

The Power of Quantity in Ai Weiwei's Sunflower Seeds

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Abstract

Can quantity be a type of power? Perhaps, this question will be answered by the work titled *Sunflower Seeds* produced by Chinese contemporary artist Ai Weiwei. In 2010, London Tate Modern invited Chinese artist Ai Weiwei to exhibit his installation *Sunflower Seeds* at Turbine Hall. It consisted of 100 million hand-made porcelain sunflower seeds, and all of which were scattered on the ground in a large scale. Obviously, this installation embodied Ai Weiwei's artistic strategy of using the notion of quantity. Ai is interested in large number, because, rhetorically, it allows him to explore China's status as superpower with a large population. In this work, every seed was slightly different, but its individuality disappeared when they were accumulated in such a large number. It visually symbolized the status of Chinese people - although they are individually different, when they gather together they are totally generic. The reason historically relates to the value system of Confucian doctrine and Communist ideology, because both of them praise the value of collectivism and suppress that of the individualism. Therefore, *Sunflower Seeds* revealed a paradox between the collective and the individual that is historically rooted in the ideological impact on Chinese people. By exploring how Ai Weiwei used the porcelain sunflower seeds as a metaphor for the Chinese people, this essay will argue that quantity is a type of power to examine the issue of the collective and the individual in the ideological context.

Keywords: the individual, the collective, totalitarianism, Confucian doctrine, Communist ideology

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Introduction

Can quantity be a type of power? Perhaps, this question will be answered by the work titled *Sunflower Seeds* produced by Chinese contemporary artist Ai Weiwei. In recent years, Ai Weiwei has become the most famous artist to represent Chinese contemporary art in the world. His art, as well as his personal experiences is becoming the latest news across various Western media. His arrest at Beijing Capital International Airport in 2011, and his 81 days' detention thereafter not only demonstrated his perceived danger to the Chinese government, but also helped to build his world-wide reputation for his pursuit of democracy in China. Nowadays, his name is usually associated with a dissident, or even a political provocateur, due to his publicly expressed political views as well as his avant-garde art practices. His hybrid life experiences – his exile life in GeBi desert in the Northwest of China with his family during the Cultural Revolution period and his 12 years stay and study in New York - have shaped Ai's personality as well as the traits of his artistic practices, which are formally simple, expressively direct, politically provocative and conceptually sophisticated.

Ai's recent oeuvres are all characterized by their emphasis on quantity. These works include: the socially engaged work *Fairytale* which includes 1,001 Chinese people and 1,001 wooden chairs copied from the style in Qing Dynasty, in *Kassel Documenta 12* in 2007; *Remembering*, 9,000 children's backpacks installed on the façade Haus der Kunst of Munich at his 2009 solo exhibition *So sorry*, in Germany; the 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds, titled *Sunflower Seeds*, exhibited in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in 2010; *He Xie*, 3,200 porcelain crabs and *Stools*, 6,000 wooden stools which are both displayed in his 2014 solo exhibition *Evidence*, in Berlin (fig. 1.2 and 1.3). These works demonstrate Ai's interests in using large numbers as his artistic strategies. Ai is interested in the utilization of quantity, because, rhetorically, it allows him to explore China's status as superpower with a large population. To this extent, quantity is profoundly associated with a type of power shaping his artistic strategies and political discourse.

In 2010, London Tate Modern invited Ai Weiwei to exhibit his installation *Sunflower Seeds* at Turbine Hall. This work consisted of 100 million hand-made porcelain sunflower seeds, and all of which were scattered on the ground on a large scale. Obviously, this installation embodied Ai Weiwei's artistic strategy of using the notion of quantity. In this work, every seed was slightly different, but its individuality disappeared when they were accumulated in such a large number.

It visually symbolized the status of Chinese people - although they were individually different, when they gather together they are totally generic. The reason historically relates to the value system of Confucian doctrine and Communist ideology, because both of them praise the value of collectivism and suppress that of individualism. Therefore, *Sunflower Seeds* revealed a paradox between the collective and the individual that is historically rooted in the ideological impact on Chinese people. In this respect, how does he emphasize quantity to explore the mutual relationship between the collective and the individual among Chinese people? How does this artist use quantity to criticize the collectivism that roots in both Confucianism and Communist ideology? By exploring how Ai Weiwei used the porcelain sunflower seeds as a metaphor for the Chinese people, this essay will argue that quantity is a

type of critical power to examine the issue of the collective and the individual in both Confucian doctrine and Communist ideology.

A Hundred Million Porcelain Sunflower Seeds in Tate Modern

From October 2010 to May 2011, Tate Modern invited Ai Weiwei to exhibit his large-scale installation *Sunflower Seeds* at the Turbine Hall. Consisting of 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds with a combined weight of 150 tons, this work covered an area in the Turbine Hall measuring approximately 1,000 square meters and had a depth of ten centimeters [fig. 1]. At the first sight, the installation presented the spectators with an undifferentiated field of grey, but on closer inspection, this revealed itself to be composed of individually hand-painted porcelain seeds. Ai collaborated with 1,600 craftsmen in Jingdezhen County, the ancient Chinese royal ceramic factory, to make this ambitious project. Each seed was made of clay, individually painted by hand and fired in order to make it hard like an authentic seed [fig.2].¹ In this work, Ai Weiwei's artistic strategy of using quantity lies in two aspects. First, he used a large number of porcelain sunflower seeds; second, these seeds were displayed in a repetitive format even if none of them were not completely identical.



Figure 1. *A panoramic of Sunflower Seeds, 2010.*
Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds, London: Tate Press, 2010, 128-129.

¹ Birnbaum, D. and Buerger, R. (2013). *Ai Weiwei: Fairytale: A Reader*, New York, Jrp Ringier, 22-24.



Figure 2. A man is painting a seed. *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*, 111.

As a matter of fact, this strategy is not only used by Ai Weiwei. In the modern and contemporary art context, Infinite incremental repetition in art is a direct result of the industrial revolution. The serial image is probably one of the modernity's most important developments in art, its acceptance resulting in the loss of the mystical view of the original object. In a long history of art-making with – from Andy Warhol's Disaster series to Jasper Johns's Flags to Wolfgang Laib's floor-bound rectangular, from Richard Long's stones or Antony Gormley's fields of thousands of little humanoids to Felix Gonzalez-Torres's pile of cellophane-wrapped sweets, the repetition in quantity has moved into our artistic vocabulary as a prime concept and as a standard means of distribution. In this sense, repetition in a large numbers demonstrates the tremendous influence that manufacturing has had on viewers' perceptions of art.² In *Sunflower Seeds*, Ai Weiwei took a lesson of Warholian multiples and turned them into a lesson of Chinese history.³

Exhibiting these seeds in the Turbine Hall, the artist invited spectators to walk across, sit down, roll in and even play with them. Although, this installation has been regarded as a type of a Minimalist form, for example, the repetition of each seed embodies what Donald Judd called "one thing after another" and encouraging viewers to get involved at the site, it represents Michael Fried's "theatricality", its significance differs from a Minimalist installation.⁴ In fact, Ai aims at not only challenging the

² Yong, L. J.(1996). Spiritual minimalism. *Performancing Arts Journal*, 18. 44-52.

³ Searle, A. (2010). Tate Modern's sunflower seeds: the World in the palm of your hand. *Gardain*.

⁴ Judd, D. (2002). Specific Object. & Fried, M.(2002). Art and Objecthood. In Charles H. and Paul

space through the number of composite objects, but also by offering a more psychological and social meaning to viewers.⁵ Through inviting viewers to walk and to feel this work with their bodies, the 100 million porcelain seeds allowed spectators to imagine China's status from a historical perspective.

Historically, sunflower seeds were associated with every Chinese person's experiences, especially in the Mao period. During the Cultural Revolution, Chinese people were called sunflowers because Chairman Mao was referred to as the sun, and sunflowers always face the sun.⁶ Additionally, sunflower seeds are common snacks of Chinese people.⁷ However, Ai Weiwei did not manufacture any sunflowers; instead, he made the seeds, as seeds represented the pure potentiality of what people might become when it was imagined as a collective of individuals and what individuals might become when they are collectively empowered as the people.⁸ In this sense, these porcelain seeds symbolized Chinese people and revealed a number of issues related to their past. As common snacks of Chinese people, sunflower seeds became a part of Chinese people's memory of the starving period.

They were associated with the collective memory of Chinese people. In this work, Ai aimed to explore the interrelationship between the collective and the individual through juxtaposition between viewers' body perceptions and their contemplation. Christian Sorace highlights that these seeds represented the potentiality of what individuals might become when they were collectively empowered as the people. In this sense, Ai discussed this potentiality by visualizing the large quantity of the Chinese population with the sunflower seeds. According to the Chinese art critic, Hang Chunxiao, the installation represented the individual existence of the Chinese people. They are unconsciously figured, arranged and generalized by the collectivist consciousness.⁹ Indeed, Ai discussed and simultaneously questioned the collectivist consciousness which is historically rooted in both the Confucian doctrine and Communist ideology in China.

The Collective and the Individual in Both Confucian and Communist ideology

Unlike the emphasis on the power of individuals in Western culture, Chinese culture tends to encourage the collective spirit through emphasizing 'self-devotion'.¹⁰ As Max Weber's analysis suggests, China's traditionalism has deep historical roots.

W.(Eds). *Art in theory, 1900-2000 : an anthology of changing ideas*. Oxford : Blackwell.

⁵ Bingham, J. & Daniel, M. (2010). *Ai Weiwei Sunflower Seeds*, Juliet B.(Eds), London: Tate Press. 54-56.

⁶ Cultural Revolution was a social-political movement that took place in the People's Republic of China from 1966 until 1976. Bingham, *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*, 84.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 85

⁸ Sorace, C. (2014). China's last Communist: Ai Weiwei, *Critical Inquiry*, 40, 411.

⁹ Huang, C. X. (2011). Wo de "Jinzonglv+Jinsuanmei. *Ti Ming ji Fa Yan*, 2, 12-14.

¹⁰ Self-devotion is translated from the Chinese word 'zi wo fengxian' which was used the Cultural Revolution period. See Zhang, T. and Schwartz, B. (2007). Confucius and the Cultural Revolution: A Study in Collective Memory. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 11,193.

Because the ancient Chinese lacked a transcendental ideal that distanced them from the world, their morality was “completely secularized”, devoid of “prophetic zeal and moral dynamism”.¹¹ In this sense, the result was not an idealistic transforming of the world, but an adjustment to it which Weber defined as “relentless canonization of tradition”. That means an acceptance of the order of the father and of duly constituted authorities.¹² In part, it is reflected in Chinese people’s faith in the Confucian doctrine.¹³ Adopted by a feudal ruler Han Wudi (140-87 B.C.), emperor of the West Han Dynasty, Confucianism was advocated by all feudal rulers as a secular religion in ancient China. Even in the twentieth century, Confucianism’s influence on Chinese culture and social life remains powerful.¹⁴ As Tu Wei-Ming observes, “The Confucius tradition remains the defining characteristic of the Chinese mentality.”¹⁵

The core of the Confucian doctrine consists of the concepts – *Ren* (仁) and *Li* (禮). Confucius declared: “*Ren* means to restrain oneself and observe *Li*; and *Li* requires people to behave according to their status and rank.”¹⁶ Zhu Xi, a Confucian during the Song Dynasty (960-1279), defined ‘self-restrain’ as “restraining individual desire and thinking”.¹⁷ That means that *Li* is not only status or rank, but also a uniform national ideology which was used by feudal rulers to exclude heretical speeches of intellectuals in ancient China. In this respect, Kam Louie points out that those radical intellectuals have always criticized Confucius because his doctrine - *Ren* and *Li* – is considered as self-restraint and conformity, in opposition to ideologies of change.¹⁸ In other words, the self-restraint and conformity aim at a collective ideology.

It is interesting to note that Ai’s early works focus on how to reconfigure the traditional icons in order to challenge the conventional Confucian ideology. In his work, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, he photographed himself in front of a brick wall. The three images makes up a sequence: in the first photograph, he is gently holding the eponymous urn at chest height; in the second, he has opened his hands and let go of the pot; in the third, broken shards litter the ground. His facial expression remains cool throughout [fig.3]. The three sequenced images represent the artist’s utilization of the traditional icon – Han urn – to negate and rebel against the traditional value and

¹¹ Zhou, X. (1993). Unorganized interests and collective action in Communist China. *American Sociological Review*, 58, 54-73.

¹² Ibid., 191.

¹³ Confucius or K’ung Fu-Tzu (c.550-476 B.C) was a statesman, philosopher, and educator who lived at the end of “the Spring and Autumn period” (770-475 B.C.). Confucian doctrine is shaped by Confucius and his students. See Zhang and Schwartz, “Confucius and the Cultural Revolution”, 193.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Tu, W. M. (1990). The Confucian Tradition in Chinese History. In ed. S. P. Ropp (Eds.), *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization* (pp.112-137). Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹⁶ Maines, D. R., Sugrue, N.M. and Katovich, M.A. (1983). The Sociological Import of Theory of the Past. *American Sociological Review*, 48, 163,164,169.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Louie, Kam.(1980). *Critique of Confucius in Contemporary China*, New York: St Martin’s Press.

Confucian doctrine.¹⁹ Similar to *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, *Sunflower Seeds* implicitly criticized the oppression of self-consciousness implemented by feudal rulers under the influence of the Confucian doctrine.



Figure 3. Ai Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995.
Ai Weiwei: Works: Beijing 1993-2003, Berlin: Kunsthalle, 2004, 66-67.

Although Confucian authority was attacked during the Cultural Revolution - for example, two Communist official newspapers, *Guang Ming RiBao* (Guangming Daily) and *Ren Ming RiBao* (People's Daily) denounced Confucius's philosophy of ruling class hegemony and attacked Confucius's educational philosophy –, it cannot be denied that Confucianism and Marxism shared some ideas in common.²⁰ Liu Xiaobo, a contemporary Chinese philosopher and public intellectual, has observed that the totalitarian Confucian value system still persists in a Marxist-Leninist guise.²¹ Liu's argument is not a hypothesis. Theoretically, there is ideological similarity between Confucianism and Communism, since both of them result in a political totalitarianism. In order to understand this ideological similarity, we need to examine the two in its own historical context.

Although the pursuit of self-interest in Capitalist economy enabled people to realize the importance of the value of self, the over pursuit of self-interest brought about the expansion of Imperialism all over the world, which resulted in the dismissing of national states and the booming of totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century. Hannah Arendt suggested that the rise of totalitarianism is premised on the disintegration of national states which implies the decline of the individuality. That means the individual presents to be homogenized. This homogeneity forms collective actions among different individuals.²² Both Fascism and Stalinism claim these collective actions. People who live in totalitarian society become the ones who are exposed under the George Orwell's "telescreen".²³ Totalitarian ideology shapes a subordinate society contrast to a civil society. In this subordinate society every single

¹⁹ Daniel, M.(2010).Geopolitical Supplement. *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*. 54-56.

²⁰ Zhang and Schwartz, "Confucius and the Cultural Revolution", 199.

²¹ Chong, W. L. (1993).The Tragic Duality of Man: Liu Xiaobo on Western Philosophy. In Kurt. W. & Saich .T. (Eds). *China's Modernization: Westernization and Acculturation*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 111-162.

²² Arendt, H. (1973). *The Origin of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt.

²³ Orwell, G. (1961).*1984*, New York: Penguin Group (USA).

person should subordinate to the state, the individual should subordinate to the collective. This subordinate institutional structure embodied a sense of slavery.

Forming at the end of the “Spring and Autumn period”(770-475B.C.) of Chinese history, a transitional period during which China developed from an ancient slave society to a feudal society, Confucianism was often utilized as a tool for the Emperor or slave owner to rule his people and slaves as a secular religion. Therefore, it cannot be denied that the thought of slavery played an essential role in Confucian doctrine, especially in its statement such as three cardinal guides – “ruler guides subject, father guides son, husband guides wife.”²⁴ This slavery thought had constant impact on Chinese people’s behaviors and thoughts for thousands of years. Today, the thought of slavery presents to be a type of patriarchal tyranny in terms of bureaucratically governmental administration. Although there is little affirmation on the thought of slavery in Communist ideology, totalitarian discourse remains to allude to this slavery action. The caption on the posters – BIG BROTHER IS WHATCHING YOU - in George Orwell’s *1984* implies how the thought of slavery dismantles people’s independent thought and enables people to be obedient.²⁵ In order to rule others, the state must emphasize the significance of the collective which can make benefits on the centralization of the power. Therefore, the subordinate institutional structure initiates the collective actions.

According to Xueguang Zhou, the nature of collective action is defined by the particular institutional structure.²⁶ The Communist state claims a monopoly of public goods and denies the legitimacy of interests at individual level. Here, the so-called “particular institutional structure” is the subordinate institutional structure, which he defines as state-society structure. The state-society structure, as Zhou observes, cut across the boundaries of private and public, by producing “large numbers” of individuals with similar behavioral patterns and demands. Similar behaviors which shape the collective forms are not based on common interests, but on their similar targets – be loyal to the state. The consequences of state-society structure lie in two aspects. First, it links each citizen with state and thus reduces all social groups to similar structural position subordinating to the state and its bureaucratic organization. Second, it enables the state policies to penetrate the boundaries between public and private.²⁷ This penetration results in the absence of public sphere in a totalitarian state. As Stark and Nee pointed out that the penetration of the state into all realms of life negates a public sphere rather than extends it.²⁸

A public sphere relies on two social imaginaries: that the people are sovereign and that the public sphere is self-organized.²⁹ In this sense, in public spheres, people are encouraged to pursue the value of “self” – the value of their subjectivity. However, in a totalitarian society, the emphasis on the collective brings about the loss of “self”.

²⁴ Tu, W. M. (1990).

²⁵ Orwell, G. (1961).

²⁶ Zhou, X. (1993). 54-73.

²⁷ Ibid.,54.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Zheng B. (2012). *The Pursuit of Publicness: A Study of Four Chinese Contemporary Art Projects*. PhD diss., University of Rochester, 14.

Influenced by both Confucianism and Communism, the Chinese Communist Party spiritually rules the Chinese people by propagandizing the value of selflessness. That means individuals should be self-restrained and in so doing devote themselves to the collective selflessly. In 1939, Mao Zedong wrote a memorial to the recently deceased Canadian doctor Norman Bethune, a medical volunteer in the Chinese Communist *Eight Route Army*.³⁰ The memorial contained a vital phrase, praising ‘the spirit of selflessness’ of Doctor Bethune, which would come to play a crucial role in the contention between the individualism and collectivism in China after the Communist takeover of 1949.³¹ The emphasis on the spirit of selflessness was further explored by Liu Shaoqi in his immensely influential lectures “How to be a good Communist”.³² Liu linked the spirit of selflessness to a ‘self-cultivation’ mode, in order to mentally rule every Chinese Communist. The goal of ‘self-cultivation’ was for a person to keep his or her virtue within proper bounds of interpersonal relation.³³ Here, we can see that similar to Confucianism, Communism places all the burden on the individual.

However, the suppression of the individual by Communism resulted in a number of social and political problems. In the Chinese context, collectivism constrains individual’s choice and opportunities and thus narrows the directions and types of claims that generates in society. Thus, the social groups in China not only live in a similar political and economic environment but also tend to share similar life-experiences, which have produced similar behavior patterns among individuals, as an action in the pursuit of collectivism.³⁴ In China, especially a country with such a large population, the pursuit of collectivism implicitly encompasses the ‘large number’ phenomenon. Several Chinese scholars, such as Dong Shouan and Zhang Jianxi, used the ‘swarms of bees’ metaphor to describe this phenomenon.³⁵ This implied that every individual was like a bee who behaves so similar to the other that individual behavior, thought and emotion are usually neglected in the collectives.

The Power of Quantity, The Power of Social Criticality

As Sorces suggests, it is not necessary for Ai to provide any political blueprint or manifesto for how to combine singularity and communalization in practice because his purpose as an artist is to make their possibility become visible. Indeed, as a visual artist, Ai Weiwei did not aim at a direct social engagement into politics, but visualized his political views to critically intervene into society. For Ai Weiwei, his visual strategy is using quantity. In other words, through visualizing the power of quantity, Ai Weiwei created critical discourse in order to interact with society. In this sense, a combination of quantity, his artistic methodology, the property of his artistic creation identifies the power of Ai’s artistic expression and its social criticality.

³⁰ *Eight Route Army* (八路军) is the title for Communist Army in the Anti-Japanese War period.

³¹ Lynteris, C. (2013). *The spirit of selflessness in Maoist China: Socialist Medicine and the New Man*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

³² Liu, S.Q. (2004). How to Be a Good Communist. In Higham, K. & Mike, B. (Trans). *Selected Works of Liu Shaoqi, Volume I*, Liu Shaoqi Reference Archive.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Zhou, X. (1993). 58-59.

³⁵ Dong, S. & Zhang, J. (1987). Dangqian de qiye xingwei jiqi daoxiang (The Present Firm Behavior and Future Tendencies), *Jingji Guanli* (Economic Management), 3, 4-9.

In the West, the locus of social-cultural criticism can be understood to have grown out of a post-Enlightenment belief. Artistic productions and reception should be part of open critical debate within the public sphere as well as a potential contributor to civil society. Criticality is one of the essential properties that penetrate into modernist and postmodernist art in the West. This criticality can be divided into two types of locus. The first is a focus for a potentially autonomous/transcendental criticality. Formal criticism from Roger Fry, Clive Bell to Clement Greenberg belongs to this type. The second locus is usually contextualized in historical avant-garde and post-war avant-garde. It can be dated back to Dada, Surrealism, Russian Constructivism in the 1930s, and Situationsit International artistic practices, Happening Art and Fluxus in the 1960s. Compared to the former, the second type of criticality not merely focused on a self-reflexive criticism in aesthetics, but also aimed to challenge the authorities of institutions or question the socio-political status quo.³⁶

Within China, the two itinerary of criticality seem to be integrated. On the one hand, the pursuit of aesthetic autonomy is regarded a sign of avant-garde by Chinese contemporary artists. That means adopting a perspective of aesthetic autonomy, Chinese artists criticize Chinese traditional and social realist art formats. As Paul Gladston points out that the criticality in contemporary Chinese art can be understood to go against the grain of western avant-gardist intentions by reinstating aspects of autonomous cultural practice as part of their opposition to established social, political and cultural forms.³⁷ This tendency embodied in the landscape paintings of “Wu Ming Hua Hui” in the 1980s, abstract paintings in the 1990s, and so on.³⁸

On the other hand, hybridizing international postmodernism and Chinese cultural outlooks, artists focus on the critical deconstruction of supposedly authoritative meanings. These artistic productions can be interpreted as a critique of continuing social disparity of People’s Republic of China and political totalitarianism of China’s Communist Regime. For example, Political Pop and Cynical Realism – the former combining popular international capitalist and Chinese communist party imagery, and the latter depicting cartoon-like figures – were presented as coded attack on the authoritarianism of the Chinese Communist Party set against the Tiananmen massacre in June Fourth, 1989.³⁹ In recent years, contemporary Chinese art as a focus for political dissidence as well as upholding cultural hybridity has been reinforced by the international reception of artists. Ai Weiwei is one of them.

In order to research the criticality in Ai’s works, we should not only concentrate on the general ecology of Chinese contemporary art, but should also refer to his personal experiences. According to Soarce, Ai’s political interventions are a specific interpretation of a Maoist training in public criticism and a commitment to

³⁶ Gladston, P. and Hill, K. (2012). Contemporary Chinese Art and Criticality: From the General to the Particular. *Journal of Visual Art*, 11, 101.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 102.

³⁸ “Wu Ming HuaHui”: Chinese Barbizon School. Artists kept themselves a certain distance from political themes through landscape sketch. They argued that art should be art itself. These Beijing based artists usually gathered at BeiHai Park in the central Beijing to paint landscapes.

³⁹ Gladston, P. & Hill, K. (2012). 204.

egalitarianism in opposition to hierarchical authority.⁴⁰ His own writings, videos, and installations suggest a set of political ideas and contradictions firmly rooted in the tradition of Chinese Marxism and critical perspective shaped by his experiences during the Cultural Revolution. Ai Weiwei has pointed out: “I was born in a society that emphasized critique, bestowing us to carry out criticism and self-criticism, so we always looked at our surroundings and object with a critical world-view.

What is the relationship between quantity and criticality in Ai’s works? Using quantity as his artistic strategy, how does Ai Weiwei criticize Chinese tradition and social reality? In the work of *Sunflower Seeds*, Ai utilized quantity in three dimensions. First, he accumulated the large numbers, because, visually, the seeds accumulating in a large scale seem to be identical to each other because their individuality disappeared when they were accumulated in such a large number. These seeds appear totally generic, like every Chinese person in a totalitarian society. As Ai remarked, “People in China have come from a history in which there was no individualism; everybody was just a piece that identified with another, more like a military type of unified society.”⁴¹

He names this collectivism, ‘mental corruption’, and suggests, “Only by encouraging individual freedom, or the individual power of mind and trusting our own feelings, can collective acts be meaningful.”⁴² Second, Ai Weiwei pursued the repetition of every single element in this work. This repetition generated a sense of ritual which became a type of power, like the grey sea of sunflower seeds. Third, installed in the exhibition hall, the large numbers established a sense of theatricality which invited viewers’ participation. In their participation, viewers could contemplate its metaphorical meanings. Indeed, *Sunflower Seeds* is an installation that allows us to explore the mutually constitutive relationship between individuals and collectives, and singularity and communality. These issues are profoundly associated with the hybridized collectivist ideologies of both Confucianism and Communism.

To a Communist state, any behaviors outside state control are seen as a challenge to the state. When the behaviors appear in large numbers, they constitute collective defiance against the state. As Ai Weiwei suggests, being an political artist should insist his powerful individuality.⁴³ As a political dissident, Ai Weiwei used quantity as a type of power to examine the issue of the collective and the individual in both Confucian doctrine and Communist ideology. Meanwhile, he criticized the consciousness of collectivism that roots in Chinese people’s minds. It perhaps represents the anxious of totalitarian states - the constitute collective defiance against the state. Ai Weiwei has been deemed to be politically dangerous. His confiscation of passport and his detention has demonstrated how citizens are suppressed in a totalitarian country. But it cannot be denied that Ai Weiwei’s works are not as controversial as his political stance. After all, art is individualist. To this extent, Ai Weiwei’s political and artistic stances show that great minds think alike.

⁴⁰ Sorace, C. (2014).

⁴¹ Bingham, J.& Daniel, M. (2010). 87.

⁴² Ibid.,96.

⁴³ Lu, P. (2010). *A History of Art in 20th-Century China*, Milan: Charta.

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