Ai Weiwei's *Fairytale*: A Unique Social Engagement

Yanhua Zhou

Sichuan Fine Arts Institute (China), University of Arizona (U.S.)

Abstract

Art as a social engagement in the west can be dated back to the end of nineteenth century. In the West, artists' pursuit of the social engagement through their artistic practices is often associated with its historical and social context. However, it tends to be different when a Chinese artist attempts to establish a social engagement through his art project. This difference is well embodied in Ai Weiwei's art project "Fairytale", which is rooted in his own cultural background and whose significance is more complex than blurring the boundary between art and life which is usually regarded as an avant-garde strategy. According to Ai Weiwei, *Fairytale* established a structure – "1=1,001". That means on the one hand, the participants can be easily regarded everywhere in Kassel as 1,001 mobile works of art. All of them contribute to an entire work. In another word, the 1,001 people consist of one work. On the other hand, everyone is dealing with their personal issues independent of art. In this sense, the entire work can be divided into 1,001 personal experiences. This structure is based on three principles of Chinese philosophy Taoism – the duality between *Yin* and *Yang*, the dynamism between Yin and Yang, and the concept of "uselessness". Positioning *Fairytale* within both Western theoretical as well as Chinese philosophical contexts, this essay is to analyze how Chinese philosophy shaped Ai's strategy of social engagement and his cultural identity - Chineseness.

Keywords: social engagement, "1=1,001", Taoism, Chineseness

Introduction

In *Kassel Documenta 12*, 2007, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei presented his socially engaged artwork *Fairytale*. Compared to Western socially engaged art practices, *Fairytale* is quite unique, because the artist is neither an organizer nor a leader in so far as he did not tell the participants what to do; instead, he encouraged all the participants to do anything to their personal interests in the city of Kassel.¹ In this sense, the work is, paradoxically, at one and the same time, one entity constructed from 1,001 human beings, and yet also a deconstructed work of 1,001 individual works. That means, on the one hand, that one entire work is divided into 1,001 personal experiences; on the other hand, the 1,001 personal experiences contribute to an entire work. Ai Weiwei conceptualized this artistic practice within a structure of '1=1,001'. The idea "1=1,001" is profoundly associated with Chinese philosophy – Taoism. Therefore, it is important to study this work not only from Western perspectives but also from a scope of Chinese philosophical; otherwise the interpretation would neglect an important dimension of his works' meaning, as has been the case in the criticism of other scholars.² I will then analyze the reason for and significance of Ai Weiwei getting a large number of people involved, since this draws on a Taoist perspective.³ Positioning *Fairytale* within both

¹ 'Socially engaged art' refers to the artwork that is interactive and participatory. See Claire Bishop, *Participation*, London: White chapel; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.

² In the following text, the author will elaborate on the details of how socially engaged art is discussed in Western theoretical contexts, by introducing several ideas such as "relational aesthetics" and "social sculpture".

³ Taoism, or Daoism, is a philosophical, ethical, and religious tradition of Chinese origin that

Western and Chinese philosophical contexts, this essay focuses on an analysis of how Chinese way of thinking shaped Ai's strategy of social engagement and his Chineseness. The first section will provide a general frame of art and social engagement in the West in order to properly contextualize *Fairytale* within a conventional narrative. The second section will discuss this work by comparing it with several Western artistic practices associated with the theories of "social sculpture" promoted by Joseph Beuys and "relational aesthetics" proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud. In the third section, the focus will be kept mainly on the structure - "1=1,001" of this work from the scope of Chinese philosophy "Taoism" in order to explore how Chinese philosophy impacts on the artist's way of making art. In the last section, the scope will be forwarded to a cross-cultural one where the main attention will be paid to how this artistic way based on artist's cultural heritage shapes Ai Weiwei's Chineseness, a term used to define artist's cultural identity.

Art and Social Engagement: The Western Narrative

An artistic practice is considered to be a social engagement in the West since the latter part of the eighteenth century. Visual art has been upheld as a locus of critical engagement with society within the context of western post-Enlightenment discourses (Gladston, P. and Hill, K., 2012: 101). It is crucial that our present understandings of such practices are debates continually associated with the development of the avant-garde and post avant-garde discourses as well as those in relation to the term contemporaneity (Gladston, P. and Hill, K., 2012:102). In historical avant-garde context, artistic practices – not only the easel works, but also the avant-garde performance, such as Dada cabaret, Futurist *serata*, or even the Proletkult theatre of Russian Constructivism had more or less been contextualized within the discourse of how art interacts with society by producing aesthetic shock and disrupt (Bishop, C. 2012: 41-77). In the postwar avant-garde period, artists pursued to establish a strategy of institutional critique by challenging the function of museums and galleries. French Situationist International is a representative of this period. Its promotion of 'anti-art' movement to bridge the gap between art and life has inspired a number of artists to explore how to move their works outside museums and produce social engagements on streets, in public squares or many other public spaces. As a matter of fact, the end of 1960s and the beginning of 1970s examined numerous public art movements which happened not only in Europe but also across the United States.

In the 1970s, German artist, Joseph Beuys, who promoted 'Social Sculpture', advocated "everyone is an artist" and attempted to invite a number of people to involve in the process of producing public works of art. In the same period, Allan Kaprow's Happening Art sweeping over the United States made it possible to reexamine the significance of process in artistic practices. This period also witnessed community art movement, which mainly happened in Britain and Western Europe. The APG, Blackie and Inter-Action groups had more or less examined the issue of how art could realize

emphasizes living in harmony with the *Tao* (also romanized as *Dao*). The term *Tao* means 'way', 'path' or 'principle'. *Tao Te Ching*(道德经), a book containing teachings attributed to *Laozi*(老子), is widely considered its keystone work. The principles of Taoism will be examined in detail in the following text.

its ethical function and improve local residents' recognition of the value through encouraging residents' participation in various community-based art activities. All this just made artist's place in society more complicated during that time mainly in two directions: one is that the artists undertake a placement with a company or government body; the other, the individual artist assumes the role of facilitating creativity among 'everyday' people. That means the criteria of community art were more "ethical than artistic" (Bishop, C. 2012: 187-188). In the 1990s, a number of terms and concepts related to art and its social engagements emerged in the discourse of postmodernism. Take North America as example. Such terms or concepts played an essential role in exploring the aesthetic discourses of socially engaged art, such as investigating how art could interact and communicate with local residents on issues which are directly relevant to their daily life, 'new genre public art' promoted by American artist Suzanne Lacy, 'relational aesthetics' and 'dialogical aesthetics' relevantly proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud and Grant H. Kester.⁴ Within these scholarly engagements, art was contested internationally as there was doubt cast on the capacity of such practices to detach themselves effectively from dominant neo-liberalism. In the new millennium, discourses related to the term contemporaneity have further complicated our understanding of socially engaged art practices. The complexity goes further when multiculturalism is instilled into this discourse by artists from non-western places, such as Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia.

In fact, artists' pursuit of social engagements through their artistic practices in the West is often associated with its historical and social context and a variety of strategies which are branded 'West'. These strategies include a radical social critique toward the enlightenment modernity in historical avant-garde, an innovative critique toward art institutions and postwar commodity fetishism in neo-avant-garde movement and a recalling of community reconstruction actions within the context of neo-liberalism and globalization during the Post-Cold War period. These artistic strategies have something in common - they have very determined goals with projects highly controlled by artists. The role of these artists seem to be leaders and organizers. However, it tends to be different when a Chinese artist attempts to establish a social engagement through his art projects. The difference is well embodied in Ai Weiwei's art project "Fairytale".

Within or Beyond Narratives: A Unique Social Engagement

Fairytale involved 1,001 participants (all Chinese) who were invited to Kassel, a city best known as home to the Brothers Grimm. Ai Weiwei names this project *Fairytale* in reference to the tales of Brothers Grimm, and also for the dreaminess and fantasy of this trip, because it brings to the participants as most of them had perhaps never dreamed of leaving their own country. The participants were divided into five groups and each group traveled in succession between June 12th and July 9th, 2007. A warehouse on the

⁴ Suzanne Lacy's concept of 'new genre public art' can be seen in her monograph: *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Seattle, Wash. : Bay Press, 1995. The relevant artistic practices is clearly demonstrated in the 1992 exhibition - "Culture in Action" in Chicago. A in depth analysis of this exhibition can also be seen in Miwon Kwon's article: Miwon Kwon, "From site to community in new genre public art: The case of 'Culture in Action'", *One place after another: Site specificity of locational identity*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002, p.112.

outskirts of Kassel was converted into a dormitory which housed 200 persons. Along with the 1,001 participants, 1,001 wooden chairs, which were the duplicates of traditional *Tai Shi Yi* from the Qing Dynasty, and 1,001 suitcases, whose surfaces were covered with black and white irregular fabric, travelled across the ocean from China [fig. 1].⁵ After this exhibition, Ai set up an archive to create a collection including 1,001 portraits of the participants and a documentary film of over 1,000 hours. This film was eventually edited to a duration of 3 hours, depicting interviews with both Ai and the participants, as well as the footage of the entire process [fig. 2] (Birnbbaum, D. and Buerger, R. 2013: 23-25).

Figure. 1,001 Chinese Visitors in Kassel Documenta 12, 2007. *Ai Weiwei: Karen Smith, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Bernard Fibicher*, London: Phaidon, 2009, 38.

⁵*Tai Shi Yi* (太师椅), a type of chair populated in China during the Ming and Qing Dynasty. The chairs in *Fairytale* are copied from the version of the Qing Dynasty. See Birnbbaum and Buerger, *Ai Weiwei: Fairytale: A Reader*, 36, 38-39.

Figure.2. A Segment of 1,001 Portraits of Chinese Participants, *Ai Weiwei: So Sorry*, Munich; New York: Prestel, c2009, 44.

This work is widely regarded as echoing German artist Joseph Beuys's socially engaged art project *7,000 Oaks* about a number of local volunteers planting 7,000 oak trees in the city of Kassel [fig. 3]. It was created for *Kassel Documenta 7*, in 1982, and was recognized as one of Beuys's works that practiced his 'social sculpture' theory (Boetzkes, A. 2010: 37). The term 'social sculpture' sees a society as an entity of one great work of art where each person can contribute to it creatively (Thompson, C. 2011: 88). Artistic practices dating from the middle of last century with reference to social engagement, can be contextualized in this theory. Thus, from the perspective of Western scholars, *Fairytale* is often interpreted as a 'social sculpture'. Within this context, the 1,001 participants in *Fairytale* performed according to Beuys's idea that 'Everyone is an artist' (Thompson, C. 2011: 88). Although they did not do anything artistic, their personal actions and experiences contributed to the significance of the entire work. In fact, in this work, it looks as if the artist transferred a microcosm of Chinese society to Kassel, a German city of fewer than 200,000 local residents, in the name of art.

Figure 4.5. Joseph Beuys, *7,000 Oaks*, Dia Art Foundation.

Ai Weiwei's interest in Beuys's 'social sculpture' is not only embodied in *Fairytale*, but also in his recent socially engaged art projects including, *Citizen Investigation*, and several internet-based art projects such as *Nian* and his music videos. Taking *Nian* as an example. Ai Weiwei invited 200 volunteers online to read the 5,202 names of the students who were killed in a school collapse in the earthquake.⁶ Internet, a social medium, is a good way to perform 'social sculpture' because it provides artists with a public sphere where every participant they invite can act at his will to produce this work of art. *Nian*, an artistic practice through the internet, has well displayed and carried out Beuys's concept - "everyone is an artist", although in these works, Ai does not aim to establish a utopian site or take any measures to explain to his audience how to build a 'social organism' as Beuys did – Beuys claimed, "only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system...in order to build a social organism as a work of art." Actually, Ai admires Beuys's political sense and tries to integrate his own art into political and social life (Bishop, C. 2006: 125) This attempt was better embodied in *Fairytale*.⁷

Indeed, the strategies of the two works – *Fairytale* and *7,000 Oaks* - resemble each other: both of them appear as social engagements involving a great number of people; and both explore the matter of how to blur the boundaries between art and life. In a way,

⁶ These names were obtained from a list produced in *Citizen Investigation* project. See Zheng, "The Pursuit of Publicness", 23.

⁷ See also Zhao Chengshuai, "Zhuan Fang Ai: zai boyisi yu wo huoer zhijian" (Interview Ai Weiwei: Between Any Warhol and Joseph Beuys), WWW.99.COM, accessed Sep 17, 2013, http://news3.99ys.com/20130917/article--130917--142099_1.shtml.

the exhibition of 1,001 Chinese people in Kassel seems to establish a dialogue between the two artists. This dialogue replies to such questions as how Beuys influences a Chinese artist and what this influence implies in terms of critics induced to a Chinese artist. In addition, *Fairytale* could be considered a transcultural encounter between people from different cultural backgrounds. In order to understand the term ‘encounter’, we need examine *Fairytale* in the context of ‘relational aesthetics’ as well (Bourriaud, N. 2002).⁸

In the mid-1990s, French art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud translated Beuys’s artistic concept into ‘relational aesthetics’ to interpret several artistic practices along the lines of social engagement, participation and collaboration. He believes that art should be a ‘social interstice’⁹ - the space in human relations which fits harmoniously and openly into the social system (Bishop, C. 2005: 32-35). According to Bourriaud, the social interstice creates free areas and time spans in contrast to the structured everyday life, and it encourages an inter-human commerce (Bishop, C. 2005: 32-35). Therefore ‘relational aesthetics’ takes as a theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations, rather than an independent and private space (Bourriaud, N. 2002: 133). Bourriaud’s concept is exemplified by Rirkrit Tiravanija’s artistic practice - an exhibition entitled *Untitled (Free)* at 303 Gallery in New York in 1992 [fig. 4]. Serving rice and Thai curry for free, the New York-based Thai artist converted a gallery into a kitchen. “You aren’t looking at the art, but are part of it—and are, in fact, making the art as you eat curry and talk with friends or new acquaintances” Tiravanija suggests (Stokes, R. 2014). This work well conveys ‘relational aesthetics’ and encourages communications between different participants to establish a ‘social interstice’(Bourriaud, N. 2002: 57).

⁸ “Encounter” is a term used by Nicolas Bourriaud for interpreting human’s relationship.

⁹ This term was initially used by Karl Marx to describe trading communities that elude the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit: barter, merchandising, autarkic types of production, etc. See Claire Bishop, “Art of the Encounter: Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, *Circa*, No. 114 (Winter, 2005): 32-35.

Figure 4. Rirkrit Tiravanija's Thai food at 303 Gallery in 1992. Columbia News.

Although there is little evidence for us to know if Ai positioned himself in relation to 'relational aesthetics', the following findings or facts can justify the use of this theory to contextualize this work.¹⁰ Similar to Tiravanija's 1992 project in the 303 Gallery, *Fairytale* appears to be a social interstice which creates free areas and time spans to encourage inter-human communications. Also, Ai states in an interview on *Fairytale* that "We are not doing something, because participating is the significance of this work."¹¹ Moreover, the project, by means of posting an invitation on his blog, recruited participants of different backgrounds. This project began with 3,000 volunteers in response to the invitation applying to get involved via answering ninety-nine questions posted online, such as "have you been to Germany?", "what is a fairytale?" and "do you believe in the future?"¹² Eventually, 1,001 candidates were selected as the participants of the project, including intellectuals, students, farmers, unemployed workers and retired high school teachers. In this sense, *Fairytale* created an inter-human relationship not only between the participants and the local residents in Kassel, but also between the participants who were of different backgrounds. The communication between these people contributes to a 'social interstice'.

In fact, both 'social sculpture' and 'relational aesthetics' may provide for *Fairytale*'s theoretical contexts. The existing analysis of this work is usually based on the two theories, which focus on how art can integrate into life. But is it proper to place *Fairytale* in those contexts? Although they share some features in common, significant differences still exist between *Fairytale* and the works of Beuys or Tiravanija. First, the roles of the artists are different. In both Beuys's and Tiravanija's works, the artist acts as the organizer and the leader. With clear purposes, they organize their projects and

¹⁰ As Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics* has been translated in Chinese since last year (2013), theoretical research related to this theory is so limited in China that artist, like Ai Weiwei, are not able to be aware of it.

¹¹ See "Fairytale" documentary film.

assign tasks for every participant. However, Ai's role in *Fairytale* appears to be ambiguous. On the one hand, this work was practically controlled by the artist himself. For example, Ai Weiwei collected 4.14 million US dollars from two Swiss foundations, arranged five trips, paid for airfare, processed visa applications for the 1,001 participants, transported Chinese chefs to cook Chinese meals, designed travel items such as clothing and luggage, and organized tours of Kassel's landmarks. On the other hand, however, the artist did not assign any tasks for the participants. Thus, he did not control this work conceptually, though he managed to organize this project in practice. Second, the roles of the participants are different. In the works of Beuys and Tiravanija, the participants are the producers of this artwork. However, the participants, in *Fairytale*, are not producers but part of a work of art. In fact, *Fairytale* is divided into 1,001 personal experiences, and at the same time, the 1,001 personal experiences contribute to an entire work. This two-way process between the participants and the work itself together create a duality in contrast to the unitarity of the works created by Beuys and Tiravanija. Thirdly, the forms of *7,000 Oaks* and *Fairytale* are different. For example, the *7,000 Oaks* has identifiable forms of trees as well as the basalt monuments beside each tree. By contrast, the form of *Fairytale* is unidentifiable, because the participants are moving all the time. Additionally, either Beuys's or Tiravanija's work is controllable, because everything is under the control of the artists. However, *Fairytale* is almost beyond the control of the artist. So the result of this work is unpredictable.

In *Fairytale*, the participants did not have to follow any instructions of the artist. They acted at will, whether hanging out in the city of Kassel, talking with local residents, taking pictures, shopping, enjoying German beer or visiting different exhibition halls. Some of them gambled in the pubs or gambling houses. A young boy pretended to be a vagrant and received two Euros from passengers. Even some had a drink with a local resident who had suffered a painful divorce as well as unemployment and who wandered in front of the dormitory of participants to look for drinking buddy. These participants just did no more unusual activities than tourists, visitors, consumers and students who enjoyed their summer vacation in a European city. None of them separately did anything related to this work. Therefore, this unpredictable work of art brings about a number of questions: why did Ai not ask the 1,001 Chinese people to do anything specific related to *Fairytale*? How can we understand this unpredictable work? Is *Fairytale* a 'social sculpture' or 'relational art' practice? Can the two theories be used to interpret this work properly? In order to understand *Fairytale* we should explore its significance in its cultural tradition, rather than simply discuss it within a Western context. Compared to the Western socially engaged art practices, *Fairytale* not only explores the avant-gardist issue of how to blur boundaries between art and life, but also refers to how the artist used his artistic strategy based on his cultural tradition on the grounds that the structure of "1=1,001" is profoundly associated with a Chinese way of thinking. In other words, it is important to locate *Fairytale* in the context of Chinese philosophical discourse in order to explore how the artist redefine the term "social engagement" from his sources of cultural tradition.

The Structure of '1=1,001'

Ai Weiwei indicates that what he has done for *Fairytale* is designing a structure of '1=1,001', in which a duality exists. This means one piece of work is divided into 1,001 personal experiences, and meanwhile the 1,001 personal experiences contribute to the

significance of the entire work. Ai Weiwei is deeply influenced by Zhuangzi, an ancient Chinese philosopher who lived in Pre-Qin Dynasty. As a successor of Taoist philosopher Laozi, Zhuangzi's philosophy concerns a dialectical thinking on uselessness which impacts on Ai's attitude of producing work of art. In an interview, Ai Weiwei states that he admires Zhuangzi very much and this ancient philosopher provides him with basic approaches to reexamine the authorship in his artistic practices. (Birnbaum, D. and Buerger, R. 2013: 21) Therefore, in order to understand the structure '1=1,001', I will use Taoism to analyze the work *Fairytale*, by not only interpreting this philosophy, but also examining several Chinese traditional paintings to explore how Taoism has influenced Chinese traditional paintings as well as contemporary art. I will choose three of its principles that are most displayed in *Fairytale* to analyze the interrelationship between Taoism and Ai's artistic concept.

The first principle is the duality between *Yin* and *Yang*.¹² *Yin* refers to the power of the female, characterized with softness, openness, receiving, emptiness, or darkness; by contrast, *Yang* refers to the male's power which suggests hardness, assertiveness, force, and light. Taoists believe that the universe is based on the polarity of the *Yin-Yang* structure, in which *Yin* and *Yang* are invisible but real forces, and that everything that exists is a blend of these polarities. The two agents are produced by the tension of the dynamic interplay of negative and positive energies. According to Taoism, the dynamism between *Yin* and *Yang* ontologically determines the flux of reality. For instance, the dynamic polarity between the summer and winter, day and night are all based on the alternation between *Yin* and *Yang*, as ancient Chinese believed. This philosophy has profoundly influenced ancient Chinese painting. For example, the color contrast of dark and light we see in ink monochrome paintings imitates the contrast between *Yin* and *Yang* (McMahon, G. 2003: 65-66). Likewise, the 'emptiness' – negative spaces, espoused element in Chinese landscape painting - usually represents the sky or rivers. By contrast, 'painterly masses', or positive spaces is often used to depict mountains or architecture [fig. 5 and fig. 6](McMahon, G. 2003: 66). In these paintings, canvas successfully integrate emptiness and painterly masses into one entity. Namely, the two agents – *Yin* and *Yang* - coil together in their blending in order to balance pictorially as well as philosophically the configuration of a painting(McMahon, G. 2003: 66).

Figure 5. Xia Gui (1180-1230), *Xi Shan Qing Yuan* (In Clear View of Streams and Mountains).
National Palace Museum website.

¹² Yin and Yang is the basic opposite elements in Taoist philosophy. See Holmes Welch, *Taoism: The Parting of The Way*, Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1966.

Figure 6. A segment of *Xi Shan Qing Yuan* with annotation, demonstrating Yin and Yang.

The second principle is that the two elements – *Yin* and *Yang* – can switch between each other under certain conditions. The fortieth chapter of *Tao Te Ching* reads, “Tao may go opposite ways, even weakness is useful(反者，道之动；弱者，道之用)”(Wang, Y. 2005: 94). In this sense, *Yang* will change to *Yin* under certain conditions. The Ming Dynasty painter Tung Chi-Chang, in a case study on images of mountains to explore the dynamism between *Yin* and *Yang* (McMahon, G. 2003: 69), suggested “the rising and falling of mountains in the distance conveys a sensation of power. The vary height of trees in a forest is expressive of feeling (Tsung, P. 1995: 36).” From a Taoist perspective, “rising” is always deemed to be *Yang* while “falling” is regarded as *Yin*. According to Tung, the dynamism and change between the rising and falling of the shape of mountains contribute to the sensation of power, because all the opposite elements are dynamic (McMahon, G. 2003: 69). That means elements are on the move and ready to switch to the opposite under certain conditions, just as minority can switch to majority, and small quantities can also switch to large quantities once the two opposite elements are under proper circumstance.

Examining the structure of ‘1=1,001’ in *Fairytale* we can observe that it confirms to the first and second principles. Ai points out that although *Fairytale* is a large-scale work, it presents the individual desires of people from a certain place and their personal survival methods (Birnbbaum, D. and Buerger, R. 2013: 69). In fact, he emphasizes the individuality of every participant instead of how these participants could contribute to the entire work. Thus, an entire group of Chinese people is equivalent to 1,001 individual experiences. Therefore, ‘1’ changes into ‘1,001’. Additionally, 1,001 individual experiences of those participants contribute to the significance of the entire work. To this extent, ‘1,001’ is unified into ‘1’. Indeed, *Fairytale* is not produced by the artist but created by the 1,001 participants. Thus, if we see ‘1’ as *Yin* and ‘1,001’ as *Yang*, the structure of ‘1=1,001’ means that *Yin* is equal to *Yang* and vice versa. Thus, this structure is another example of the Taoist concept of the dynamism between *Yin* and *Yang*, and it shows how Ai Weiwei used the notion of quantity philosophically.

The third principle of Taoism is its emphasis on the significance of ‘uselessness’. Since things can switch to their opposite side, uselessness can also switch to usefulness. Thus, ‘uselessness’ is deemed to be a crucial point in Taoist philosophy. The forty-eighth chapter of *Tao Te Ching* suggests, “When you need do nothing, there is nothing you cannot do(无为而无所不为)” (Wang, Y. 2005: 110). In the ancient Chinese language, ‘do nothing’ refers to ‘uselessness’, while ‘nothing you cannot do’ denotes ‘usefulness’.

As Zhuangzi, the Pre-Qin Taoist, stated: “All men know the use of usefulness, but none know the use of uselessness. (Mllgaard, E. 2007: 25)” He emphasized the significance of ‘uselessness’ and argued that the value of uselessness is equal to that of usefulness.

This theory is comparable to the Western postmodern term ‘deconstruction’ promoted by Jacques Derrida, which is widely used by western modern and contemporary artists (Mllgaard, E. 2007: 6). For instance, John Cage’s famous sound work 4’33” based on the concept of deconstruction can find its counterpart in Tao Te Ching “a great sound is inaudible” (大音稀声); the “dip painting” created by Jackson Pollock expresses a similar idea in the context of Taoism - “a great image is formless (大象无形)” (Wang, Y. 2005: 63). In fact, Chinese artists of Ai’s generation have sought ways to combine the two ideas –Taoist ‘uselessness’ and postmodernist ‘deconstruction’– into a Chinese interpretation of Western postmodern philosophy. This cultural and theoretical combination lies in the fact that on the one hand, Chinese contemporary artists seek to produce works in an international context in order to show their cross-cultural intentions; on the other hand, they need to demonstrate their cultural identity as a pursuit of experiences of heterogeneity. The combination can be best illustrated in the case of Huang Yongping, Ai Weiwei’s contemporary and a leading figure of Xiamen Dada, a Chinese contemporary art group which was active in the ’85 *Avant-garde Movement* (Gao, M. 2011). Huang Yongping created a series of works titled *Nonexpressive Painting: Roulette Wheel Series* (Feibiaoda de huihua: Zhuanpanxilie) in which the “painting” (he rejected the term “paintings”) was made by the movement of a spinning wheel [fig. 7](Gao, M. 2011: 203). Although his paintings can remind us of French New Realist Tinguely’s Kinetic art in the mid of twentieth century made by a machine instead of a man, they were located by Huang Yongping in a totally different context filled with a strong sense of Taoism. According to Huang, the goal was to “extend art creation into a simplified nonformalist, nonbaroque, nonsymbolic, nonexpressive, nonskillful, and nonunique condition (Gao, M. 2011: 204).”

Figure 7. Huang Yongping is Creating Nonexpressive Painting, Gao, Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-garde in Twentieth-century Chinese Art*, Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press ; London : in association with China Art Foundation, c2011, 203.

Likewise, Ai Weiwei's early works also appear to combine Dadaist concept or Warholian gestures with Taoist "uselessness". One of his early works *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo* (1994), an ancient pottery urn coloured a Coca-Cola Logo appears that artifact and modern propaganda meet in a single utilitarian form[fig. 8.](Smith, K. 2009: 68-79). It is neither a valuable ancient urn nor a brand new Coca-Cola container. In fact, this hybrid object is literally strange and useless. However, a confrontation between two different cultures – Chinese traditional culture and American commercialist culture - makes this "useless" work metaphorically useful. Another example can be seen in his installation comprised with Chinese doors for the Kassel Documenta at which *Fairytale* displayed. This installation was flattened by heavy winds by accident during the exhibition days. However, when Ai was asked whether he wanted to repair his artwork, he stated that he liked the flattened version better. He believes that man can never make a work like this since this piece mixes the force from the nature.¹³ His respect for the nature force alludes to his attitude to the interactive authorship. That means he enables the authority of the artist to be useless. This awareness of his artistic expression can also be consider an inherent connection with the Taoist concept of 'uselessness'.

Figure 8. *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo* (1994), Ai Weiwei: Karen Smith, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Bernard Fibicher; London: Phaidon, 2009.

This strategy is also embodied in *Fairytale*. Ai Weiwei invited 1,001 Chinese people to Kassel. But these people are literally useless to this work, since they did little related to

¹³ See the documentary film of *Fairytale*. "Fairytale", Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3dliVfgt-I>.

this work. The 1,001 Chinese people were more like visitors, travelers, consumers, passengers, artist or an ordinary stranger. They integrated into the city of Kassel and so ordinary they are that we cannot even tell which person is a visitor or a work of art. In the documentary film, a group of students, some of the participants, are asking the location of local flea market. They are wearing T-shirts and jeans like a group of tourists. A young man with long hair, is bared and trying to jump into the lake to swim, but he stops to talk with a swan, like a visitor who find some interesting, because it is very rare to see an animal from such close distance in China. A couple of participants join a performance group and dance with the local artist as if they are part of them (Gao, M. 2011: 203). Indeed, what the participants did in Kassel had little to do with *Fairytale* visually. However, on the other hand, *Fairytale* is right constituted by the 1,001 Chinese people, 1,001 wooden chairs, 1,001 suitcases, and 1,001 personal experiences. They co-create an entire “fairytale”.

Indeed, the personal experiences of different participants in Kassel seem to be of no use to the project, as the documentary film shows. However, Ai believes, “not doing something may be more important than actually doing something. Not doing anything will maximize the work, doing any one thing will cause its nature to change (Birnbbaum, D. and Buerger, R. 2013: 21).” Examining Ai’s words and Zhuangzi’s idea of the function of uselessness, it is possible to find an interconnection between Zhuangzi’s and Ai’s ideas. For instance, both of them emphasize the importance of uselessness, as they believe uselessness can switch to usefulness or vice versa. Therefore, *Fairytale* reveals not only duality between an entire project and a number of individual experiences, but also embodies the importance of uselessness within a Taoist context. Ai Weiwei notes the project encourages those who may no longer believe fairytale to believe that fairytale can only happen to the individual persons who respect their own individual rights (Birnbbaum, D. and Buerger, R. 2013: 25). Consequently, although this work seems to be useless, Ai Weiwei actually has visualized its function by encouraging people to realize their individuality. In this way, he transfers a useless work into a useful one.

According to Ai Weiwei, *Fairytale* established a structure – “1=1,001”. On the one hand, the participants are like 1,001 mobile works of art scattering in Kassel. The integrity works as a work. In other words, the 1,001 people consist of one work. On the other hand, everyone is independently dealing with their own personal issues which have no concern with art. From this point of view, the entire work is divided into 1,001 personal experiences. In this sense, a paradox exists in this structure, that is, the dynamism between large quantity and small quantity, which finally falls into the dynamism between Yin and Yang. Therefore, my argument goes that this structure is based on the two principle of Chinese philosophy Taoism –the concept of “uselessness and the dynamism between Yin and Yang”. It can be thereby inferred that Ai Weiwei’s artistic practices are rooted in his own cultural heritage which shapes his Chineseness.

***Fairytale* and Chineseness**

Chineseness is a term coined by the west to describe a particular quality of art that acts as catalyst for a re-definement and review of the essential characteristics of China. Nowadays, it is most frequently used in various discussions of Chinese contemporary art so as to differentiate because contemporary artists are all in an international art

community. In spite of it, the relationship between Chineseness and Chinese contemporary art is actually ambiguous. Some scholars criticize that Chinese contemporary art has lost its Chineseness since contemporary artists have been tainted with a western aesthetic hegemony. That they appeal to maintain Chineseness is merely for the convenience of demonstrating their cultural identity in the context of cultural globalism. However, other scholars hold the opinion that it is necessary to get rid of Chineseness since Chinese contemporary art has taken advantage of Chinese cultural symbols to label their works as Chineseness, such as Chinese calligraphy, ink paintings, popular historical stories and unique philosophical ideas. These scholars aim to criticize the superficiality of and avoid the appearance of these works of art. However, Ai Weiwei is the artist who pursues the Chineseness in his works not only by showing several Chinese labels, but also through his unique artistic strategies to represent different aspects of China. These strategies include displaying his works in a large scale and quantity, which encourages people to think about the vague concept of individualism and collectivism in a totalitarian society. His works such as *Sunflower Seeds* and *Remembering* are the typical examples. Besides, using mass media to create works and inviting volunteers through internet is another strategy of his. This strategy involves a political demonstration of the loss of publicness in China. Good examples can be found in his internet-based works like *Citizen Investigation* and *Lao Ma Ti Hua* which belong to the Sichuan Earth Quake series. From these works, Chineseness is shown in a specific way - encouraging people to critically contemplate the social *status quo* of contemporary China. But which strategy did Ai Weiwei use in *Fairytale*, a work that has to be exhibited by taking Chinese outside China? And how did this strategy show his Chineseness?

Ai Weiwei indicates although *Fairytale* is a large-scale work, it presents the individual desires of people from a certain place and their personal survival methods exemplified may defy internationalization (Birnbbaum, D. and Buergel, R. 2013: 25). In this sense, *Fairytale* makes up the core conflict between the work and the current conditions of world culture, politics, and economics, especially when modern Chinese society is ensnared in a cultural war between national identity and global integration at all levels of social life (Kocur, Z. 2011:1). From a cross-cultural perspective, *Fairytale* discusses the issue of how China communicates with the world and integrates itself into the international order without sacrificing its cultural identity. Unlike the conventional works of Chinese contemporary art which usually uses Chinese icons, such as ink, calligraphy and Mao's portraits, to show their cultural identity, *Fairytale* adopts a simple and direct form - the inter-human communication - to make this cultural exchange much easier. The interaction between people from different cultures is also what inspired the curator of Kassel Documenta 12 to approve *Fairytale* project conducted in local as he was curious about what the intervention of Chinese would spark in Kassel, a city with a population of no more than 200,000.

In the end of the documentary film, a number of people are interviewed, including several participants, local ordinary residents, artists, visitors, even the mayor of Kassel. They express their personal opinions on this work and share their feelings of this inter-human communication. A lady in the middle age feels this project is significant because it provides her an opportunity to know the real lives of Chinese people which she would have never known without this project. An elegant lady even asks if there is any possibility for her to do something for this project. In this aspect, *Fairytale* has

enhanced the mutual understanding between China and Europe. As an old couple comment in the interview -“*Fairytale* is a greeting to the world from thriving China”, and Ai Weiwei shows a type of Chineseness which is convivial and delightful through inter-human communication between people who are from different cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion

This essay has explored how Ai Weiwei used a unique way to re-defined social engagement based on his cultural tradition, and how this unique social engagement represented his Chineseness. Through using both Western and Chinese theoretical resources to analyze his socially engaged work *Fairytale*, I observe that *Fairytale* cannot be interpreted simply in the Western context, because its significance is far more profound than blurring the boundaries between art and life. In fact, according to Ai, *Fairytale* establishes a structure ‘1=1,001’, which means that the entire work is divided into 1,001 personal experiences, at the same time, the 1,001 personal experiences contribute to the entire work. In this sense, a duality exists in the structure of the work which is realized in the dynamism between the ‘1’ and the ‘1,001’. In order to provide a multi-dimensional perspective, I have contextualized *Fairytale* in Taoism. I argue that this structure is based on three principle of Chinese philosophy Taoism – the contradiction between *Yin* and *Yang*, the dynamism between the two elements, and the concept of ‘uselessness’. As a Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei is inevitably influenced by Chinese cultural tradition, especially Chinese philosophy, which directs his thinking. His emphasis on the dynamic duality of the structure of “1=1,001” as well as his application of the function of ‘uselessness’ contribute to a unique social engagement of *Fairytale*. This uniqueness demonstrates Ai Weiwei’s cultural identity and re-shapes the way of showing Chineseness in Chinese contemporary art.

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Author’s Information:

Dr. Yanhua Zhou is currently an assistant professor from the Contemporary Visual Art Research Center of Sichuan Fine Arts Institute (SCFAI). She is also a Ph.D. candidate from the Department of East Asian Studies at University of Arizona. She received her first Ph.D. Degree in Art History from Southwest University (China) and her MA in Art History from University of St Andrews (UK). Her research interests embrace modern and contemporary art theories, including Minimalism, Conceptual art and site-specific art, with a special interest in socially engaged art. Her recent research focuses on socially engaged art in the rural areas of contemporary China.

Email: yanhuazhou@email.arizona.edu, metotal@hotmail.com