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On Ai Weiwei's "Remembrance"

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On Ai Weiwei's "Remembrance"

Xinbei Lin

On May 12, 2008, a powerful earthquake struck Wenchuan, China. Parents were devastated by seeing their sons and daughters laying lifeless, when standing in front of the ruins of schools. They suspected that the quality of the school buildings was the main reason of their children's deaths. Angry and heart-broken parents demanded that the government give a complete list of perished students and investigate the causes behind the shoddy school buildings. Under pressure from parents and media, the government announced that 5,335 students died in the earthquake (Li and Li, par. 1). The government also promised to have a comprehensive investigation on quality of school buildings (The State Council 10:39). The statements from the government spokesperson gave a little bit of comfort to parents.

The promised name list and investigation did not come. On the two-year anniversary of the Wenchuan earthquake, the country celebrated the revival of stricken cities from the disaster, and praised the government's efforts. The state-run Xinhua News Agency stated that:

This earthly miracle[the reconstruction of stricken cities] was created by the strategic manoeuvres, decisive actions, and scientific actions of the Party's Central Committee and the State Council, which galvanized the strength of the entire nation, relied on the enormous advantages of socialism with Chinese characteristics, relied on the selfless devotion of all constructors, especially the Party officials, and relied on the independent, indomitable national spirit. (qtd. in Zheng 127)

However, not all people chorused with the government's completely optimistic stance; it had failed to keep its promises to release the name list and evaded holding an investigation on school buildings.

Ai Weiwei, a Chinese artist and activist, is among those critics. He has a noticeable fraction of artwork that is specifically focused on the free speech issues in China and is consequently considered provocative. A few months after the Wenchuan Earthquake, he and other activists started the *Citizens' Investigation*, a project aimed at collecting and verifying deceased students' names by interviewing parents, requesting government materials, and petitioning repeatedly. Volunteers and activists in the investigation were hoping to be a voice for deceased students and to protest against the government's perfunctory response. However, public security forces constantly interrupted the investigation and relevant personnel were threatened or put into jail. The *Citizens' Investigation* team was able to verify 5,205 students' names at around the beginning of 2010 ("5.12"). Unfortunately, most of the documents put together during the investigation were censored by the Chinese government. Documentaries featuring parents and government officers could not be found on major media platforms. Text files were deleted. People in mainland China could not access documents created by the *Citizens' Investigation* team.

Of all the documents, Ai Weiwei's audio project "Remembrance"["念"], seemingly a conclusion to the *Citizens' Investigation*, could be considered one of the most important. On April 24, 2010, Ai Weiwei started a campaign on Twitter, collecting recordings of people reading names of students. 3,334 people sent the recordings. "The name of 5,205 perished were recited 12,140 times" (Remembrance). This seven and a half hour long audio project is a combination of sound recordings that reads out names of students verified by the *Citizens'*

Investigation team. When you open the file, the screen turns black completely (for the next seven and a half hours). After two-seconds of silence, a female voice enters slowly and clearly, and after a pause, another voice follows. The pattern continues and repeats in the project. One can identify the differences of people's accents, that those people are from different regions of China, or from different parts of the world. "Cao Ziyang", "Du Xin", "Du Xipeng", "Yu Jinrong..." When reading these names of students who died in the Wenchuan Earthquake are pronounced and heard, speakers create connections between perished students and listeners. In this way, students survive through being kept alive in the public memory as emblems of Wenchuan earthquake, even though they passed away years ago. The whole audio project emphasizes the meaning of "Remembrance" ["念"] in Chinese, which means both "to read aloud" and "to remember", echoing the artist's statement: "Respect life, refuse to forget" (@aiww). At the same time, the "Remembrance", as a part of *the Citizens' Investigation*, remains critical to the government's attitudes. It expresses the artist's "indignation for the cover-ups on truths about sub-standard architecture, which led to the large number of schools that collapsed during the earthquake" (Remembrance).

Even though this art work is inevitably offensive to the Chinese government as it seems to undermine the government's efforts in the Wenchuan Earthquake, the "Remembrance" is more than a vicious criticism to the Chinese government. It is a wreath "dedicated to the young people who lost their lives in the earthquake" with the humanity shining inside between the voices (Remembrance) and is filled with soft sadness from people around the world. More importantly, this audio project by Ai Weiwei is an important part under the Freedom of Speech and the Marketplace of ideas.

The notion of the Marketplace of ideas comes from *On Liberty* written by John Stuart Mill, a British political philosopher in 18th centuries. Mill argues that any idea could be true or contain a portion of truth. Therefore, individuals, groups and the government might abandon the truth or that portion of truth by silencing an idea. Silencing an idea, meanwhile, closes the possibilities for discussion and examination on correct ideas people hold, making the idea less convincing and more vulnerable under future attack. Even in the most extreme circumstances when an idea is completely wrong without having any portion of truth, the idea, in Mill's argument, has to be taken into account as a warning or an opposite side of the truth for successors. Only by considering all ideas, human society is able to reach the truth and progresses. The notion of the Marketplace of ideas draws an analogy between an open discourse to the economic concept of market, where commodities are freely selected and exchanged (Gordon 235). In the marketplace of ideas, all ideas are allowed to be expressed and flow freely in order to serve Mills's aims. In this case, banning the access to "Remembrance" as well as documents in the *Citizens' Investigation* in mainland China violates the marketplace of ideas. The Chinese government, by censoring the project "Remembrance" with its power, suppressed a thought that suggesting a possible cause of students' death. It missed a chance of investigating the corruption behind poor-quality school buildings and of improving on future campus development. Had Ai Weiwei's "Remembrance" been accessed in mainland China, parents' pains would be heard and there would be more people urging the government to perform its promises to parents. Although parents' concern, that poor-quality school building was the major cause of students' deaths, might not be true, the government's investigation would alert people, who want to benefit for themselves through stealing money from funds should be used for constructing campus building. Thus, future deaths of students might be avoided through accepting and examining an idea that does not follow the government's tone.

The violation to the marketplace of ideas might lead to citizens' gradually decreasing trust of government institutions. During the Thanksgiving holiday in 2017, the child abuse scandal in Beijing RedYellowBlue kindergarten evoked a great outcry in China and attracted

millions netizens' attention on several online platforms. Three videos, in which parents were accusing teachers of injecting unknown drugs to children and even performing sexual assaults to children, were deleted. The word “红黄蓝”[“RedYellowBlue”] was made sensitive and cannot be searched or sent on online platforms. The Beijing Police Office later officially announced that there was no sexual abuse perpetrated on children but a young teacher who stabbed kids with needles when kids were not listening to her. The Office also announced that those videos were fudged not true and required parents who appeared in the videos to apologize publicly (Xin par 4). But people thought the office was covering up the truth, because the videos and articles were deleted.

Without sufficient information within the marketplace of ideas, people are not able to identify the truth and examine government's statement. Thereby people could not develop independent and critical points on views and discuss regarding the government's statement. The society and the government could not progress without the public opinion supervision. Experiencing the children abuse scandal and the government's default during the Wenchuan earthquake, people's distrust of the government could only become less under the censorship. More seriously, it is possible that people, under low trust on basic national institutions such as police and state council, will refuse to cooperate; as a result, a collapse of the social system. Though some might argue that it's understandable when the government sometimes steps in to restrain speech and prevent speeches being manipulated to cause negative impact in the society, it is true as Mr. Li Dazhao says that “... is to use the Freedom of Speech to eliminate dangerous thoughts, but not to restrain the Freedom of Speech with the excuse of eliminating dangerous thoughts” (par 11).

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