

## Bridge 4

### Compare Zhang Xiaogang and Ai Weiwei

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The environment that a person is raised in could influence his/her lifestyle, values, and conceptions. By researching Zhang Xiaogang and Ai Weiwei, I found that these two artists had both been influenced by their experiences of living in western society which reflected on their artworks by showing different style, as a performance artist and a surrealist painting artist. They got to know the society of the West in a variety of ways and at different times. Zhang Xiaogang traveled to Europe in 1992. On the other hand, Ai Weiwei lived in American from 1981 to 1993.<sup>1</sup>As result, the culture of different country and different period that influenced them were totally diverse. These factors made two talented artists find their style and make a big success.

Zhang Xiaogang and Ai Weiwei's families were different, which made them get a distinct education. Zhang Xiaogang grow up in a normal intellectual family. He learned drawing at an early age, the time when his entire family stayed in the countryside and worked in the "Study Camp." He went to the Sichuan Academy of Art in Chongqing and enrolled in the painting department. During his college years, he was not understood by his classmates, because of his

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<sup>1</sup> John Yau, "AI WEIWEI New York Photographs 1983 - 1993," The Brooklyn Rail, September 5, 2011, , accessed April 24, 2017, <http://brooklynrail.org/2011/09/artseen/ai-weiwei-new-york-photographs-1983-1993>.

style.<sup>2</sup> His surrealist style was so distinct from all others, which led him to be influenced by Gauguin and Van Gogh. This is the first step for him to be influenced by the western style art. Then, because of this influences and advanced style, all his painting was more appreciated by the western art market than the Chinese art market. In comparison, Ai Weiwei's got in touch with the western society since he went to the Parsons School of Design, an Art college in New York City in 1981.<sup>3</sup> This was a period that America had continuously defend active for human rights. This was also a period that contemporary art being in fashion. "The decade of the 1980s is characterized by the coexistence of a diverse range of artistic practices," said Sabine M. Eckmann, Ph.D., curator of the Gallery of Art. "Taken together, these different positions demonstrate the complete arrival of the postmodern in the art world."<sup>4</sup> From this, we could easily see that the western influence of Ai Weiwei is more direct and earlier than that of Zhang Xiaogang. Also, the country they got touch with is in entirely different style. Zhang Xiaogang was interesting in Europe Art, which is more focused on the work itself. On the other hand, Ai Weiwei was influenced by the liberalism of America, which means that he desired the human rights and own freedom. Art Works at that time more focused on using art as a language to show artists' desire for freedom and rights. He was influenced by the East Village artists, such

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<sup>2</sup> David Barboza, "The Rise of Zhang Xiaogang," Zhangxiaogang 张晓刚个人网站, accessed April 22, 2017, [http://www.zhangxiaogang.com.cn/enArtText\\_XQ.aspx?TblCollegeClnum=74](http://www.zhangxiaogang.com.cn/enArtText_XQ.aspx?TblCollegeClnum=74).

<sup>3</sup> Susan J. Henders, Lily Cho, and Alice Ming Wai Jim, *Human rights and the arts: perspectives on global Asia* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Liam Otten, "American Art of the 1980s | The Source | Washington University in St. Louis," *The Source*, January 13, 2016, accessed April 24, 2017, <https://source.wustl.edu/2003/12/american-art-of-the-1980s/>.

as Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, and Jasper Johns.<sup>5</sup> These artists had one feature in common. They all sought the freedom and this made them become well-known artists. This made Ai Weiwei want to find his liberty. All these variable elements made them build separate styles.

The influence is not only coming out from their early experience but also from when they turn around to face China. The fact of knowing Chinese society had a reaction with the influence of Western society, which makes them firstly confused and find their ways later. Zhang Xiaogang thought that his western society background placed him in a dilemma. The west accepted his works at first, but he thought that it was a result of ideology, but not a result of the appreciation of his art style. However, people in China considered him as a fruit of catering to Western ideology, instead of a real artist. He said it was so hard for him, for the artists of his generation, since they had to work so hard to use their arts to prove their identity, as artists. He did not want to be an artist that was only accepted by the market. He had the brand of western ideology in Chinese minds and came back as a marketing artist.<sup>6</sup> In comparison, Ai Weiwei showed a different reaction. When Ai Weiwei came back to China, he was more focused on the problems that Chinese society recently had, instead of himself. Since he had lived in New York for an extended period, which is also the radical period in American history. At that period, the combat of current community organization and tradition influenced

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<sup>5</sup> My translation. Justin Chow, "艾未未：藝術改變社會的可能性 | 周文慶," 香港獨立媒體網, September 25, 2014, , accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.inmediahk.net/node/1026483>.

<sup>6</sup> My translation. 罗天, "张晓刚：想当卡夫卡，却被当成沃霍尔," The New York Times, July 16, 2014, , accessed April 23, 2017, <http://cn.nytimes.com/interactive/20140716/tc16zhangxiaogang/>.

a lot of American teenagers. They desired of freedom and rights. Ai Weiwei was also influenced by it; his works could show clues of these influences, of how he fought for the human rights. When he came back to China, he thought the biggest problem of the Chinese government is its autocrat. He said that China still needs help from America. America needs to stick to its values, which is the most important fruit of American culture, which means the equal freedom that every citizen could have. As an artist, he spoke out all his thought out loudly by creating artworks.<sup>7</sup>

With all these influences, Zhang Xiaogang and Ai Weiwei expressed their thoughts and conceptions in extremely different ways. Zhang Xiaogang wanted to use his work to find out who he is. He wanted to analyze people's mind by analyzing time and memories. So, his painting of the Culture Revolution was more about the relationship between society and people than the showing of history. The first thing he decided to do was to demonstrate the relationship between society and people; then he chose the Culture Revolution as the stage to express his thoughts. He had experienced this period so that he could have a deeper realization. Also, Culture Revolution is a period that the relationship between society and people had never been as clear.<sup>8</sup>When Zhang Xiaogang worked on using painting to show his understanding of the relationship between society and people, Ai Weiwei even transferred himself from the artist Ai Weiwei to an artwork Ai Weiwei. He said that the influence of life in New York City is

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<sup>7</sup> My translation. 纪思道, "幽默的抗争者艾未未," The New York Times, January 03, 2013, , accessed April 23, 2017, <http://cn.nytimes.com/opinion/20130101/c01kristof/>.

<sup>8</sup> My translation. 罗天, "张晓刚：想当卡夫卡，却被当成沃霍尔," The New York Times, July 16, 2014, , accessed April 23, 2017, <http://cn.nytimes.com/interactive/20140716/tc16zhangxiaogang/>.

that it helped him to know how art and reality, even people's attitude and lifestyle, begin to interact. He would not be interested in the thing that separated art and reality. This might be a reason that he views his identity as an artist and a political voice. He said these two capacities are a part of his life, he had never thought them separate<sup>9</sup> It is so funny when you search Ai Weiwei; you could know a lot of about this person, then what his works are. But when you search Zhang Xiaogang, it is hard to find anything about this person. You have to know his work at first. This also shows how different Ai Weiwei and Zhang Xiaogang are.

In a nutshell, the connection between western society and China built the style of Ai Weiwei and Zhang Xiaogang. This influence shows differences that reflected on their works since the way they familiar themselves with western society was so distinct. All these unique experiences and conceptions created these two great artists.

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<sup>9</sup> My translation. Larry Rohter, "艾未未访谈：没什么好隐瞒的，却总在注视之下," The New York Times, February 28, 2013, , accessed April 23, 2017, <http://cn.nytimes.com/culture/20130228/c28aiweiwei>.

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