

INTRODUCTION

Weiwei-isms distills Ai Weiwei's thinking on the topics of individual rights and freedom of expression, filtered through his responses to a range of events—the 2008 Beijing Olympics and Sichuan earthquake, for instance, or his own eighty-one-day detention by the Chinese authorities. Excerpted from Ai's own newspaper articles, Twitter posts, media interviews, and other sources, *Weiwei-isms* is organized around six themes: freedom of expression; art and activism; government, power, and making moral choices; the digital world; history and the future; and personal reflections. Within each section, quotes have been selected and ordered with an eye toward balance and flow.

For those who aren't conversant with Ai Weiwei's background, a chronology takes readers through his biographical details.

Like many throughout the world, Ai Weiwei views China's potential for greatness as measurable by its willingness to tolerate and encourage free speech among its people. In its National Human Rights Action Plan of 2012–2015, the Chinese government employs carefully chosen words to portray China as an open society, in which individual rights and free expression are fully respected. But the brutal repression of even mild forms of criticism and dissent tells an entirely different story.

China understands that to be great, it has to be good. That is, it needs to articulate a policy that respects basic human rights of free expression and personal liberty. But China wants to pursue this aim on its own schedule, so as not

to disturb the interests of power and wealth or cause the military to feel threatened and seize power from the party technocrats. It is a real tightrope.

But as Ai Weiwei repeatedly points out, and centuries of history attest, human rights and freedom of expression are not set by anyone's agenda. They are inalienable rights, central to what makes us human. For a government to deny them, in whole or in part, or to delay their implementation, is to be more machine than human. And that machine has to be challenged on many fronts. Ai Weiwei is among those leading this charge, making him one of the courageous and inspiring artists of our time.

Along with his art, Ai Weiwei brandishes the written word to expose the enormous chasm between the government's use of language and its authoritarian actions. With his own artfully

chosen expressions and idioms Ai Weiwei holds China accountable, both to its people and to the world community. For him, this struggle is a “war of words,” and his own words—spoken, written, or tweeted—are “like a bullet out of the gun.” Ai Weiwei’s skill in wielding the brief phrase as cultural statement has gained scholarly and critical admiration as an art form unto itself.

For Ai Weiwei freedom of expression is a daily endeavor waged on Twitter, in the global media, and in his work as an artist. Ai’s political stance, his life, his art, and his digital communications mesh into a continuous whole. “Everything is art,” he has written. “Everything is politics.”

It’s no coincidence that *Weiwei-isms* is being published by Princeton University Press. Princeton University is hosting a year-long exhibi-

tion of Ai Weiwei's *Circle of Animals / Zodiac Heads* (August 1, 2012–August 1, 2013). Like the Princeton exhibition, the book will serve the effort to bring Ai Weiwei to audiences beyond the art world, particularly in colleges and universities. This effort has taken on added significance as the scope of Ai Weiwei's creative expression, and of the issues he addresses, has expanded. The Ai Weiwei Princeton exhibition and book appear at a time when human rights programs in universities have become firmly established fixtures of the academic landscape all over the world, providing a powerful network of scholarly conversation for researchers and students alike engaged in the history, politics, and aesthetics of free expression.

Watching Ai Weiwei's engagement with human rights deepen and grow over the years, we have come to develop our own strong opin-

ions about China and its future. What does a country need to truly prosper and grow? To our minds, it comes down to one essential requirement: moral goodness. The basic tenets of society and rules of decent human behavior must be met. As we see it, China will not rise as a truly great nation until it conforms to proper standards of global behavior and its people are free to express themselves without fear of reprisal.

In describing Ai Weiwei as a patriot, what we mean is this: he loves his native soil and he is willing to fight for its betterment. Every country that aspires to leadership needs an Ai Weiwei: someone who envisions the nation's greatness in ways that surpass current realities, someone who has the courage to demand more of its government and its citizens. That vision and courage are evident throughout *Weiwei-isms*.

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The book's small size belies its capacity to inspire, influence, and instruct. Though the phrasing may be casual and the tone light and humorous, Ai Weiwei's "isms" cut incisively to the core of what matters in China—and the world—today.

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