of Chinese literature and Western Christian culture. On the one hand, Guo uses Gonggong, the Chinese mythological figure, to symbolize the tradition-long legitimacy of the throne coming from the divine power, the son of heaven who “should” be the one in power. However, Zhuanxu, another mythological figure in Chinese culture, is the one without divine power, desires the throne simply because “I must satisfy my impulse to become ruler.” This scene is the reflection of the turbulent reality between the fall of the dynastic divine genealogy and the revolt of the common people. On the other hand, Guo’s vocabulary is penetrated with elements of Christianity. He writes “new wine may not be contained in old skins,” a close paraphrase from the Bible “Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins” (Matthew 9: 17). And near the end of the poem, when the goddess witnesses the emergence of the new-born god, Guo writes:

The new sun, my sister, why has it not yet risen?

It burns too fiercely, we fear it will explode; we have it plunged in the sea.

(*Nüshen* 女神, 14)

This scene relates to Christianity again in its close relation to baptism. The newborn sun is plunged in the sea before being presented to the world and the sea will wash out its over exploding burning energy. As such, by combining German Romanticism, Western Christianity and rewriting the mythological figure in modern revolutionary times, Guo elucidates the border between the West and the East: the juxtaposition of each in order to form the modernly advanced narrative.

By constructing the goddess as this figure that originates from a mythological tradition, mixed with Western values, and calls out modern revolution, Guo invents this

lyrical vernacular New Poetry form that shoulders the activist task of imagining a modern Chinese community. The goddess not only transforms the historical turmoil into a juxtaposed space but also further explicates the space between tradition and modernity, Western and Chinese, classical Chinese and vernacular Chinese by negotiating the borders in between these concepts. As a result, the goddess has become a perfect embodiment of this collective narrative for how the Chinese revolution has influenced Chinese readers at the time. Guo has achieved his aim as to construct a “third China- a beautiful China” through his writing (Lee 190).

## **2.2 The Intellectual as the Literary Leader: Guo Moruo and the Creation Society**

Originating from the poet-hero creation formed in *The Goddess*, Guo’s activism launches into various fields of 1920s’ China, ranging from the literary, cultural, artistic, to the political. With the symbolic capital gained by the identity of a rising lyrical poet, Guo successfully frames himself as a new influential intellectual at the scene of post-May Fourth China through wide participation. This section, by surrounding Guo’s practices as a co-leader of the Creation Society, examines the cultural and political effects of Guo’s activism on the fields of a modern China and particularly how this collectivity has provided various possibilities for social change. Therefore, this section first visits the theorization of the literary field of twentieth-century China by scholar Michel Hockx in order to understand the collective tendency of the time and the dynamics in founding the Creation Society. Afterwards, this section explores the main contributions this collective voice Guo contributed to as a leader in the Creation Society within the debates on New Literature and Revolution. With the desire of becoming the hero of the time, Guo

implemented his activism more than simply in the spread of New Poetry, but also in his own cultural practices in the field of social transformation: public space of revolutionary cultural debates and political revolution. This section will end with the discussion of Guo's role as an activist intellectual and the intersection of his literary creation and his political practices. Guo's activism stretches long beyond the contribution as a lyrical poet, but also as a political leader and cultural intellectual. Accordingly, Guo's activism essentially looks to a larger literary readership, not relying on individuals' participation after they hear the activist call as Ai does.

To understand the scene of modern Chinese literature, Michel Hockx proposed a reading of the French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of field and claims that "the literary field is an interesting community of agents and institutions involved in the material and symbolic production of literature" (Hockx 9). Accordingly, the production of literature, on the one hand, concerns the cultural agent's capability; on the other hand, it concerns the distribution of economic capital, symbolic or cultural capital, and political capital. Within this basic configuration, one can first identify the cultural agents or the interested community of the field: writers, publishers, editors, booksellers, critics, and readers and then the tension between "literary value and... political usefulness" (Hockx 9). As a result, the literary scene in the 1920s China is complicated first by the shifting dynamics of symbolic and political capital, and by the collectivity of cultural agents.

Regardless of various effective factors on the production of literature in the 1920s, the trend of collectivity seems to produce the widest effects on the cultural agents and the field. Specifically, this collectivity points to the forming of literary groups (*wenxue she* 文学社). It is noted that the majority of the conventionally-

mentioned modern Chinese writers “in the Republican era belonged to literary groups” (Hockx and Denton 3). Hockx further explained the attributes of *she*:

“*She* could mean any of the following: a label for a group of writers contributing to, or editing, or distributing a magazine or series of books, the name of the room where the magazine or series was edited; the name of a bookstore or publishing house; the name of a network of intellectuals interested in literature” (76)

As such, the collective formation of individuals at the time almost constitutes an unspoken rule of a habitual road for cultural agents. Accordingly, being a member of a collective voice means together to form a louder voice to the society, commencing wider effects on the field. This literary allegiance not only gives out multiple collective voices of intellectual ideologies and beliefs, the very nature of this “collectivity” in return conditions the individuals.

This trend of collectivity helps us situate another distinctive feature of cultural agents’ role in the public space in the 1920s: the multiplicity of intellectuals’ public practices. Writers tend to take on various roles as cultural agents. On the one hand, writers always function as editors. On the other, writers share a closer relationship with editors and publishers. In a field of collectivity, no single product can be produced by an individual alone, but a product of several connections and social engagements. Literature becomes a product of cultural agents’ interactions. It is argued that “what gets published- in literary journals, newspaper supplements, and in book form- is often determined not by some abstract notion of quality, but by friendships, mentorships, and other forms of social affiliations” (Hockx and Denton 1). The authority is largely at the hand of editors and decided by institutions. Therefore, what this collectivity affects is not only the cultural

agents but also the production of literature, reinforcing the circle of production within the collective recognized members of literary groups. The founding of Creation Society is in direct response to the two aspects mentioned: the literary authority created by the power in publishing, and the desire to form a louder voice at the time of a historical turmoil.

The publishing practices by the Creationists ended the monopoly caused by the Commercial Press that focused on Chinese classics and translations of foreign literature, “catering to the tastes of old and young” (Hockx 73). First of all, the phenomenal publishing of Guo Moruo’s collection of poetry *The Goddess* in 1921 by *Taidong shuju* not only gained Guo a considerable amount of symbolic capital as a rising star, but it also shows the possibility of new markets for new voices. Even though the periodicals’ design looked shabbier than those published by the Commercial Press and the distribution was “not half as wide,” Guo Moruo as the most popular poet of the time still gained them much symbolic capital (Hockx 73). With this successful cooperation, Creationists also gained their economic capital. The *Taidong shuju* continued to support the Creationists in various ways. Guo Moruo was provided with a job, a place to live, and travel funds every time he “needed to return to Japan” (Hockx 73). This fundamentally helped the young and poor Creationists, fueled their creation steps further. In the years between 1922 and 1925, the example set by the Creation Society was followed by many. Small publishing houses all over the country entrusted literary publications to groups of friends, calling themselves a society (*she*) or association (*hui*), and the journals were often so-called “*tongren zazhi*” (Hockx 73).

The loud voice the Creationist made contributes to two critical discourse of Chinese literary history: the discussion on the formation of New Literature and

Revolution Literature. In the development of the Creation Societies, the society as a collective agent joins the conversation of New Literature with other literary societies, demonstrating distinct political views. Kirk Denton offers critical interventions regarding the interaction between the Creation society and New Literature: firstly, Denton theorizes the debates on New Literature and the national task of creating a new literature a follow-up of the “initial iconoclastic zeal of the May Fourth;” secondly, two literary societies can be viewed as opposition to this debate: the Creation Society and the Literary Research Association (1996, 35). Following the first route, the passion for creating the New Literature haunts almost every intellectual at May Fourth. In January 1917, Hu Shi (胡适; 1891-1962) proposed the groundbreaking “Some Modest Proposals for the Reform of Literature” (*Wenxue gailiang chuyi* 文学改良刍议), which was published on New Youth (*Xin qingnian* 新青年) 2, no.5. Of the eight proposals he mentioned, he ventures the popular belief in the vernacular form as the contemporary Chinese literature because “whenever I mention contemporary literature, only vernacular fiction can be compared without shame to the world’s literary “first rank” (137, Denton 1996). He also notes that “literature has changed from dynasty to dynasty, each dynasty having its own literature” (125, Denton 1996). This idea is shared by Guo Moruo, new literature for the new time, and later forms into Guo’s theorization of the *Zeitgeist*. Another May Fourth giant Chen Duxiu (陈独秀) also joined the conversation by publishing an article named Theories of Literary Revolution (*Wenxue gemin lun* 文学革命论) on *Xin qingnian* 新青年 2, no. 6 (Feb. 1917). In the article, Chen takes on a clearer tone in the necessity of “evolution” for new literature and wrote out the word *Zeitgeist* (145, in Denton). The Creationist Cheng Fangwu (成仿吾) writes out the path of new literature by the article “The Mission of the

New Literature” (*Xin wenxue zhi shiming* 新文学之使命) on Creation Weekly (*Chuangzao zhoubao* 创造周报) 1, no.2 (May 20, 1922). In this article, he carves out a distinct perspective on new literature for Creationists: one of the three missions for the new literature is “a mission toward literature itself” (Denton 1996: 246), unlike the common literary view that is so enveloped by the political atmosphere. All these derivative notions of “newness”, is concluded by Leo Ou-fan Lee as:

In a way, Chinese modernity was achieved, in Stephen Owen’s phrase, through a performative declaration as articulated by the word ‘new,’ *xin* 新. Ever since the late Qing, there had been a proliferation of journal titles and terms including the word “new”: from New People 新民, New Youth, new tide, new literature and art, new life, new society. (31)

This stance on “new” and the idea of literature for literature’s sake leads us to the second aspect: the debates between the collective voices on New Literature. Mainly, what the Creation Society promotes is new literature that highly emphasizes self-expression, literature for literature itself. As Guo writes: the words of a poem are the reflection of emotions. This is the real poetry and can thus be deemed good (108). In general, the Creation Society promoted a new literature that values aesthetics and self-expression under the influence of “the Western romantic ideals of individualism, genius, creative energy, and the expression of feelings” (35, Denton 1996). On the other hand, The Literary Research Association promoted a new literature that is highly socialized. For them, the real literature shall be “a ‘scientific’ portrayal of reality through the suppression of the writer’s subjectivity in the creative process” (35, Denton 1996). The key difference here lies in the role of the self in the creative process. Nevertheless, this literary debate

leads us to the practical aspect of the literary field in 1920s China: a struggle for symbolic capital. The Literary Association members (e.g. Ye Shengtao, Zhou Zuoren, Zheng Zhenduo, and Mao Dun) vociferously attack the popular Mandarin Ducks and Butterfly writers partly because “the latter were reaching the very urban readers these “progressive” intellectuals wished to reach with their New Literature” (13, Denton 1996). From this perspective, the debates between each literary society are necessary for them to compete for symbolic capital.

Nevertheless, no literary thoughts contain more symbolic capital than a lyrical poem that sings into everyone’s heart at that time. The literary creation by Guo Moruo, the howl of the Heavenly Hound and the enlightening goddess, by reaching a large group of readership, all exemplify Guo’s power as a literary activist and in return broadens the symbolic capital attributed to the role of the Creationists, supporting the claims of the Creation Society. In addition, Guo’s introductory note of the translation of “Introduction to the Sorrow of Young Werther” (*Shaonian Weite zhi fannao xuyin* 少年维特之烦恼序引), published in the Creation Quarterly (*Chuangzao jikan* 创造季刊) 1, no.1 (1922), strikes a concrete model for the critical claims Creationists states. Guo defines pantheism as aestheticism and writes: “All natural phenomena are but manifestations of the divine; the self, too, is but a manifestation of the self” (206), leading back to the Creationist’s essential view on literature but elevates the “self” into a level of divinity.

As the field changes, the discussion continues into revolutionary literature. In 1928, Cheng Fangwu wrote a transitional piece called “From a Literary Revolution to a Revolutionary Literature” (*Cong wenxue geming dao geming wenxue* 从文学革命到革命文学), the Creation Monthly (*Chuangzao yuekan* 创造月刊) 1, no.9 (Feb. 1, 1928), in

which he clearly frames the task for the Creation Society as it shall stretch beyond a pure literary society just as the literary revolution extends beyond the scene of literature.

Cheng believes that the Creation Society would, “through its spirit of defiance, ardent zeal, critical attitude, and unceasing effort, on the one hand, gave encouragement and comfort to awakened youth and on the other hand, unceasingly worked to perfect our vernacular form” (272). Guo’s literary practices and writings all coincide with this core idea. Firstly, he wrote that “all truly revolutionary movements are artistic movements, all passionate practitioners are genuine artists, and all passionate artists are therefore genuine revolutionaries” in an article called “The artist and the revolutionary” (*Yishu jia yu geming jia* 艺术家与革命家), *Chuangzao zhoubao* (创造周报) 18 (Sept.9, 1923). By affirming this revolutionary task as artistic creation, he further agrees with Cheng’s proposal. Secondly, Guo deftly captured the restless desire and energy of the young generation who suffered from the aftershocks of the May Fourth movement and guided them both by translating selections from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which “serialized in more than half of a total of fifty-two issues” (Hockx and Denton 115), and by his poetic creation such as the goddess.

Despite the influence Creation Society carries as a cultural institution, the development of the Creation Society is largely affected by political capital influence. The first stop of the Creationists’ practices is in May 1924. After witnessing “the daily fattening of vile literary groups that were motivated by self-interest and were quick to wield their force,” the main members of the Creation Society abdicated and Cheng Fangwu composed a farewell notice that still hinges on their determined national task: “We are by no means cowardly deserters, and we would never give up our work” and

“our literary revolution, just like our political revolution, must start all over once again” (Hockx and Denton 117). The shift of political dynamics called the Creationists up once again in 1926, following the establishment of the National Government and the anti-imperialist mobilization after the May Thirtieth Incident in 1935. Guo wrote “Revolution and Literature” in the May issue of *Creation Monthly* that “Literature is forever revolutionary, and only revolutionary literature is genuine literature. Consequently, genuine literature is forever the revolutionary vanguard, and during a revolutionary period, there will always be a literary golden age” (121). Just as how Guo urged the young people to join the revolution, Guo himself took on a practical route and became the director of the propaganda section of the General Political Department of the National Revolutionary Army. Guo’s cultural capital successfully transformed into political capital and matches well with his role in the propaganda section.

As one of the main leaders of Creation Society, the development of Guo’s personal beliefs highly overlaps with the changing collective voice the Creation Society posed towards the whole society. This collectivity not only shape the nature of the “polemical literary discourse,” but also “the nature of literature itself” (Hockx and Denton 3). Yet the overlapping path of both a literary and political career, or this combined role of a literary figure and a political participant, also points to the habitus of that generation of intellectuals: “literary talent changed from being a form of cultural capital, convertible in many fields into political and other forms of power, to be a form of symbolic capital, of value within the field of literature only” (Hockx 62). The particular time made Guo a popular activist, allowing for the existence of collective voices, room for social movement and change. In a way, his cultural and political practices achieved

his aim presented in his literary creation: hero-poet. He has made himself a heroic activist in the literary field of the 1920s. The trend of collectivity proves the sufficient space provided by the society to call upon social change. However, in contemporary time, when there are strong state powers and rigid social constructions, there seems to be no room for social movement or activism against the ruling party's ideology.

## CHAPTER 3

### AI WEIWEI'S CIVIL ACTIVISM AS A DISSIDENT ARTIST IN THE POST-CULTURAL REVOLUTION ERA

When Guo Moruo rose as the figure of a lyrical poet, Lu Xun characterized historical time as an iron house and asked if intellectuals would ever awaken those who were asleep in the iron house, assuming it had an invincible infrastructure. Lu then commented that since there were people awake, there was hope to break the iron house after all. Indeed, Guo Moruo's lyrical voice is one of the rumbling sounds that must awaken many and poses a threat to the daunting iron house. The activist's voice at that time found its target and place: it defined the *Zeitgeist* as revolutionary and therefore called upon every possible force to break the historical chains forced upon the Chinese nation. This activist's call for breaking the chain has largely affected the later generations of artists, and one can notice its reemergence in various cultural products.<sup>6</sup> Activism has had its place throughout the 20th century and witnessed every critical moment of Chinese modernization. However, with the aftershock of June Fourth and the coming of the digital age, Chinese government's strict ideological control forms another contemporary iron house that allows no questioning for official-stated "truth" or free speeches. Online and

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<sup>6</sup> A visual representation of this is modern artist Li Hua's woodcut painting *China, Roar!* In the painting, China as a nation is represented by a chained masculine body. The painter sets a knife beside the body, waiting for "China" to find the knife and set himself free from the chains. This painting is also a representative work in the Woodcut Movement endorsed by Lu Xun, for its public function of advocating social change.

camera activism rise to confront with the hegemonic state and exemplify grassroots agency.

The center of the analysis is Ai Weiwei, who has actively written blogs on Chinese social issues, publicly advocated for human rights and freedom, produced documentaries defending the human rights of neglected individuals in the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, and has conducted abundant investigations in search of hidden truth on social problems in reconsidering these topics. Resembling Guo Moruo's dual role of a lyrical poet and a literary leader, two social roles are of central focus in this chapter: Ai Weiwei as a blogger who demonstrates the power of online activism by gathering common citizens' participation in his civil projects; and Ai as an independent investigator who exemplifies the power of camera activism by making activist documentaries.

Whereas both Guo's social roles serve his revolutionary activism, both Ai's online and visual practices serve his civil activism of calling for a society where democracy is valued and citizen rights are preserved. In addition, Guo's versatile practices made him a prominent revolutionary with the accumulated cultural capital among his peers. Ai's artistic and visual practices both online and offline made him an influential civil activist with more international cultural and economical capital than his peers. Accordingly, we see the agency of an activist in Ai because of how much he has achieved; how he has brought this questioning of ideological control and authoritarian administration in handling people's lives to global attention; how he mobilizes netizens toward real social practices; and, in the end, how he is shining light into the daunting iron house.

This section, featuring Ai Weiwei, the most prominent activist of contemporary China, situates him at the dual peak of online and visual activism in China to examine

how he has mobilized netizens through blogging and activist video. Unlike the route Guo Moruo took as a rising poet who calls for a utopian future to the political field of the society, Ai Weiwei rose as a dissident who reveals the dystopian features of the society and ventures into the political field of the society while making artistic production and independent documentaries along the way. Therefore, this section first focuses on Ai's activist practices as an online activist surrounding the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake, analyzing the ruling logic of the Party, and decoding the tension between the individuals and the government. This section then delves into other aspects of Ai's artistic and cultural practices surrounding his activism post-Sichuan earthquake. Special attention is paid to his documentary-making, which features the rising visual activism through the New Documentary Movement in China. This section aims to understand Ai Weiwei's combined activist role of a blogger and a filmmaker in the context of contemporary China's digital age of ideological control. Accordingly, this section aims to locate the differences between Guo Moruo's revolutionary activism at the beginning of Chinese modernization, and Ai Weiwei's online activism at the peak of ideological control and hyper-modernization. This section argues that in 21st Century China, under the powerful rule of the Party, it is impossible to form independent activist societies like Guo Moruo did in the 1920s. The current activist information relies on the temporality of transmission due to censorship. The successful completion of activist actions relies on a strong social demand of justice and alternative ideologies. The temporary community formed around Ai Weiwei's activist project offers alternative spheres to the oppressed and ignored individuals, creating the room for social engagement and recognition. This section also aims to see the room for activism in contemporary China by understanding

how Ai Weiwei's cultural practices complicate the existing forms of activism and exemplify power in the age of contention. At the center of discussion would be two projects: one is the *Citizen Investigation* (2019) that features Ai Weiwei's online activism, second is the series of documentaries that mark Ai's visual activism.

### **3.1 The Artist as the Civil Leader: Online Activism in the *Citizen Investigation***

Ai functions as a prolific blogger from 2006 to 2009, transmitting various forms of activist projects online. In total, there were more than 2,700 posts on his blog and thousands of photos as well as millions of reader comments (Ambrozy xvii). In addition, Ai has made multiple documentaries recording his activist actions in China. After his blog was shut down by Chinese government in 2009, an English language collection of his blogs was edited by Lee Ambrozy and published in 2011. Ai's blog writing concerns various subjects, such as Chinese social issues, his own art projects, and even his open disagreement with some handling of public events. Ai participated in the design of Bird Nest, the National Stadium for 2008 Olympic games, yet he publicly dismissed the opening ceremony in his blog after realizing how the government was chasing lower-class people out of the city in order to present a "good" image to the world. He harshly criticized the government with a blog post under the title of "Closing the Opening Ceremony" on the day of the opening ceremony:

Offensive noise pollution and a monarchical mentality have been revived as a vaudeville variety show. It was the ultimate rendering of a culture under centralized state power, an encyclopedia of spiritual subjugation... You can

possess power and domination...and cause masturbatory orgies, but there is a shred of real poignancy. (180)

Ai fiercely criticized the current “centralization” of state power, and even dared to address the Party in such a negative way openly as a celebrity. This contentious way of demonstrating his political values have been iconic in his various activist projects, rendering himself as a dangerous dissident through officials’ eyes and a brave fighter on the battlefield of online activism in his followers’ eyes.

This seed of activism was planted in Ai Weiwei since his early childhood and was largely influenced by his father. Ai Weiwei’s father Ai Qing (艾青 1910-1996, real name: Jiang Haicheng 蒋海澄) was admired for his practices in New Poetry just like Guo Moruo, when poets were significant participants in political revolutions. In addition, Ai Qing’s poetry “became a tool for ‘inspiring the masses’” after 1942’s “Talks at the Yan’an Forum in Literature and Art” (Ambrozy xxv). Due to Ai Qing’s participation in a Marxist study group, he was imprisoned by the Nationalist Party. Later, when trying to defend his colleague Ding Ling (丁玲 1904-1986), just as other educated youths who were sent down to the countryside to labor, Ai’s father was politically degraded into a “rightist” and was sent to the Xinjiang for “re-education.” Though a famous former poet, Ai Qing had to clean toilets all day and his poetry was banned. Ai was a one-year-old and followed his parents. It was not until 1975, near the end of the Cultural Revolution, that his family was allowed normal citizenship and moved back to Beijing. However, since their house was already occupied by others, the whole family had to move from time to time around the city to find shelter (Merewether 29). This event has shaped Ai’s early childhood memory of diaspora and oppression. When he later started the activist

practices surrounding the global refugee project, he commented: “I am a refugee, every bit. These people are me. That’s my identity...My father was exiled and I grew up in the camps. We faced all kinds of discrimination and unfair treatment, so I have a natural understanding of people being seen as different” (*Humanity*, 65-66).

Similarly to how Guo Moruo co-founded literary societies at a time of historical turmoil, Ai Weiwei searched out his own community at that time of “confusion.” In 1978, Ai Weiwei studied at the Beijing Film Academy. One year later he co-founded Stars, an artistic society formed by professional artists, writers, autodidacts, and so on (Köppel-Yang 61). As children of the Cultural Revolution, the founders chose “Stars” out of Mao Zedong’s famous quote in the 1930s: “A tiny spark can set the steppes ablaze” (qtd. in Merewether 30). This admiration of a “blaze” produced by devoting oneself into a high purpose for the society foreshadows Ai’s political activism that can be viewed as sending out a tiny spark into ordinary citizens’ hearts. This avant-garde literary society does not aim for a groundbreaking societal cut-off with the old society, or political outcry like the May Fourth activism in Guo Moruo, it instead focuses on the observation and reevaluation of the individual. In other words, the political ideology and the traditional heritage are no longer what the new generation of artists and intellectuals look upon; instead, they participate in the society in a way of self-exploration and express their ideas through artwork. This stance has been defined as “radical” due to its later exemplification in 1979’s protest to the democracy at Xidan and the introduction to the second exhibition of the Stars: “Today, our new continent is ourselves. We are embroiled into a fundamental revolution, changeable and fascinating” (Köppel-Yang 61). The adoption of the word “revolution,” akin to the passion and national concern of the May Fourth

activists, however, is confronted by strong state power and ideological control. This impulse to look for answers outside of the official image, and emphasis on revolution, therefore, made the Stars a potential dissident group, and later they became the first generation of Chinese artists “to leave the country during the campaigns against bourgeois liberalism and spiritual pollution in 1981 and 1983-84” (Köppel-Yang, 62). Ai moved to the United States in 1981 and spent most of his time in New York (1983-1993) participating in street protests, artistic talks, and gambling. He also offered his apartment as a shelter to artists and intellectuals who went to New York.

Ai Weiwei came back to China in 1993, when his father was severely ill, right before the connection to Internet was fully achieved in China (Yang 2). The coming of the Internet age has complicated the public sphere of Chinese society and provided a new way of social engagement. In Yang Guobin’s 2011 groundbreaking book, *The Power of the Internet in China*, Yang posed the question “Is it still possible to understand social change in China without understanding the popular struggles linked to the Internet?” (1). Following this consideration, Yang explains that “Chinese people have created a world of carnival, community, and contention in and through cyberspace and how in this process they have transformed personhood, society, and politics” (1). Yang’s systematic theorization of Chinese contemporary online activism has laid the foundational work for future scholarship to discuss different modes of contentions happening on the field of the Internet since 1994. After about ten years’ development, the rise of sina blog in 2005 allows public intellectuals post abundant and distinct articles on social issues, ordinary netizens participate in this social discussion by following bloggers and commenting on their posts. It was not until 2005, when the sina blog provides a new form of online

communal debates and public discussion, that Ai Weiwei starts to fully make use of the Internet and becomes one of the most celebrated bloggers. Some active bloggers even write about government's wrongdoing in certain heated social events, and therefore online engagement functions as a critical social engagement and even allows the netizens to supervise the government. The online fury caused by the post-Sichuan earthquake is one of the most important issues that harnesses the power of the Internet.

At 14:28 on May 12, 2008, an 8.0-magnitude earthquake shook the Sichuan region, a western province of China. Consequently, 87,150 people were killed and about 5.36 million buildings collapsed (Xu 1). However, scandals about the government's aid distribution and shoddy school buildings arose. The Sichuan earthquake as a national disaster has gained wide attention since the very beginning, and various celebrities posted related messages online. The sina blog provided a contested field for active bloggers, such as Ai Weiwei and Han Han. Active bloggers wrote abundantly to consider the social issues. In May 2008, during the national outcry of the post-Sichuan disaster, Han Han, a post-80 generation writer and the most-read blogger in the world, detailed his participation in helping with people's recovery there in blog posts frequently.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Han Han openly wrote blog posts that directed criticism towards government's wrongdoing. Under the title of "Beichuan Government Continues to Lie," Han Han pointed out the inconsistency of car prices between government issued purchasing lists for the earthquake and the real prices of cars, implicating government in corruption. Two days earlier, in an blog post called "Government Is Busy with Purchasing for the Earthquake and the Beichuan Government Is the Most Generous One", Han Han posted

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<sup>7</sup> According to Lee Ambrozy, Han Han's blog received about 100,000 per day.

the details of car price comparisons and criticized the government sarcastically in a tone of nationalism: “Whatsoever, our people’s government at least sticks to the rule of refusing French cars very well” (all the cars bought are Chinese national brand). Akin to Han Han’s interrogation of the official handling of post-Sichuan earthquake issues, Ai Weiwei pays attention to another issue on Sichuan earthquake.

In the earthquake turmoil, one particular issue struck every citizen’s nerve: an unusual number of schools collapsed, whereas other buildings nearby survived the disaster, causing more than 5,335 students’ deaths (Xu 9). While people started to question if the buildings’ low quality was partly caused by the corruption of contractors and local officials, the government deftly monitored these discussions and claimed that the main reason for the disaster was the destructive earthquake, rather than human oversight, without releasing any investigation details. In addition, the government reported that more than five thousand children died during the earthquake, while refusing to divulge a name list. This lack of information fueled citizen protests. Parents started to protest and to demand the release of student casualty names. The government denied these requests. As a result, on March 20th, 2009, Ai Weiwei, who was writing prolifically on his blogs about Chinese social issues, started his project of “Citizen Investigation,” in which he and his team summoned citizens to cooperate and volunteer to “seek out the names of each departed child” (209) because “the most fundamental worth and civil right of any person is their right to their name” (211). He stated that the reason for this investigation is “to achieve the very lowest level of respect for the deceased,” and to shoulder the responsibility as citizens by “ask[ing] the questions that should be asked” in order to achieve social progress (211). For all the hearts and bodies broken by the

physical and mental destruction of the Sichuan earthquake, this public demonstration of Ai's project functions as an alternative sphere for the emotional crackdown is eminent in the communication between the dead students' parents and Ai Weiwei studio. Ai Weiwei studio keeps receiving letters from citizens and dead students' parents. All the letters are located online by Ai Weiwei Studio. However, this project exceeded the zone of free speech set by the Chinese government. On March 21st, Sina started to delete the articles about the earthquake on Ai Weiwei's blog. Two days later, when Ai Weiwei was communicating the Citizen Investigation with netizens online, the internet was swiftly cut off in three hours and the contents were deleted. The official end of Ai Weiwei's online practices within the domestic sphere was on May 29th, 2009, when Ai Weiwei's blogs on Sina, Sohu, and Netease are all shut down. From March 12, 2009 until that day, Ai has written 115 articles about the earthquake and 202 articles about the dead students' names. Due to the fundamental reliance on online activism, Ai Weiwei's project centering around the Sichuan Earthquake also entails multiple layers that enable us to understand the dynamics of China's ideological control, mass contention, and social change.

After the activist call of Ai, about one hundred volunteers were finally gathered and they "traveled to quake zones to interview families, officials, and workers and made phone calls from his office, pressuring officials to provide the number of deaths that had occurred" (Ambrozy xxiii). Together they have made about 1,000 phone calls requesting "I would like to obtain more detailed information about the students' deaths, the information of the death toll and name list" (*So Sorry*; 1:07-54:41). The officials never told the volunteers the information, but only either declared that "This information is confidential," accusing volunteers of being possible spies from the US or Japan, or

claiming that the name list had been published even though no one actually ever seen it (*So Sorry*; 1:35-54:41). The investigation process has allowed Ai Weiwei's team to collect a resourceful pool of video footages on the hidden information concerning the Sichuan earthquake and grassroots Chinese law enforcement, which are later cut into documentaries such as *Disturbing the Peace* (or *Lao Ma Ti Hua* 老妈蹄花 2012) and *So Sorry* (深表遗憾 2012).<sup>8</sup> Ai Weiwei briefly summarized his interpretation of the difficulty of this project as well as the tension between truth-seeking citizens and the ideology-biding officials at the beginning of *So Sorry*:

I've spoken with them for nearly 20 hours. Basically, I feel that no census has been reached... their predicament is the same as ours. Our predicament is that we want the facts. Why can't we get them? Their predicament is that they are stuck in a system. That system can't be swayed by just one person's willpower...it looks like these two questions are both necessary: why does power exist as a necessity in virtually any society? It's because every society must have the right to monitor and restrain power. Not one society can escape this most fundamental structure... They're just doing their duty and we're doing ours. (2:37- 54:41)

It is clear that Ai Weiwei views his Citizen Investigation together with his other activist projects as a way of necessary critical engagement with society as a basic fulfillment of a modern citizen's duty: to ask questions, to discover truth, and in the end, to monitor and restrain power. Regardless of the detainment of volunteers, the public monitoring and surveillance by government assigned locals, the deletion of already collected data, and

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<sup>8</sup> The next section is a focus on how these documentaries exemplify a visual activism that mobilizes netizens and help Ai achieve his activist ideal.

the shut-down of sina blogs, Citizen Investigation has been able to release a list of dead students' names, with date of birth, school, grade, and a contact number of in total 5,210 students (Ambrozy xxiii). Well aware of the necessity and the power of the Internet, the name list and all other related information are published on Ai Weiwei's website: aiweiwei.com.<sup>9</sup>

However, this activism provokes several questions: why was the government prevented from releasing information about the investigation process? Why did the government refuse to release the dead students' names? Why would it necessitate an unofficial figure to call upon an action for basic human respect? Why was this investigation banned by the government? Numerous points can be drawn here to analyze the political dynamics of the Chinese government: the opposition between the state and the individual reflected in casualties, the contentious yet powerful agency embodied in the online field, the failure of the state's attempted ideological control in capturing the structure of feelings. The Chinese government's actions denote a hegemonic governance that reduces citizens' full capacity into manageable numbers while refusing to release a full name list and any other details.

The hegemonic feature can be traced back to the shock of June Fourth, 1989. This incident marked a turning point in China's official governance: its attitudes towards any kind of mass movement and activism changed. Deng Xiaoping "had publicly identified the CCP's failure in the 1980s to carry out 'ideological and political education-not just of

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<sup>9</sup> This website cannot be accessed by Chinese mainland Internet without using crossing-wall software (翻墙软件 *Fanqiang Ruanjian*, software designed to allow users access foreign websites). Since the Chinese Internet has denied access to them, many incidents of detainment of citizen using "crossing-wall" have been reported at the time of thesis writing (2019).

students but of the people in general' as the Party's 'biggest mistake' (Edwards 14). Learning from the failure of the 1980s, the CCP shifted to a strategy of cultural hegemony and "the authorities have since ensured representations publicly circulating through official channels never question the CCP's legitimacy, the benefits of one-party rule, or broad economic policies" (Edwards 14). As a result, top-down censorship has enveloped the cultural production of Chinese society and officials strived to prevent dissenting expression from being publicized. This also correlates with what Foucault described as "the set of rules which at a given period and for a given society define the limits and forms of the sayable" (Edwards 11).

One of the strategies of forming this hegemonic culture is the management of an individual calling. In characterizing the structures of capitalism as "the iron cage," Max Weber points out the "fundamental elements of the spirit of capitalism...of all modern culture" is to rationally conduct "on the basis of the idea of the calling" (81). He further explains that to feel this calling "is an obligation which the individual is supposed to feel and does feel towards the content of his professional activity" (81). By emphasizing the necessity of a "calling" in each citizen's duty to add to "the earning of more and more money," the government ensures the legitimacy of the governance in that how it utilizes "individual powers" for the social good and allows for individual enjoyment (81). The Chinese government's creation of the calling for each Chinese citizen is "positive energy" (*zhengnengliang* 正能量), a term that guides the people to think of the good side of society and political governing, thus forming an ideology that prevents the public presentation of negative and critical ideas from grassroots groups or intellectuals. Accordingly, it attempts to shape the people's minds into feeling joyful in living under

the governance of the government, or not to think critically. Ideally, everyone shares this calling from the government and avoids the kind of speech that challenges the government. Moreover, the Chinese government sets very strict boundaries to create a good context for this calling to continuously popularize in the public. For example, it commands that party members and college professors should resist the erosion caused by Western ideas such as universal values, civil society, citizens' rights, the party's mistakes in the past, power-elite capitalism and an independent justice system (Xu 197).

The logic of China's governing through the construction of a socialist calling of positive energy is also related in its dealing with social organizations (*shehui zuzhi* 社会组织) during the Sichuan earthquake. After the state of emergency in the Sichuan earthquake changed, the Chinese government quickly went back to its normal state of governing: tightening the control of social organizations. On the one hand, "the state expelled and restricted associations that provided social services and suppresses activists such Ai Weiwei" (Xu 192); on the other hand, the state meticulously monitored the social organizations through the organization's own wording (*ding xing* 定性) of their activities. In the scrutinization of social organizations' "wording," the normally oppressed non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are surprisingly tolerated when their wording matches with the official's calling of positive energy (198).<sup>10</sup> It turns out that the social organizations that frame themselves under the shelter of "public welfare" (*gongyi* 公益) activities gained the symbolic support from the government whereas those who stayed in the "angry and radical" zone of humanist, democratic values face severe oppression

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<sup>10</sup> Though scholar Robert Weller argues that NGOs in China should be called GNGOs (Government NGOs).

(198). Furthermore, the construction of the calling in positive energy shape people's mind in all aspects. The volunteers who civically participated in helping the recovery after Sichuan earthquake mostly did not speak of "normative ideas of liberal democratic civil society", but they mostly used "nationalism, religion, individualism, and other cultural terms to talk about why they participated and how they felt about their volunteering experience" (192). In other words, the calling denotes the "safe" sphere of public speaking. This tendency in civic volunteers' wording relates to Weber's idea of "internalized structures." In the end, this construction in the calling aims to strengthen the legitimacy of the Chinese government by constructing this habitus that people tend to think of the positive side of social life under the Party's governing, and it further affirms the Chinese government's correct decisions and policy-making.

Within the framework of positive energy, the deaths of students therefore are reduced into an intolerable element for the government's authority while also reflecting the tension between ordinary people and the state power. In other words, the unwarranted death of the individual is essentially against the power of the social order as it gives the power to die to the individual. Thus, while the government chose to not disclose the names of the children, an inhumane act aimed at political and social control, the project of Ai Weiwei to seek out the children's names and individual's rights is a threat to the social order of authoritarian governing. Under these political strategical controls, the official declaration of the number of dead students and the main reason of school collapse being the earthquake shall not be understood as an official statement to be examined, but a truth to be publicly followed and never challenged. Any action that dares to question

the rightness and legitimacy of the official definitions shall be deemed as dissent and will hardly have any room for development.

On the contrary, surprisingly, the online practices surrounding the Citizen Investigation project has demonstrated the unstoppable power exemplified in a social movement. Despite the government's ruthless ideological control that stood upon the innocent and ignored lives of those children, one can still notice the common folk's agency by locating the progress Ai Weiwei's Citizen Investigation project has made. Certain amount of netizens dismissed the official censorship imposed on Ai's project and showed their support by either spreading the message or join the activist project. Then, how does this "illegal" action led by Ai Weiwei occur in China? The power in Ai's activist action can be understood firstly in the contentious characteristic of Chinese Internet culture; and at last in the power to mobilize embedded in the presentation of Ai's activism for how it has captured the structure of feelings.

According to Yang Guobin, Chinese Internet culture, in addition to the misleading image of being "entertaining" and under "control," is more and more marked by its contentious features (1). This trend of contention is woken up after the wake of the "repression of the student movement, the rise of new forms of citizen activism since the 1990s" (23). Consequently, the habitus of "contention" is formed in the online field. The contentious feature artfully allows Internet activists to negotiate ideological control with the government and in return affect the ways of political control. In addition, Internet culture also transforms and undermines cultural hegemonic control in unexpected ways. Since the Internet has come to China's public sphere, online forums and all kinds of information have created an abundant space for politically sanctioned discussions with

disguised forms, such as in-jokes and hidden transcripts. As a result, “ordinary people engage in a broad range of political action and find a new sense of self, community, and empowerment. Authority of all kinds is subject to doubt and ridicule (Yang 2).”

Therefore, the contents are shown on Internet function as an alternative sphere of opinions and information that is strikingly different from the official image offered by newspapers, television broadcasts, or popular shows.

Most important of all, Ai Weiwei’s activism has captured the structure of feeling in front of the national disaster and the contentious masses that is not allowed in the official image. As Yang Guobin noted, “political domination shapes the forms of contention but cannot prevent it from happening” (13). The sadness, powerlessness, and hopelessness, anger of the parents and the sympathy of the general public all demand the demonstration of justice, represented by a transparent and thorough investigation of the related government officials. However, when the government chose to reply in declarative and authoritative gestures, this structure of feelings is cast aside and must find its way of output. Ai Weiwei’s project offers this opportunity of articulating the unwanted feelings. This new structure of feelings, following the contentious online field since the 1990s, presents another high point of the Chinese government’s failure of ideological control and the agency allowed by the online sphere.

Collectively, Ai’s online activism goes way beyond this incident and is able to mobilize a series of investigations that directly challenges the Party’s authority. Starting from the online field, Ai’s influential practices stretches internationally. Of the multiple projects Ai Weiwei launched for the students’ deaths in the Sichuan earthquake, the installation *Remembering* (2009) remains the most comforting and expressive one for

both those students' parents and all other people that care. It follows his release of students' names and furthermore functions as a public memorial erected for those neglected deaths of students, recognizing their death and serving people's mourning. *Remembering* is installed "on the façade of the Haus der Kunst, Munich," and consists of 9,000 colorful school bags (Delany et al. 123). These school bags are arranged into a Chinese sentence: "She lived happily for seven years in this world" (她在这个世界上开心地生活过七年). This is quoted from a dead student's mother who wrote to Ai Weiwei's studio out of gratitude and sorrow. When the government refuses to recognize the deaths of those students who lost their lives during the Sichuan earthquake, they denied the public recognition of those deaths. Thus, the parents are left without closure due to the unrecognized deaths of their beloved children. Conversely, Ai Weiwei's public display of this quote of a memorial from a dead student's mother thus functions as a recognition of those deaths. Ai Weiwei himself affirmed this idea of recognition by explaining that he "realize[s] individual life, media, and the lives of the students are serving very different purposes. The lives of the students disappeared within the state propaganda, and very soon everybody will forget everything" (*Remembering and the Politics of Dissent*).

On the social level, the public demonstration of the disaster's destruction fueled people's compassion. This leads to two results. One is a larger-scale of public mourning: "Liberal intellectuals and political dissidents made underground documentaries, built alternative memorials, and created artistic works to commemorate the students and to challenge the state's moral authority" (Xu 10). The other is a more auto-mobilized volunteering from unofficial groups: most volunteers were not organized by the state but

by civic associations, nongovernmental organizations, and grassroots associations” (12). Then, on the psychological level, Ai’s installation as this symbol of death and mourning elucidates the emotional commitment (etho) “enforced by forms of religion” (Geertz 126).<sup>11</sup> Geertz explained the mutual-confirming relationship between the emotional demand of parents and the recognition represented by mourning symbols in that “their etho is made intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life implied by the actual state of affairs which the world view describes and the worldview is made emotionally acceptable by being presented as an image of an actual state of affairs” (126). For the dead students’ parents, this symbol functions as a cultural replacement that speaks to their broken heart (etho). The hatred and powerlessness towards the government and the grief are at the same time resolved by the representation of this symbol of recognition.

Ai Weiwei’s publication of dead students’ names and the presentation of public mourning of their loss of life also pose a heretical power against the symbolic violence generated by the Chinese government. The general citizens of China, after the powerful authoritarian governing of Chinese government since Tiananmen Square Incident, have been conditioned to inherit a habitus of silence and obedience. This habitus, according to Bourdieu, is “the internalization of the same objective structures” and is “objectively concerted” by “the practices of the members of the same group,” that “transcend[s] subjective intentions and conscious projects whether individual or collective” (81). Accordingly, this habitus also leads to the regeneration of new ideology among people. People are at once produced and also the producer of various norms. This habitus forms

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<sup>11</sup> Though it’s normally noted as “ethos,” Geertz used the term as “etho.”

“a capital of rights and duties built up in the course of successive generations” and new variations of this habitus can only be generated “when extra-ordinary situations break in upon the daily routine” (178). The death of students in the Sichuan earthquake and the governments’ ignorance towards it are this “extra-ordinary situation.” The compassion, grief, and anger of people far exceed the habitus that’s internalized in people, breaking the common rule of “obedience.” With figures such as Ai Weiwei functioning as leaders of these self-organized grassroots humanitarian projects, people gave up the habitus and adopted their own weapon: public language and civic engagement. When Ai Weiwei adopts the dead students’ mother’s sigh “She has lived happily in this world for seven years,” it is a gesture against the government’s ignorance of the death of those dead students by publicly displaying this language of recognizing the death. This public display and spread of governmental disapproved language strike the everyday order under the authoritarian governance and give systematic expressions to cope with the crisis situation. Specifically, the heretical power is formed by giving voice to the silenced. As Bourdieu suggested, these social practices exert their power and “they literally produce by expressing them” as “they derive their power from their capacity to objectify unformulated experiences, to make them public – a step on the road to officialization and legitimation – and, when the occasion arises, to manifest and reinforce their concordance” (170).

Ai’s representation of students’ deaths in the Sichuan earthquake can also be understood through Foucault’s illustration on the tension between a correct representation and ideology. First of all, Foucault defines ideology as a “false representation” that is the opposite to truth and the purpose of an ideology is to hide the truth and compose a false

representation (qtd. in Rabinow 239). In this sense, the Chinese government's refusal to release dead students' names is an ideology composed by the officials in order to hide the truth, the cause of students' unnecessary deaths during the earthquake, and the misconduct of their corruption in school buildings. This is also telling in the construction of positive energy as the ideology: to avoid the unwelcomed past and look into the bright side, a perfect excuse for justification. However, in this catastrophic event, the habitus formed by positive energy ideology is interrupted by the massive mourning, the public anger, and the demand for truth. Foucault further explains "how the problem of correct representations" can "inform a multitude of social domains and practices" and the problem of representations "concerns with order, truth, and the subject" (qtd. in Rabinow 240). From this perspective, Ai's social practice as an activist informs the public of the social domination of the government, challenges the government's political strategy, and sets itself in opposition to the ideology of the Chinese government. Ai Weiwei's representation of students' death in Sichuan constitutes a social practice that rejects the order assigned by the government, reclaims truth about socially recognized deaths, and truly shows care about students' lives. This dissident act speaks to people's need for truth at the time.

Ai Weiwei's civil activism in post-Sichuan earthquake looms large more than the Citizen Investigation project. Another significant trope is the activist documentaries he made documenting the process of conducting investigations in Sichuan. The next section will read Ai's civil activism from the perspective of camera activism, also comparing it to Guo Moruo's lyrical activism and Ai's online activism.

### 3.2 The Filmmaker as the Hooligan Investigator: *So Sorry* and Camera Activism

When the nation is in a state of chaos and the culture is fiercely questioned by its people, Guo Moruo's revolutionary activism relies on his lyrical poems by which he proposes a utopian national collective for Chinese people to struggle for. However, for Ai Weiwei, under the powerful Party's strict ideological control, his civil activism relies on his online and camera activism through which he seeks to reveal and demonstrate hidden narratives outside of the official orthodoxy, and advocates democracy and civil rights. In other words, Guo Moruo is a nationalist who imagines a great collective, firstly inspired by western romanticism, whereas Ai Weiwei is a dissident who defies the current regime's behavior based on the Western ideal of a modern nation, both claiming "for the sake of people." Their different treatment of the West has fundamentally affected the way of their activist practices. The reception of romanticism allows Guo Moruo to mobilize younger generation towards revolution through the act of writing lyrical poetry that aims for personal empowerment, whereas the belief in a western modern nation ideal leads Ai Weiwei on a road of civil investigation that is contradictory to the current hegemonic Chinese system. In addition to Ai Weiwei's online advocacy in Citizen Investigation as a blogger, his activist documentaries function as a powerful weapon to both document the process of civil investigation and the further supervision of grassroots law enforcement. This section, in contrast to reading Guo Moruo's self-identification of a hero-poet construction, argues that Ai Weiwei presents himself as a hooligan investigator in his documentaries, and directly confronts the brutal governance presented by the grassroots officials during the investigation process. Therefore, this section first situates Ai under the impacts of the New Documentary Movement in a post-Cultural Revolution era and

decodes this generation's filmmakers' subjectivities and generational habitus. Then, this section focuses on Ai Weiwei's documentary-making, with an emphasis on the analysis of *So Sorry* and decodes this form of activist calling in comparison with Guo's lyrical poetry. This section discusses how documentary-making as a new form of activism has fueled, complicated, or even problematized Ai's activist practices. It further asserts that camera videos as a new form of activist practice in the digital age function in a more direct, powerful way that distinguishes it from the lyrical form, transforming the interaction between activist and citizens.

Post-Cultural Revolution China has witnessed a rise in independent documentary filmmaking which was first configured as the "New Documentary Movement" by scholar Lü Xinyu in her 2003 book *Documenting China: Chinese New Documentary Movement*.<sup>12</sup> Film scholar Zhang Zhen also studied this movement from the perspective of political mimesis.<sup>13</sup> Based on Lü and Zhang's theorization of New Documentary Movement, two phases of development can be identified to understand how New Documentary Movement consists of a significant cultural trope into the history of post-Cultural Revolution China: the first phase marked by observational documentaries from the end of 1970s to the end of 1980s in response to the troubled history in Cultural Revolution, the second phase marked by subjective explorations of both history and the self, accompanied by the tendency of activist videos, in response to the shock of the June Fourth incident.

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<sup>12</sup> Chinese title: 《记录中国：当代中国新纪录运动》.

<sup>13</sup> Zhen, Zhang. "Toward a Digital Political Mimesis: Aesthetic of Affect and Activist Video." pp.316-39.

The end of the Cultural Revolution poses the general public into a state of confusion as there is no thorough and critical public discourse about this historical disarray. Ai Weiwei commented that people are “so cut off from the life we had lived... There was no discussion about the catastrophe which we had just experienced” (qtd. in Merewether, 30). The regime also looks for a cultural revival as the national leader Deng Xiaoping calls out “Let 100 flowers bloom” and “Free your thinking” in order to “invite intellectuals to participate in the project of modernization” (Köppel-Yang 62). As a result, free speech and individual creativity are valued at the time. In response to “both the disillusion with Maoism following the debacle of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the changing nature of relationships with the West that had followed,” the 1980s turns out to be a time of abundant “independent thought and questioning of status quo” (Berry and Rofel, 4). This period thus leads out the same primary task as the age Guo Moruo lived: to redefine the nation’s cultural identity in order to better “modernize” it. The first group of Chinese independent filmmakers rose at this transient moment of intellectual freedom in the mid-to-late 1980s as the previously sent-down youths were given the opportunity to live back in the city, and allowed to pursue different lifestyles and ideals beyond the state, some of them hired by different cultural organizations. Ai Weiwei’s father Ai Qing was appointed as the associate president of China’s Writer Association in 1979 after he came back to Beijing (Ding 21). As a result, the confusion about the historical turmoil, this short period’s truth-seeking atmosphere, and the digital improvement together led these newly returned educated youth to record and observe the streets in order to find their own answers. With confusion and eagerness, they roam the city streets, document and observe, considering the problems of the past and possibilities

of the future, and in the end largely contributes to the flourish of the New Documentary Movement.

However, there's another side to the promising scene in post-Cultural Revolution era that eventually lead to the June Fourth incident, a transitional point for New Documentary Movement. On a national level, the Party proposed reforms: under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, in order to cope with people's confusion and the disillusionment caused by the brutal Cultural Revolution. In the economic realm, the reform rejected collective enterprises and promoted market economy, framing it as "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Berry and Rofel, 6). Yet the reform leads to conflicted effects: on the one hand, hopes and possibilities emerges at the time; on the other hand, it created social inequalities due to "the marketization of power, inequalities in distribution and rent-seeking behavior, increasingly polarized income levels, the abolition of security in employment, and lack of reforms in social benefits" (Berry and Rofel, 7). The accumulation of these contradictions further frustrated the newly returned generation, causing the June Fourth Incident. The government's military crackdown resulted in two consequences in the development of documentary-making: first, the tightening of freedom of speeches and expressions that reduces the space for the alternative sphere; second, in response to the shock and control, a tendency of critical examination of the past and the current reality gradually emerges.

Dan Edwards proposed that two fields of analysis are of vital importance in understanding the visual representation of China in post-Cultural Revolution era: the public sphere (*gonggong lingyu* 公共领域), marked by official-approved production, is publicly released and advocated through cinemas and TV shows; the private sphere

(*minjian* 民间), marked by grassroots (*caogen* 草根) private production and the release in the film salons and gatherings. According to Edwards, the public sphere is dominated by the official monitored public communication through film, television, printing media, and public institutions, while film and television has reached “92 percent of China’s population by the early years of this century” (15). Scholars such as Qing Liu and McCormick also define the public sphere in China as “a social realm where public discourses are structurally situated, allocated, regulated, and circulated, while the term public discourse refers to information, images, ideas, arguments, and so forth, that are accessible to a wide audience” (Edwards 17). As so, the independently-produced cultural products, such as documentaries, are of little access to the audience. As a result, the key difference between the official-approved cultural products and private-produced ones are the problem of public reception.

However, the line between the content of public-distributed cultural products and the content of private-distributed ones is not so clear-cut. The extreme confusion caused by the June Fourth incident made the intellectuals realize the importance of the perspectives coming from the grassroots, since their own judgment of reality had been proved wrong by the very incident of June Fourth. Intellectuals had examined China from above during the 1980s, the Tiananmen events in 1989 pushed them to realize the “the need to go to the grassroots,” to understand “social reality from the bottom up,” because they were unable to answer the question of “How could such a thing occur” based on their former thinking (Lu 19). Second, as I have mentioned in Chapter I, post-Cultural Revolution China adopts a hegemonic policy that censors mainstream cultural production while allowing a certain amount of dissident cultural production that in return strengthens

the credibility of official governance. Even though previous scholars have tended to argue that New Documentary Movement was only a grassroots truth-seeking movement outside of the official realm, Lü Xinyu contended that the idea of reconsidering the history and reality from a critical perspective by presenting the lives of ordinary lower-class citizens also comes from the inside of the system (20). Resourceful evidence is listed by Lü Xinyu to deftly affirm this co-existence.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the very existence of these officially endorsed programs does create the room for criticism on social reality and spread the factor of reexamining the history and life to the particular historical time.

Aided by this factor of critical perspective from wide-spread official realm, and strengthened by the desire to “look for alternative means to express their ideas outside official channels” due to the aftershock of the military crackdown of June Fourth, intellectuals and cultural workers produce in a more aggressive way represented by activist documentary-making (Edwards 23). As such, filmmakers at the time look to “the hidden and marginalized lives in China, recognizing the existence of oppression, marginalization, pain, and desperation” (Edwards 23). As a result, the co-existence of this official image and the alternative portrayal by independent documentaries and films together form a comprehensive image of contemporary China. The critical specter from the official realm is reflected as an activist factor in the grassroots sphere. Particularly, the popularization of affordable DVs allows ordinary citizens the opportunity to wander the streets, observe and document. Film scholar Zhang Zhen proposed that the coming of DVs enabled an *activist turn* in New Documentary Movement, which is phrased as the

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<sup>14</sup> TV programs such as *Life Space* in 1993, *Documentary Editing Room* in 1993, and *Yinyang* in 1994 (Lu 20).

trend of “individualization” (*gerenhua* 个人化) by Lü Xin Yu (21). In tune with this trend of individualization, scholar Yu Tianqi proposed the term *camera activism* to better understand the technological transformation done by the DV cameras. Yu defines camera activism as “the camera-enabled individual participation into activism as a form of socio-political intervention” (57). Zhang further illustrates this activist turn in terms of its radical element:

Chinese ‘personal-political’ DV documentary made outside the state and mainstream commercial media systems (the two increasingly overlap) is inclined to generate the dynamism of such radicality precisely through its more direct bodily and affective involvement on the grassroots (*caogen*) scenes of happenings—to echo her emphatic etymological (botanic) use of the term ‘radicality’ (324).

In other words, the very emergence of New Documentary Movement is accompanied by a trend of individualized social participation of DV documentaries; the activist desire to question the constructed social circumstances, reconsider historical and political chaos; and to look for answers and recognize representations outside of hegemonic historical and political narratives. Zhang Zhen also specifies that “activist” does not “equate activism to a pre-conceived social program and organized action,” instead, it articulates “a sympathetic *inter-active relation* and a *pro-active stance* in the production of affective knowledge and the aspiration for social change” (324). This trend of activist practices echoed in videos made “since the beginning of economic reforms in the 1980s” became “intensified after the Chinese government fully adopted an aggressive model of neoliberal market economy in the mid-1990s” (Zhang 324). Scholar Lee and Hsing

conclude cultural producers such as journalists, filmmakers, and artists as “activists” in carrying out the “symbolic contestations” (2-3).

Specifically, activist documentaries flourish along with the tightening ideological control on cultural production as the activists’ desire to seek truth, and look into marginalized groups in the society only gets intensified under the official calling, and will act once to seize the chance. Abundant activist documentary-makers have dedicated their time and social well-being into the making of activist documentaries. Documentaries such as *The Box* by Ying Weiwei in 2001, *Houjie* by Zhou Hao and Ji Jianghong in 2002, *Searching for Lin Zhao’s Soul* in 2004 by Hu Jie, *Taishi Village* by Ai Xiao Ming in 2005, and *Petition* by Zhao Liang in 2009 are all representative works of this time. Even though activist documentaries received way less attention than all the other independent documentaries both domestically and internationally, and activist filmmakers are heavily monitored or controlled by Chinese officials, activist documentaries do raise public awareness within the bounds.<sup>15</sup> However, the emergence of Ai Weiwei changed the scene of New Documentary Movement. His documentaries are able to transcend the bounds of the activist circle and gain both domestic and international attention. This may be partly a result of Ai’s utilization of Chinese Internet and his fame accumulated as an independent artist and a civil fighter. Fully believe in the power of Internet, Ai posted all his films online and kept updating his projects on his social media accounts such as Twitter and Instagram.

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<sup>15</sup> As Ai Xiaoming continues to “openly advocated social and political activism and sees her sees her documentary work as “a form of participatory action”, “her activism outside the campus has led to police harassments, custodies, and now an indefinite ban on her traveling abroad” (Zhang Zhen 334).

Ai Weiwei returned to Beijing just when the trends of activist video get intensified in 1993.<sup>16</sup> Yet the factor of visual documentation of life started when Ai was in the US. He did it by taking over 10,000 photos. Then, newly returned to Beijing, Ai's visual exploration begins to flourish in the three-dimensional documentary world (Tateshots: 0:16- 4:50). Since the New Documentary Movement has laid the foundation of China's alternative sphere of folklife, Ai's visual exploration, long before his activist attention on Chinese civil life, stands as another trope to understand his activist pursuits. The method accompanies his cultural practices and functions as either the main or an alternative option of advocacy. As early as 2003, he made the documentary *Eat Drink and Play* 吃喝玩乐, recording the ordinary lives in Beijing city under the deployment of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome). It marked the very first impulse of Ai Weiwei's concern for documenting individual lives as they are, in the midst of severe external destruction. This 26-minute-long video was released on Youtube in 2013, the tenth anniversary of the SARS disaster. In 2007, he also mobilized this visual tool to document his artistic project *Fairytale* 童话, in which he invited 1,001 Chinese civil citizens to Germany to record their behaviors as they experienced the foreignness for the first time.

Align with the trend of activist documentary making and the demand of justice post-Sichuan earthquake, this visual tool witnessed Ai Weiwei's transitional attention paid to the contentious side of the Chinese nation: the tension between political control and activism. In 2009, in the aftermath of all the disputes surrounding the Sichuan

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<sup>16</sup> Ai returned to Beijing because his father was severely ill.

earthquake, Ai released the first activist documentary *Disturbing the Peace* (or *Lao Ma Ti Hua* 老妈蹄花 2009). It recorded the process of testifying for Tan Zuoren, who has been promoting June Fourth's memorial for years, and challenges the Chinese government in front of foreign press since the Sichuan earthquake. Subsequently, Ai also made *4851*, *Little Girl's Cheeks* (花脸巴 *Hua Lian Ba*) and *So Sorry* (深表遗憾 *Shen Biao Yihan*), all centering on the Sichuan earthquake. Correspondingly, director Alison Klayman made a documentary about Ai Weiwei named *Never Sorry* in 2012. In its Taiwanese title, 艾未未: 草泥馬 (*Ai Weiwei: Cao Ni Ma*, aka 艾未未: 道歉你妹), 草泥馬 is a figurative speaking of the Chinese phrase "fuck your mom," with similar initials and finals but different tones. This title not only corresponds with Ai Weiwei's own documentary *So Sorry*, that denotes the sorry for the dead students and their parents, but also sorry for how ruthless the government is in handling the issue. The title also responds to Ai Weiwei's early artistic work *A Study of Perspective* (1995-2003), in which Ai took photos of his middle finger directed to the representative buildings of different symbols of state: China's Tiananmen Square, American's White House, and France's Eiffel Tower.

The Sichuan earthquake marked a turning point for Ai Weiwei in every way. Firstly, it defined him from an avant-garde artist to a civil activist; secondly, Ai started to largely focus on the civil aspect of Chinese society and confront the all-encompassing power of the Chinese government; thirdly, Ai Weiwei's international fame started to boost starting from there, aided by his widespread documentary on a global level, and his

artistic demonstration in Germany; lastly, this marks the beginning of his productive period of activist documentary making. Three key features contribute to the activist impacts Ai Weiwei's documentaries are making: first, the presence of a first-person confrontation that depicts Ai as a hooligan investigator, transforms the relation between the camera, the audience and the filmmaker; second, the sometimes intentional entertainizing tendency along with his documentary making, a transformation between the producer and the product caused by the new online culture; third, directly mobilize the audience to participate in the activist practices through camera activism, a distinct feature of activism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century's Internet age. *So Sorry*, as a continuation of *Disturbing the Peace*, provides a perfect model of analyzing Ai's camera activism.

First of all, in contrast to Guo Moruo's configuration of a hero-poet construction in his lyrical poem, Ai Weiwei transforms the relation between the producer (filmmaker) and the product (documentary) by involving his physicality as a main part of the documentary, a more straightforward way of demonstrating the producer's activist subjectivity. Fundamentally, the relation between the cultural product and the cultural producer is transformed and made available by the digital technology DV camera. Thomas Harding summarizes the technological function enabled by cameras comprehensively: In the hands of a video activist, a camcorder becomes a powerful political instrument that can deter police violence. An edit suite becomes a means for setting a political agenda. A video projector becomes a mechanism for generating mass awareness (1).

In the case of Ai Weiwei, in addition to these three functions, the fundamental utilization of a camera also functions as an activist means to align the audience's

subjectivity with the activist (in this case also the filmmaker) so as to form a collective activist ideology or voice that will mobilize the potential participants, the audience, into Ai's activist projects. In order to achieve this activist aim, Ai's documentaries mostly emphasizes a subjective perspective on experiencing the process of the investigation, or sometimes, provocative first-person confrontation between Ai's team and Chinese police. Many scenes in *Disturbing the Peace* and *So Sorry* are shot by a DV camera in which it poses the perspective of the experiencer: the camera follows Ai Weiwei's body into the debris of Sichuan, to the courtroom in which the official addresses Ai's team face-to-face while smoking and constantly rolling eyes, to the darkness of the hotel room in which the police broke in and hit Ai. By mostly watching both Ai and the other participants' action through a close-up DV perspective, the audience is forced to join the subjectivity of Ai Weiwei and other citizen investigators, feeling the utterly ruthless attitudes of government officials and even the powerlessness when the film ends in a chaos in which the policeman and Ai's team confront each other on the streets. The provocative image, presented through a first-person confrontational perspective, produces a more intimate relation between the audience and the filmmaker. The DV-camera can be a subjective representation of Ai Weiwei's activist call.

Compared with an elevated poet-hero construction, even though the affinity created by the camera can effectively mobilize the audience, it also reveals more about the unrefined personal behaviors of the activist. In *The Rebirth of the Goddess*, Guo as the author has the ultimate authority: he can define the current troubled time metaphorically through a war between Gonggong and Zhuanxu while constructing the goddess as the savior; more so, he can construct the role of the poet, himself, as the

messenger of the Goddess's activist call, thus elevates the poet into a revolutionary hero. The common reader can hardly defy or doubt Guo's narrative composed in a powerful free-verse lyrical poem. The activism is achieved as long as the reader feels this revolutionary power embedded in the lyrical voice, and also end there. However, in Ai's documentary, the filmmaker's image is totally unrelated to anything profound, rather, he presents himself as a hooligan investigator who may not be excused if not for his activist purpose. One of the most controversial scenes happens near the end of *So Sorry*. When Ai and his team came back to Chengdu to file charges to policeman for illegal beating of him after he had brain surgery in Germany, he found himself followed by a white car. Ai then walked beside the car and pees on the tree. Other times, when confronting police officers, Ai speaks almost in the same manner with them, demanding the officers' ID before they try to intervene. Yu Tianqi criticized these behaviors for "mirrors[ing] exactly the authoritarian feature of the system they seek to resist" for how Ai's speech is "delivered in a violent dictatorial manner with little space for negotiation" (65). Nevertheless, Ai Weiwei's hooligan behaviors are justified by his friend, a famous post-Cultural Revolution painter Chen Danqing. Chen declares that the Chinese government is hooligan and only a hooligan like Ai Weiwei is able to fight against its will.

Other than the transformation done to the relation between the producer and the production, Ai's documentary also transforms the relation between the producer and audience. In Guo's configuration of the goddess, the revolutionary hero is of high status and divine power. The poet as the hero and the messenger for the goddess stands at the position of a leader, he invites the participation of the readers from high above. Conversely, Ai is presented as almost a co-fighter with the audience, with every common

Chinese citizen. Despite how this comradeship is done by the first-person perspective in filming, Ai's own speech views himself in the same position with any other common citizen. At the beginning of *Disturbing the Peace*, Ai Weiwei sits right in front of the camera, addressing his reason for going to Chengdu to defend the environmentalist and activist Tan Zuoren. At the end of his speech, he calls the volunteers as "citizen investigators" and declares: "We are doing what any citizen should do for fairness and justice in our society." By using "we" instead of "I," Ai puts himself in the same position of every citizen in China. For Ai, claiming rights for every citizen and fighting for them is the responsibility of a citizen and an indispensable part of achieving fairness and justice in the society. By addressing the audience directly in front of the camera about civil rights and the necessity of action, Ai Weiwei demonstrates his civil activist call and invites every audience to act, to shoulder the responsibility as a citizen. As the documentary goes on and the audience witnesses how Ai himself stands out, voice opinions and questions official narratives, the audience perceives Ai as a responsible citizen, a fighter for civil rights, and a brave activist who dares to speak out and even confronts the power-holders. The connection between Ai Weiwei as an activist and the audience as receiver is achieved, or Ai Weiwei's activism is realized at the least by having the audience get aware of their rights. However, this narrative of "comradeship" is also questionable. Apparently, Ai is an elite in Chinese society, his activist action is largely protected by his fame gained through his political artwork, his cultural status inherited from his poet father Ai Qing, but also built by his befriending other Chinese intellectuals. Whereas Ai was able to be released after 81 days' detainment by the Chinese government, numerous Chinese contemporary activists' social exposure simply

disappears after detainment or they are unable to continue their normal life after official punishment.<sup>17</sup>

In return, the documentary also transforms the producer's role. The most direct way to spread Ai's activism through documentaries is to increase distribution. Offline distribution is largely limited whereas the online distribution outside the domestic Internet can be rocketing. As a result, Ai is also very good at ticking people's interest point. He has made several short videos that deliberately present his views in an entertaining way, attracting vast attention. Ai's videos with an entertaining element such as *草泥马 Style (Cao Ni Ma Style)*<sup>18</sup> and *Dumbass* have reached millions of audience on YouTube whereas his other serious civic documentaries other than the few famous ones receive a small audience. Zhang Zhen also notes the shift "in activist representation from 'pathos' (*gaobie beiqing*) to 'playfulness' (which involves a 'cultivated' rough and rogue style resonating with online political jokes and web spoofs)" (339). Ai Weiwei's deliberation in entertainizing some of his actions, for a purpose of a wider spread, and possibly for a help towards the huge amount of tax fine he faced due to his participation in these political activist practices further complicate his presence of a hooligan investigator. Nevertheless, it is partly because of these deliberate treatment, that his activist practices are able to go beyond the small circles of Chinese activists and exemplify agency. Unless with a fame and profit, Ai Weiwei would never be able to

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<sup>17</sup> Pu Zhiqiang, a former lawyer specializes in civil cases in China, was disbarred in 2016. Pu also made a presence in both *Disturbing the Peace* and *So Sorry* as a lawyer for Tan Zuoren's case; Ai Xiaoming, is banned from going abroad. Most recently, the leading Marxist activists have been absent from public eyes since the end of 2018.

<sup>18</sup> The video is an imitation of a Korean pop song, *Gangnam Style*. In the video, Ai do dances as the singer in *Gangnam Style* and sings Chinese lyrics that mocks the Chinese officials.

“live” a life again with the huge fine on him on the official record. Exactly because of the fame, he was able to transgress the economical boundaries the government sanctioned upon him.

What Guo calls for in his lyrical poem, is an abstract idea of a revolution, a promising image drawn by the poet that looks for a bright future that’s not either the feudalistic or the semi-colonized China. Guo’s activism is achieved simply by having a larger readership, a change of their perspective. The essential power belongs to the promoter of the revolution, the poet, the elite. Common citizens cannot write poems or argue about any significant conceptions. In the Internet era, the activist power functions in a different way. Every individual is equipped with a phone or a camera, they can write their views or document any evidence and spread them online. As Ai Xiaoming commented: everyone can be Ai Weiwei today (Zhang Zhen). Accordingly, Ai’s civil activism relies on this grassroots feature of activist participation. In Ai’s multiple activists, he aims to mobilize every capable netizen to act out part of the project. For example, in memorial of the victim students in the Sichuan earthquake, Ai calls out netizens to read out one name from the name list he released. 3,444 netizens sent their recordings and they are later made into an audio work called *Remembrance* 念 in 2010.

Moreover, the final scene of *So Sorry* is a video shot by a passer-by who recorded the subsequent process of Ai’s team confronting the police and unable to keep documenting. The film ends with this physical confrontation, with the passer-by’s joining of Ai’s film’s subjectivity, with a true overlap between the activist Ai Weiwei and every ordinary citizen’s “action.” The ending denotes a realization of Ai Weiwei’s civil activism: every citizen shall take action to claim rights. This drive to try to mobilize every citizen into an

active participant of social issues and become right-conscious lie at the center of Ai Weiwei's activism. The activist filmmaker Ai Xiaoming deftly noted: Today, everyone can become Ai Weiwei (Zhang 316). What the online field and the digital age enables, is just what Ai Weiwei aims for.

On April 3rd, 2011, Ai mysteriously disappeared at the airport. Later it was found out that he was detained by the Chinese government in a secret location for 81 days. Internationally, about one hundred thousand petitions were signed to call for his release. On June 22, 2011, Ai was released. When the reporters anxiously tried to ask him questions as he stepped out, he kept a low profile. He replied: "I can't talk... so sorry" (*Never Sorry*, 3:50). Ai Weiwei's mother, who was proud of her son before for "speaking up for ordinary citizens" (*Never Sorry*, 58:20), at this time only said, "I'm happy I finally met my son" (*Never Sorry*, 4:04). Barnaby Martin wrote the book *Hanging Man* based on Ai's eighty-one-day long detainment, also in response to Ai's early artwork in New York called "Hanging Man." Five months after his release, the Chinese government announced the "official" crime of Ai Weiwei: he shall pay a tax bill of 2.4 million USD. In front of this official crime and such a scary number, Ai Weiwei again mobilized the online field. He launched the project to collect this fine on Twitter. Within the first twenty-four hours, he received over a million USD tax bill. The bruises induced by online activism is also cured by it.

Ai Weiwei's activism continued after the detainment, he stepped on the long journey of visual confrontation with the Chinese government's controlling power. In 2010, he released a documentary called *Hua Hao Yue Yuan* 花好月圆, dedicated to the severe policy on punishing the criminals in Beijing. In the same year, he released several

documentaries signifying his concern for citizens' rights. In 2012, He released the *A Beautiful Life* 美好生活 in telling the Chinese citizen Feng Zhenghu, who was rejected returning China by the government for eight times and relied on the food of passers-by at the Japanese airport for 92 days. He was accepted back into China's land on February 12. Under the release, Ai commented, "No country should refuse entry to its own citizens." In the same year, Ai also released *Wang Jingmei* 王静梅 and *One Recluse* 一个孤僻的人 in which he paid attention to the systematic violence in Chinese judicial system and it affects the citizens' lives. Other documentaries such as *The Mala Desert* (马勒戈壁 2012), *The Crab House* (河蟹房 2012), *Ping'an Yueqing* (平安乐清 2012), *Stay Home* (喜梅 2013) touches upon revelation of 50-cent army<sup>19</sup>, the government's forced crackdown of Ai's studio in Shanghai, and other civil investigation in seek of justice for ordinary people. Until 2017, Ai Weiwei shifted to the global refugee crisis and made the documentary *Human Flow* 人流, which had made it into the 74th Venice Film Festival.

Ai's dual social engagement in his online practices and visual activism may be best summarized by his own words:

It's very important to do something, like a documentary or something on the Internet. These things, like weather, gradually change the temperature and will build some kind of movement... If you want to do something, today there are a

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<sup>19</sup> 50-cent army (*Wu Mao Dang* 五毛党) are paid web commentator trained and funded by Chinese government.

million ways to do it with the internet. We can find a community or non-governmental organization or volunteers who are working on the front line in extremely difficult conditions. (*Humanity*, 93)

For Ai, activism simply denotes the persistence in actions. The online sphere and the documentary-making are the chosen fields of his purpose, or the two available field in contemporary China for activism. At this point, we may finally understand why Ai Weiwei, unlike Guo Moruo, is deemed as one of the most notorious dissidents by the government, yet the most resilient and celebrated artist by citizens and the world. Bourdieu points out that “any language that can command attention is an ‘authorized language,’ invested with the authority of a group, the things it designates are not simply expressed but also authorized and legitimated” (170). Accordingly, by the public presentation of Ai’s artwork in front of the world, this civil action is authorized and legitimized. By giving voice to the silenced, marginalized groups in China, Ai’s humanist concerns transcend the scope of the art world and reach everyone’s deep concern towards contemporary Chinese society’s domination and ideological control.

## CHAPTER 4

### REIMAGINING CHINESE ACTIVISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The project has examined two kinds of representative activism of both pre- and post-Internet and digital time: Guo Moruo's revolutionary activism marked by the writing of lyrical poetry at the age of intellectual-led contentions and Ai Weiwei's civil activism marked by online mobilization and camera activism at the age of grassroots engagement. They share many similarities: 1) they both fully submit themselves into their cultural products and involve themselves as part of the presence: Guo does this by creating a hero-poet imagination, Ai does this by incorporating him into the documentary as a hooligan investigator; 2) their ultimate pursuit lies in the realization of their ideal societal imagination that they are willing to utilize as many forms of activist practice as they can in order to serve the purpose: Guo adopts lyrical poetry, literary societies, historical plays, and academic researches, Ai demonstrates through blogging & microblogging, artworks, documentaries, and various online projects; 3) even though it is questionable whether their activist ideals have been achieved or not, they both gained huge amount of personal capital: Guo later was officially endorsed by Chairman Mao and venture into high position in Communist political system, Ai became a globally recognized celebrity and gained both cultural and economic capital. Yet the differences between the two activists are also striking: First, the two kind of activism is inspired under different historical background. At the scene of the historical transformation of May Fourth, the first time when Chinese civilization was massively challenged by modern Western

values, the powerful influence of activism was witnessed all across the nation. Movements occurred throughout literary, cultural, social and political spheres. Guo Moruo rose as a lyrical poet and practiced his influence in the cultural and political sphere as a leading activist. During the Cultural Revolution, activism was a politically-endorsed power by Chairman Mao, sweeping across the nation and leading to its societal collapse. Until the daunting violent demise of June Fourth activism, the Chinese government hardly eased its control on public opinion and allowed any unauthorized “mass movement.” Stepping into the digital age, online and camera activism combat the Chinese government’s censorship and ideological control with the temporality of freedom in information transmission and grassroots engagement. Ai Weiwei rose as a post-Cultural Revolution artist and practiced his activism in the artistic, online and documentary field as a civic leader. Second, despite how they both try to practice activism in a way of self-burning, the tools they have utilized to achieve their activist ideals distinctly impact their projects. Inspired by Western romanticism, Guo’s lyrical poetry enabled his poet-hero construction that both empowers and elevates the poet and transforms every reader into a potential follower of revolution in May Fourth times. Believing in Western democracy and civil rights, Ai’s blogging and documentary-making enabled his mobilization of every ordinary netizen that both empowers the individual and spreads the alternative ideology of civil society. Whereas the common folks at May Fourth times seem to be passive receivers of activism with the intellectuals in power, the contemporary equipment of activists with Internet and cameras seems to allow them more space for activist engagement. Nevertheless, the contemporary powerful ideological control improved by the technology also constrains activism or even crushes it. Third, the

relation between them and the nation is different: Guo's lyrical activism in a romanticized new era changed into a communist imagination with his later conversion into Marxism, allowing him a heroic figure in official discourse; Ai's activism in a democratic civil society stands against the current political agenda of Chinese society and in the end made him a dissident. In order to thoroughly understand the relationship between activism and China's modernization, the next project requires further studies on the dynamics and formation of the Chinese contemporary online field, the subjectivity of corresponding generations both activists are at, the factor of the West in affecting their conceptualization of activism, and a comprehensive study of the modern Chinese political system.

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