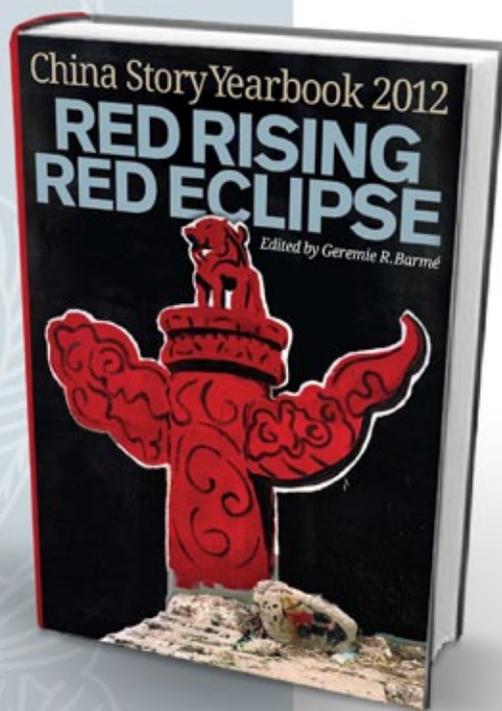


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VOICES FROM THE BLOGOSPHERE II

Excerpt from
CHINA STORY YEARBOOK 2012

RED RISING RED ECLIPSE

Edited by
Geremie R. Barmé

with
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Australian Centre on China in the World
中华全球研究中心 / 中華全球研究中心



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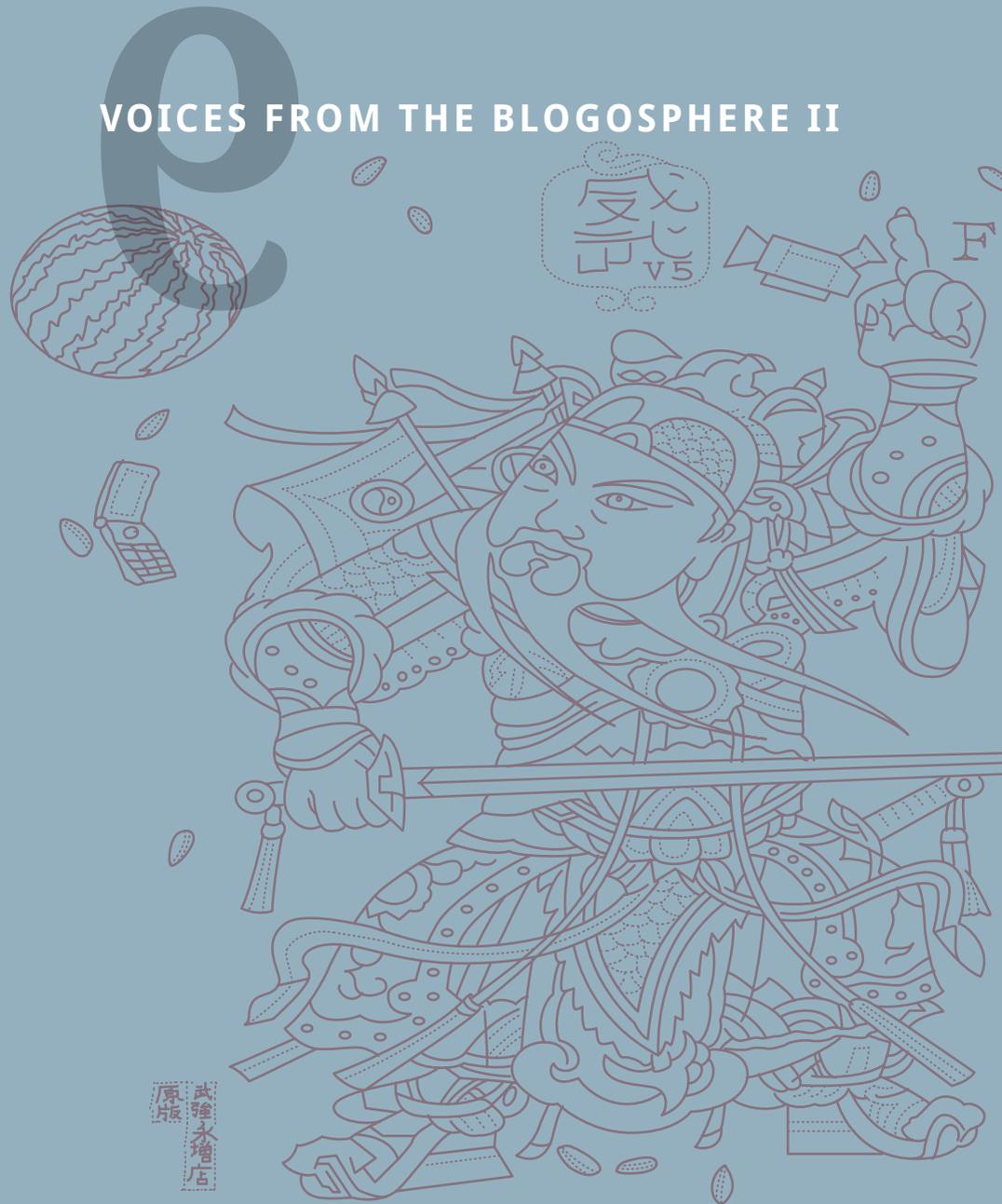
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VOICES FROM THE BLOGOSPHERE II



FUCK 發謔

THIS CHAPTER continues our selection of writings from the Chinese Internet by local writers and foreign observers that engage with some of the topics discussed in this book. All material is reprinted with permission from the original author, editor or website.

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Reading Culture in the *People's Daily*

By David Bandurski

From China Media Project

Published on 2 December 2011



Unpacking China's latest policies on cultural reform, which emerged from October's Sixth Plenum of the Seventeenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, will be a process of many months. The October 'Notice' on cultural reform is not so much a coherent program of cultural development as a mess of politics, ideology and commercial interests. And the Party's own attempts to explain what these changes mean lead only to more befuddlement.

Take, for example, today's edition of the Party's official *People's Daily*. While articles on cultural reform are scattered throughout the paper, page seven offers a series of pieces with the stated goal of 'exploring methods of transition and development for the cultural industries'.

The first piece in the series, 'Breaking Through Deep Issues in the Development of Culture Industries', comes from the Hebei Province Research Centre for the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. Here is the centre's introduction:

In a modern society, culture and the economy grow together into one with each passing day. Owing to various regional, industry and administrative lines, our country's cultural industries have not only suffered the limitation of their own development, but the support of and drive for economic and social development in a larger sense has not been fully brought into play [as a result]. Therefore, various regions and industries should, in the forming and implementation of cultural reform and development planning, set their eyes on cooperative development, united development, breaking through...[the situation] of the backwardness of cultural development relative to the economic development.

Readers hoping for specifics are rewarded instead with more generalities. The article says that achieving cross-regional and cross-industry cultural industry development requires 'the strengthening of top-level design, innovating the systems and mechanisms for cultural construction'.

The objectives broadly defined in this article seem valid enough. China must move toward greater innovation. Indeed. China must transition from a 'made in China' model to a 'created in China' model. Sure.

While there are many reasons for the emergence of '*shanzai* [imitation or rip-off – *Ed.*] culture', on one level it can illustrate the loss of impetus for innovation and creation in the cultural industries. At the moment, our culture industries lag behind the overall economy and society in terms of innovation and creativity, and this has restrained the development of the culture industries as well as economic and social development. Fostering the impulse for creativity and innovation has become... a strategic focus and urgent task in the cultural and also social and economic development. Realizing the leap from 'made in China' and 'assembled in China' to 'created in China' and 'brand China' requires a salient emphasis on innovation consciousness [创新意识] and creative thinking [创造思维], making innovation and creativity the leading and driving forces of cultural industry development. [This means] strengthening the protection of intellectual property and creating a social environment that respects knowledge, respects talent, respect work and respects innovation. [This means] strengthening the position of creativity and innovation in the cultural service value chain, raising the quality and effectiveness of acts of innovation and creativity.

But how do you drive home a 'salient emphasis on innovation consciousness and creative thinking' and nurture 'the impulse for creativity and innovation' without relaxing the political and ideological environment in which people create in the first place? This, as I've stressed before, is the fundamental blindspot of China's cultural reforms.

How do you create ‘a social environment that respects knowledge’ and innovation when the fundamental law on culture is the Party’s, the demand that culture ‘follow the correct political orientation’ as spelled out in the October ‘Decision’ on cultural reforms?

The paragraph above also talks about the ‘quality and effectiveness’ of innovation and creativity. But what are the metrics for quality and effectiveness? Who decides what is quality and what is effective? Who gets to allocate resources on that basis?

The second article in the series begins with an assessment of the need for more cultural production on the basis of broader trends in economic growth:

In step with our country’s economic development and rising household incomes, the spiritual [or ‘non-material’ = ‘cultural’] consumer demand of the people has steadily expanded, and this has promoted the emergence of cultural and creative industries. In the past few years, the cultural and creative industries in our country have developed rapidly, and the scope of development has expanded from several large cities like Beijing and Shanghai to principal cities throughout the country.

How will China now meet this rising demand? The article states confidently that ‘many major cities have placed great priority on cultural innovation and industry development, and have gained clear results.’

The city of Shanghai has raised the concept of ‘innovation industrialized and industry innovated’; the city of Nanjing has raised [the idea of] ‘making it such that every person’s creativity is encouraged, that every good creation has the opportunity to be marketed (市场化) and industrialized (产业化), and that every creator receives effective institutional support and favourable policy support’; the city of Guangzhou has raised [the concept of] ‘grabbing hold of the animation industry just [as it has] the automotive industry’; the city of Shenzhen has talked about building ‘the capital of innovative design, etcetera.

So the Party everywhere is talking about innovation. That’s no surprise, of course. They have little choice given that innovation has become the pre-eminent Party buzzword. And what about action? The article goes on to mention other specific measures, such as a pilot project offering tax reductions for cultural enterprises in Beijing, investment in the building of ‘cultural industry accumulation areas’ (产业聚集区) – culture industry parks, that is – and working with banks to encourage loans to ‘cultural innovation enterprises’ (文化创意企业).

I may seem to some to be belabouring this point, but there is an ongoing tension here between the ‘material’ of hoped-for culture and the ‘spirit’ of innovation. ‘Cultural industry accumulation areas’ and loans for ‘cultural innovation enterprises’ are all well and good. But the assumption seems to be that people will be innovating simply because these loans and parks exist. And there is that nagging question about the ‘social environment’ for innovation alluded to in the first article in the *People’s Daily* series. Can you talk about innovation without talking about freedom? Whether you can or not, China is doing just that.

Nor can the discussion of cultural development escape the ideological conditioned response of defining Chinese cultural creation in opposition to the West – and thereby unnecessarily restricting its meaning and twisting its purpose. Who is going to decide whether innovations are sufficiently ‘Chinese’?

A third article on page seven of the *People’s Daily* urges that policy making on cultural development take into account the uniqueness of the Chinese condition:

The writer believes that every country’s cultural industries have their own soil on which they live and their own conditions that give them full scope. Departing from definite historical conditions and social environments, the development modes of cultural industries must change. Therefore, in setting down policies for the cultural industries, while the advanced experiences of developed Western nations should be adopted, we cannot apply or mechanically copy development modes...

So innovation is great, but China has to make sure that whatever innovation it gets is Chinese enough.

This prerogative of ‘Chineseness’ leads us to another of the bewildering contradictions in this push for cultural reform. As I said at the outset, this policy is a mess. So perhaps it shouldn’t surprise us that the top-down push to create innovative culture that is quintessentially Chinese also maintains as its ‘guiding principle’ the political tenets of a nineteenth-century German philosopher.

An article in the *People’s Daily* series addressing the ‘need to thoroughly leverage the capacity of [China’s] excellent traditional culture’ offers the following proviso for cultural industry development:

[We must] adhere to the correct development direction. In bringing traditional culture into [overall] cultural industry development, we must adhere to Marxism as the guiding principle, keeping to the tenets of serving the people and serving socialism . . .

Digital Rants from Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei (born 1954, son of a famous pro-Party poet, Ai Qing) is an artist and provocateur who first rose to prominence as a member of ‘The Stars’, an avant-garde Beijing art group formed in 1978. He went to the United States in 1981 and lived in New York until 1993. He returned to Beijing where he became a fixture of the art scene.



In 2008, the collapse of shoddily constructed schools in the May 12 Wenchuan Earthquake in Sichuan prompted Ai to begin a series of performances, events and art works that drew attention to government corruption and malfeasance. He became increasingly outspoken in the media and on the Internet, notably using Twitter.

On 3 April 2011, Ai was detained at Beijing Capital Airport before a flight, and held incommunicado by security forces until 22 June. Following his release he was charged with tax offences, charges which embroiled him well into 2012. He remained an outspoken critic of the Chinese authorities and an international cultural celebrity.

Following his release from detention, Ai Weiwei was for a while all but silenced. On 24 June 2011, the US-based *China Digital Times* website noted the blanket censorship of his name, and related names, on the mainland Chinese Internet. ‘A very long list of keywords is currently banned on Sina Weibo’s search function’, it reported. Among those banned keywords were: 艾未未 (Ai Weiwei), 艾未 (Ai Wei), 未未 (Wei Wei), 艾 (Ai), 未 (Wei), 未来 (Future [similar to Weiwei]), 艾胖子 (Fatty Ai), 胖子 (Fatty) and 月半子 (Moon Half Son).’

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An Account of an Arrest Foretold

On 20 November 2009, Weiwei posted a blog that appears in the English version of his rants under the title 'I Really Can't Believe It'. We record it here first since, given the circumstances of his April 2011 disappearance and his sudden resurfacing in late June the same year, it seems particularly prescient:

Yesterday the Ministry of Public Security sent someone who spent the entire afternoon at the Bank of China investigating my account information. Their reason for the investigation was that I was involved in 'fraud'. What are they trying to do?

The Ministry of Public Security investigated very thoroughly, for more than three hours. Such actions prove they have no moral or ethical bottom line. I'm not surprised at all. When I heard that I was involved in 'fraud', I laughed – at least they are sharing their honour with me.

My mother and sister both received inquiring calls from the bureau. At first they were worried and thought that anything could happen, but I don't see things that way. I believe that no matter what happens, nothing can prevent the historical process by which society demands freedom and democracy.

This afternoon we had a family meeting, where I gave my family an account of my 'work', expressed my views and point of view, and analyzed the situation. Everyone understands that I've already considered the worst of what might happen, and they all feel much more secure.

What can they do to me? Nothing more than to banish, kidnap, or imprison me. Perhaps they could fabricate my disappearance into thin air, but they don't have any creativity or imagination, and they lack both joy and the ability to fly. This kind of political organization is pitiful.

Bury those children, give them kidney stones, and act like it's nothing, exercise violence near and far, but don't dare to face the facts... and this is how you make it in this world I really can't believe it.

The Longest Road

One painful truth of today is that, as we import new technologies or lifestyles from other nations, we are helpless to import the corresponding mental awareness of the strength of justice. We are unable to import souls.

Modern Chinese cultural history is one that scorns the value of the individual, it is instead a history of suppressing humanity and spirituality. Intellectuals are invariably attacked from all directions by powerful Western culture represented by aggression and by decaying cognitive structures represented by Chinese feudalistic influences. All of which have placed our intellectuals in an embarrassing predicament.

Over the past one hundred years, virtually all reform efforts have begun with submission to Western culture, and all conclude with compromising native traditions. Simple emulations and resistance have amounted to a central characteristic in China's modern cultural development.

Doubtless, the tides of history are pulling this archaic ship ever nearer to the banks of democracy, as communication, identification, understanding, and tolerance have begun to supplant methods of coercion and exclusion. ...
[Written in November 1997 and posted on 23 February 2006]

Hurt Feelings

Invoking the emotions of more than a billion people to make a point makes it seem as if there exists an apparatus that can measure the feelings of more than a billion people. In my understanding, feelings aren't that easy to hurt, and I don't believe that the universal feelings of a nation are selective, that they can only be hurt at some specific time or place. In fact, the Chinese people have weathered many great storms, and their feelings have proven rather resilient. How deep is the wound, once an injury has an opportunity to heal itself? Why are these feelings only revealed when they are hurt? Once such a situation touches upon the masses, the dubious facts multiply to excess.

[10 April 2006]

The People

This mysterious culture that birthed Confucianism and Taoism, adopted Buddhism, and likewise has faith in a system for realizing socialist ideals; this cultural tradition with the most comprehensive and systematic ethical code, yet the most materialistic, desire-driven reality; this society overloaded with dogmatic political theory but likewise inundated by laissez-faire practice; this plot of land is energy and injury, it bears possibilities and impossibilities, opportunity and danger, surprise, excitement, frustration and despair.

[Written on 16 December 2004, posted on 10 January 2006]

2008

Rule of Law

For a moment, forget the struggle between tyranny and civil rights; forget the extravagant dreams of referendums or citizen votes. We should struggle for and protect those most basic, miniscule bits of power that we truly cannot cast aside: freedom of speech and rule of law. Return basic rights to the people, endow society with basic dignity, and only then can we have confidence and take responsibility, and thus face our collective difficulties. Only rule of law can make the game equal, and only when it is equal can people's participation possibly be extraordinary.

Bullshit is Free

Will China have a bright tomorrow? If so, where will it come from? What kind of people will pay what kind of price for it? That is the question that we must ask ourselves.

Relying on individuals to pay the price is taking stock in a notion of history created by heroes. There is no lack of courageous individuals in China's history, yet courageous people are in short supply. Everyone else is either an experienced and astute onlooker or an ignorant person rejoicing in the calamity of others.

People. There are many people, but they have not taken shape as a collective People, for there are no shared sentiments, no common will, or shared values and necessary human sympathy. A human sense of righteousness is lacking. This is generally why some people are always avoiding 'universal values', and undermining the seeds of free democracy. Touching upon the shared and inseparable parts of humanity, this concept doesn't exist in China. Once warriors are apprehended, all of their efforts come to a halt on the honorary lists of various overseas human rights organizations, and they will sooner or later be completely forgotten in their own nation. But that's a bit exaggerated – their fellow countrymen will never even know of their efforts. That sounds more like the truth.

[Written following the detention of Liu Xiaobo, a key organizer of Charter 08]

Simulating Domestic Introspection

Meddling with blogs and censoring comments is just a universal reminder of who the blog host really is on this patch of land. Although the government is not liberal or decent, it can't be criticized. The lack of freedom of expression and the absence of public debate are old habits; it's just that this makes blogging a little less interesting.

Peace is flourishing, and aside from relying on pens and the barrels of their guns, all dictators can do is make the common people's lives a little less joyful, every day just a little less, every time just a little less. The erosion and disintegration of freedom, dignity, equality, transparency and openness has encroached upon the innocent human nature of people and their free will, corroded our innate convictions, courage and rights. All dictators are short on humour and are obsessive-compulsively sterile.

[30 December 2008]

2009

Bullshit Tax

The pre-1947 KMT was, among other things, lambasted for its petty-fogging miscellaneous fees and taxes. On 1 February 2009, Ai suggested a series of new taxes. He suggested a 'post-harmonious discord fee' along with numerous other categories to allow the state to circumvent under the cloak of law all manner of unregulated behaviour, and to make a profit at the same time. One of the new charges the artist suggested was the 'Observing Flag Raising in Tiananmen Square Fee':

Large numbers of out-of-town floating populations gather in Tiananmen Square to watch the flag-raising ceremony. Their numbers exceed the proscribed amount for unlawful gatherings, and these ceremonies could potentially evolve into a mob scene of unscientific cults. A fee for entrance onto Tiananmen Square is proposed.

[1 February 2009]

My Regards to Your Mother

What kind of plaything is the media? To call them whores would degrade sex workers. To call them beasts of burden would humiliate the animal kingdom. They are only the most disappointing, most uninteresting, most lowly race of people, the most ignorant human beings belonging to the species....

[27 February 2009]

Day of True National Revitalization

You persistently delete, so I'll just repost. Words can be deleted, but the facts won't be deleted along with them. This process will be repeated for a long time, until the day arrives when we evolve, and facts and truth are no longer important to everyday life, so we can forget as we please.

It's not difficult to see that the main similarity in the endless disasters occurring on this plot of land takes the concealing of facts as an important component. The distortion and concealing of basic facts – what happened, how it happened, and why it happened – has become the most sincere, most

valuable, and most productive effort this race has ever put forth. The truth is always terrible, unfit for presentation, unspeakable, and difficult for the people to handle, just speaking the truth would be 'subversion of the state'. Concealing and lying are the foundation ensuring our society's survival. On the day that truth manifests itself, the sky will brighten; that would be true liberation.

[13 April 2009]

I'm Ready

'Be careful! Are you ready?'

I'm ready. Or rather, there's nothing to get ready for. One person. That is everything that I have, it is all that someone might possibly gain and everything that I can devote. I will not hesitate in the time of need, and I won't be vague.

If there were something to be nostalgic about, that would be the wonders that life brings. These wonders are the same for each and every one of us, a game where everyone is equal, and the illusions and freedom that come with it. I see any manner of threats on any human right as a threat on human dignity and rationality, a threat to life's potential. I want to learn how to confront.

Relax, I learn fast, and I won't let you down. Not long ago, the collective deaths of those children who forfeited their lives helped me to realize the meaning of individual life and society.

Reject cynicism, reject cooperation, reject fear, and reject tea drinking, there is nothing to discuss. It's the same old saying, don't come looking for me again. I won't cooperate. If you must come, bring your instruments of torture with you.

[28 May 2009]

The Global Times and Ai Weiwei

By Richard

From The Peking Duck

Published on 13 April 2011



Nine days ago, Hu Xijin, the editor in chief of *The Global Times*, assembled all of the Chinese staff into the paper's large conference room and shut the door. As is nearly always the case with such meetings, the expats, known as 'foreign experts', were not permitted inside.

Hu had a direct and simple order for his shock troops staff: they were to go to their desks and seek out any Chinese comment threads, any discussions on Chinese BBS's and portals and blogs – any discussion on the Internet at all – about the detention of Ai Weiwei and counter them with the Party line, as expressed so clearly and ominously in a recent *Global Times* editorial, namely that Ai Weiwei is a self-appointed maverick who deserves to be detained, and who is being used by hostile Western powers to embarrass, hurt and destabilize China. This was not a request, it was a direct order. It was compulsory.

This tells us quite clearly how determined the Party is to get its message out about Ai Weiwei, even if it's in gross violation of journalist ethics, if not downright sleazy. It adds a whole new dimension to the concept of the Fifty-cent Gang.

I've avoided Ai Weiwei, mainly because I'm on vacation and my Internet connections have been remarkably dodgy, which I attribute to Ai Weiwei, or at least to what he stands for. The Communist Party has to stifle voices of dissent when it feels vulnerable, and the Internet is always the first place they clamp down. I'm sitting in a hotel in Nanjing and will try to make this a brief post, although I am brimming with thoughts on the topic.

The Global Times showed its truest and most sinister colours with a now infamous editorial warning that Ai Weiwei was about to hit a 'red line,' and if/ when he does he is asking for trouble. This was a not-so-veiled threat to all Chinese activists. The Communist Party is on the march, my friends. They're kicking butt and taking names, and they're coming for you.

It is reckless collusion against China's basic political framework and ignorance of China's judicial sovereignty to exaggerate a specific case in China and attack China with fierce comments before finding out the truth. The West's behaviour aims at disrupting the attention of Chinese society and attempts to modify the value system of the Chinese people.

Ai Weiwei likes to do something 'others dare not do'. He has been close to the 'red line' of Chinese law. Objectively speaking, Chinese society does not have much experience in dealing with such persons. However, as long as Ai Weiwei continuously marches forward, he will inevitably touch the 'red line' one day.

The West ignored the complexity of China's ruling judicial environment and the characteristics of Ai Weiwei's individual behaviour. They simply described it as China's 'human rights suppression'. 'Human rights' have really become the paint of Western politicians and the media, with which they are wiping off the facts in this world.

This is disturbing on so many levels I don't think I need to drill down. It speaks for itself. It's nauseating. Instead, I'd like to talk about a meeting I had with a senior editor of *The Global Times* just forty-eight hours ago. She is urbane, sophisticated, educated, talented and a truly wonderful person. She also epitomizes the archetype of the sophisticated, urbane, educated Chinese who insists on toeing the Party line at all costs. I believe – I know – that this is completely sincere. But it's also quite frustrating. 'Getting through' to such a person, especially when it's a good friend you admire, is infinitely frustrating when they seem to put up seamless, airtight mental barriers that you simply cannot break through.

I paraphrase, but with accuracy:

Why doesn't the West see that we do things our way in China? We have 1.3 billion people, all those mouths to feed and to protect through a harmonious society. You don't have this situation. You are developed and your populations are small. Human rights doesn't mean to the West what it means in China. Most Chinese support Ai Weiwei's detention. They support Liu Xiaobo's detention. He is a criminal trying to impose Western-style government on a society that doesn't want it. Why won't the West understand how humiliating it was to award the Nobel Prize to someone we put in gaol, a man who is a criminal to the Chinese? How should we feel? How should we react?

This led to a very long conversation – over an hour – in which I explained that if only China would actually engage in a dialogue about these issues with the outside world instead of sabre-rattling and always sounding like a misunderstood and petulant child, maybe then China would advance its cause and help people outside China understand what China is really all about, how human rights are seen through Chinese eyes.

I specifically pointed to the Ai Weiwei editorial:

Don't you realize the entire expat community here in Beijing and many others around the world are buzzing about this editorial, shocked at its belligerence, its snide and strident tone, its implied threats and its undercurrent of violence? Maybe, as you keep saying, the West truly doesn't understand China. Well, you are focusing now on soft power. *The Global Times* itself is actually an outgrowth of China's thirst for soft power, for global reputation and respect. And look at how you're failing. You are driving away foreign talent and making China look worse, not better – in precise contradiction to the paper's stated goals. If your media and leaders could articulate China's point of view as clearly and calmly as you just did in this

conversation maybe then China could get somewhere in fostering understanding. But railing against Ai Weiwei at the top of your lungs – a man seen as an artist and a celebrity – is exactly what you should not be doing. Why not throw the West a bone and let him go, declare an amnesty and then explain why he was detained in the first place.

This evoked quite a response.

Let Ai Weiwei go? But Richard, how can we do that? How can China admit to the world it is being defeated, it is bowing to international pressure and not doing what is right for China? How can we humiliate ourselves like that?

I said it's been done before (look at North Korea surrendering reporter 'spies' after Bill Clinton paid them a visit). In an instant, it would force a new dimension to the issue, and show China was willing to be less hysterical. And I said China appears hysterical, becoming increasingly strident, and that nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the direction *The Global Times* is taking.

This was, as I said, a long, polite and serious discussion. I never experienced anything quite like it before, because despite the mental barriers I referred, to, she genuinely wanted to hear my opinion and to learn how the West sees China, and I think she actually 'got' that *The Global Times*, even if they're right, is scaring people away and damaging its own cause with readers who are not Chinese. She actually said she wanted to discuss my argument with her superiors. (And no, I am not so vain or arrogant or naive as to believe my little talk will change the shape of Chinese journalism.)

All of this said, the detention of Ai Weiwei and many other activists who have the misfortune of being nameless and faceless to us is unpardonable, and self-defeating. I know, they were sending a message to the people of China, not to Americans 10,000 miles away. But again, they say they want soft power, they say they want to be a global super power, they

say they want fair treatment in the media. Well, sorry, but you can't have it both ways. You can't repress with one hand and paint a picture of a happy harmonious rules-following society with the other. Detaining Ai Weiwei was the worst thing you could have done, trumped only by your idiocy in attacking him in savage, ugly, deranged editorials.

Go out and do your thing, *Global Times*' Fifty-cent Gang members. While a lot of people will be fooled, enough will see through the propaganda. I admire the young aspiring journalists I worked with there two years ago. If any of you are reading this (which is not very likely), I urge you to think for yourselves, and understand that while journalists have several roles, astro-turfing message boards isn't one of them.

I am delighted to read that *The Global Times* editorial has sparked 'scorn and ridicule' among much of China's Twitterati and social media users. I am glad to make my small contribution to this much-deserved scorn and ridicule.

Update: *The Global Times* and Ai Weiwei

Published on 13 April 2011

Five full days after my post on Ai Weiwei and *The Global Times* was published, I received an email from someone relatively high up at the paper telling me that my description of the meeting with Mr Hu and the staff as depicted in the post was categorically untrue. I'm putting this post up because I want the newspaper's response to be on the record.

I can say definitively that the lower portion of the post, in which I describe my conversation with *The Global Times* editor, is true because I was there having the conversation. I cannot say definitively that the episode involving Mr Hu is true, as I wasn't there, obviously. But I can say that I heard about it from sources I trust like brothers/sisters. I was told that throughout the day, after the meeting, the office was buzzing about Mr Hu's announcement.

That said, it is still hearsay. A former journalist, I used trusted sources and thought long and hard about putting up the post to begin with. I wasn't there. Maybe the meeting was perceived differently by different attendees. Maybe the story I heard was exaggerated, or maybe it was totally accurate. I definitely believe that the story, or at least the gist of it, is true, but I also have to offer the other side of the story.

In spite of my frustrations with the direction *The Global Times* has taken, underscored by the recent Ai Weiwei editorials, I still have great respect for many who work there, and good memories of our working together. The higher-level person who contacted me and insisted the story is false is one of those people I deeply respect.

So there's both sides. I wanted to put it all on the table and let readers know how the paper responded.

As I said, it was five full days before the paper contacted me. The entry was translated into Chinese the very day it posted and got a fair amount of distribution. If it were categorically false I wish they had contacted me on day one, when they first read it.

Apologies for a long and possibly ambiguous post. I hope it's clear why I felt I had to write it.

A Last Word: The Derailed Country

By Han Han

While many commentators have analyzed the 2011 Wenzhou high-speed train disaster, the Shanghai-based bon-vivant essayist Han Han offered a powerful meditation on the tragedy in the form of an online essay. It was translated by Matt Schrader (with minor modification by Geremie R. Barmé) and originally published by Charles Custer at ChinaGeeks on 28 July 2011 and in China Heritage Quarterly Issue 27 (September 2011).



You ask, why are they acting like a bunch of lunatics? They think they're the picture of restraint.

You ask, why can't they tell black from white, fact from fiction? They think they're straight shooters, telling it like it is.

You ask, why are they running interference for murders? They think they've thrown their friends under the bus. And they're ashamed.

You ask, why all the cover-ups? They think they're letting it all hang out.

You ask, why are they so irretrievably corrupt? They think they're hardworking and plain living.

You ask, why are they so infuriatingly arrogant? They think they're the picture of humility.

You feel like you're the victim. So do they.

They think: 'During the Qing dynasty, no one had TV. Now everyone has a TV. Progress!' They think: 'We're building you all this stuff, what do you care what happens in the process? Why should you care who it's really for, so long as you get to use it? The train from Shanghai to Beijing used to take a whole day. Now you're there in five hours (as long as there's no lightning strike). Why aren't you grateful? What's with all the questions?'

'Every now and then, there's an accident. The top leaders all show how worried they are. We make someone available to answer journalists' questions. First we say we'll give the victims 170,000 *yuan* apiece. Then we say we'll give them 500,000. We fire a buddy of ours. We've done all that, and you still want to nitpick? How could you all be so close-minded? You're not thinking of the big picture! Why do you want us to apologize when we haven't done anything wrong? It's the price of development.

'Taking care of the bodies of the dead quickly is just the way we do things. The earlier you sign the confidential document agreeing to cremate your loved one's body, the more money you get; the later you sign it, the less you receive. Our pals in the other departments – the ones who knock down all the houses – taught us that one. Burying the train car was a bone-headed move, true, but the folks upstairs told us to do it. That's how they think: if there's something that could give you trouble, just bury it. Anyway, the real mistake was trying to dig such a huge hole in broad daylight, and not talking it over with the Propaganda Department beforehand, and not getting a handle on all the photographers at the site. We were busy, ok?

'If there's anything we've learned from all this, it's that when you need to bury something, make sure you think about how big it is, and make sure you keep the whole thing quiet. We underestimated all that.'

They think that, on the whole, it was a textbook rescue operation – well planned, promptly executed, and properly managed. It's a shame public opinion got a little out of hand, but they think: 'That part's not our responsibility. We don't do public opinion.'

They think: 'Look at the big picture: We successfully held the Olympics, we did away with the agricultural tax, and you guys still won't cut us a break. You're always glomming on to these piddling little details. No can-do spirit. We could be more authoritarian than North Korea. We could make this place poorer than the Sudan. We could be more evil than the Khmer Rouge. Our army's bigger than any of theirs, but we don't do any of that. And, not only are you not grateful, you want us to apologize! As if we've done something wrong!'

Society has people of means, and those without. There's people with power, and those that have none. And yet everyone thinks they're a victim. In a country where everyone's the victim, where the classes have started to decouple from one another, where it's every man for himself, in this huge country whose constituent parts slide forward on inertia alone – in this country, if there's no further reform, even tiny decouplings make the derailings hard to put right.

The country's not moving forward because a lot of them judge themselves as if Stalin and Mao were still alive. So they'll always feel like the victim. They'll always feel like they're the enlightened ones, the impartial ones, the merciful ones, the humble ones, the put-upon ones. They think the technological drumbeat of historical progress is a dream of their own making. The more you criticize him, the more he longs for autocracy. The more you piss him off [*gao mao* 搞毛], the more he's nostalgic for Mao.

A friend in the state apparatus told me: 'You're all too greedy. Forty years ago, writers like you would've been shot. So you tell me, have things got better, or have they got worse?'

I said, 'No, you're all too greedy. Ninety years ago, that kind of thinking would have gotten you laughed out of the room. So you tell me: after all that, have things got better, or have they got worse?'

