

AI WEIWEI
LIFE
REVOLT
POETRY

An Homage to
AI QING & EMILE VERHAEREN

Rik Hemmerijckx
Lieven Van Den Abeele



MER. BOOKS

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*I have sung for those who have been humiliated,
I have sung for those who have been exploited,
I sing of rebellion, I sing of revolution,
In the darkest night, I offer hope along with the dawn,
In the savor of victory, I sing of the sun.*

Ai Qing, *Song in Praise of Light*, 1978
(translation: Eugene Chen Eoyang)

A TRIBUTE BY AI WEIWEI TO HIS FATHER, AI QING, AND EMILE VERHAEREN

Rik Hemmerijckx
Director of the Emile Verhaeren Museum



Ai Weiwei and Ai Qing, 1958

The cover of this book resembles a placard. The title *Life, Revolt, Poetry* sounds like a slogan, and that is precisely the intention. This publication accompanies an exhibition at the Emile Verhaeren Museum devoted to the Chinese poet Ai Qing and his famous son, the contemporary artist Ai Weiwei. At first glance, they form a strange trio – Verhaeren, Ai Qing, and Ai Weiwei – brought together seemingly by chance. Reading Ai Weiwei's autobiography, *1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows*, revealed not only his love for his father and the latter's gift for words, but also his father's admiration for the Belgian writer Emile Verhaeren. This admiration is evident not only in the influence of Verhaeren's poetry on Ai Qing's work and in the Chinese translations he produced – in order to become more deeply acquainted with and better understand his oeuvre – but also in his passion for making Verhaeren's poems accessible to Chinese readers in their own language.

What links these three artists is not only poetry and the visual arts – Verhaeren was a leading critic of the artists of his time – but also the way in which they engage with the world as artists. All three

lived through fascinating times and were first-hand witnesses to major historical events, events that helped shape them into the artists they became. What they also share is a kind of universal humanism: a philosophy centred on human dignity and universal rights, a plea for global solidarity, equality, and self-determination for all people. Their capacity for empathy, their critical thinking, and their indignation give rise to a spirit of revolt. Their art is an act of resistance against all forms of injustice, authoritarian power, and the restriction of free speech. Despite the strength of their social and political convictions – and this is more subtle and less direct in some than in others – their work always stems from an inner necessity and a commitment to art for art's sake. They transform lived experience and indignation into poetry. And each in their own language – whether through words, images, or objects – they give artistic expression to a vision of humanity that effortlessly transcends the anecdotal dimension of their own existence within the grand narrative of history.

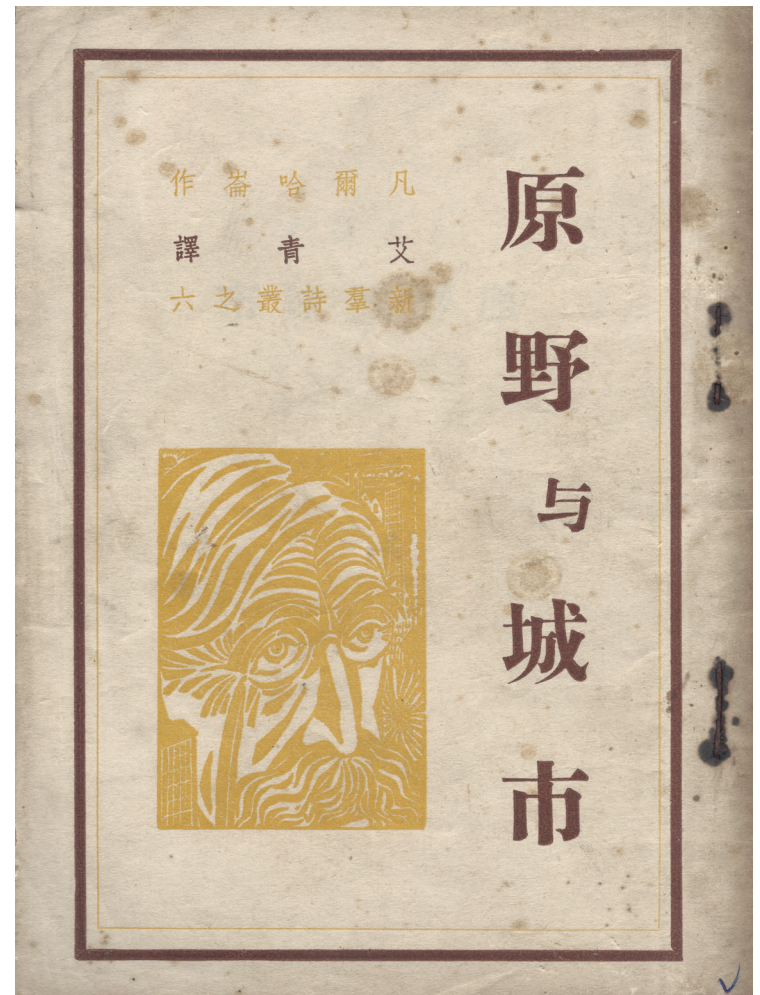
When we approached Ai Weiwei with our proposal to create an exhibition for the Emile Verhaeren Museum, the idea immediately resonated with him. He took the exhibition very personally and saw our proposal as a project that, in his own words, brought him closer to his father. He played a major role in selecting the works on display and closely followed the creation of this book, seeing the publication as a tribute to his father, Ai Qing, and to Emile Verhaeren.

We are deeply grateful to Ai Weiwei for accepting our proposal, for his commitment to this project, and for agreeing to take his place between two

giants of modern poetry. He understands better than anyone the power of the various functions of (visual) language: the communicative and the entertaining, the emotional and the aesthetic, the critical and the cognitive. Yet alongside the liberating functions of language, he remains particularly vigilant against the imperatives and the Newspeak of totalitarian voices.

It's not every day that the Emile Verhaeren Museum in Sint-Amands can welcome an artist of Ai Weiwei's calibre. The museum stands in the birthplace of the great poet and near his final resting place, in that iconic bend of the Scheldt. The museum is currently in troubled waters, but we hope this exhibition can point the way towards a new future.

We would like to thank everyone who helped make this project a reality: the artist and his entire team, the Flemish Government and the municipality of Puurs-Sint-Amands, Patrick Derom Gallery, MER. Books, the National Lottery, Duvel Moortgat, and everyone who believed in our project and played a key role in its successful completion.



Ai Qing's translation of Emile Verhaeren's collection *Yuanye yu chengshi* (*The Plains and the Cities*), 1948

When Ai Qing was imprisoned, he translated the poetry of Emile Verhaeren – his only translations of poetry. The translated collection, titled 原野与城市 (*The Plains and the Cities*), was published in 1948. It's evident that Verhaeren was a poet he greatly admired and who had a significant influence on him. When Ai Weiwei was a child, Ai Qing spoke to him about Verhaeren's poetry.

像消失在河流裏的波濤，
像在幅員之底的被折的翼，
我的心呀，把你沉浸到那
用他們的恐怖與勝利的熱烈意志

拚擊着都市的羣衆裏去吧。

看呀，每一個叫喊，每一次瘋狂，
每一下驚慌，都在衝擊奮發；

把成千伸張着的肌肉和顫動着的血脈編成一束吧；
耽愛着，應和着所有的時間之奔流——而且
如此寬懷地獻身給那

人羣和事物之匆促的幻變吧，
並願你在光耀的一閃間，能突然確定地感到那
統治着，壓迫着牠的

深沉而可怕的規律。

把你的力和那些

羣衆所不自覺的

在閃現了憂愁的今宵所頒布的運命
安置在和諧上吧。

而明天，權利和義務，

將只有牠——羣衆

是具有深邃的本能的

而整個的宇宙將並駕齊驅地協力，

同着人所不知的這成千的原由

朝向赤紅而悲慘的未來之每個努力，

牠推動着，在天的邊際。



Ai Weiwei, 2026. © Gao Yuan

LIFE, REVOLT, POETRY

AI QING AND AI WEIWEI: INTERTWINED STORIES

Rik Hemmerijckx
Lieven Van Den Abeele

‘Poetry, of course, has influenced me more than any other writing. (...) Poetry for me is almost like a religious feeling.’

— *Ai Weiwei Speaks with Hans Ulrich Obrist*, p. 49

The lives of father and son, Ai Qing (1910–1996) and Ai Weiwei (b.1957), span more than a century of history – not only in China, but also in the Western world. Their paths were shaped by family upheaval, political pressure, rebellion, and poetry. For both men, these experiences proved decisive in the making of their art. Their stories run in parallel and share striking echoes. It’s not that history repeats itself, but that the mechanisms of authoritarian power endure from one era to the next.

Driven by artistic ambition, both left their home country at a young age – Ai Qing for France in 1929, Ai Weiwei for the United States in 1981. Each quickly found his footing, excelled in his art, and gained recognition. But inevitably, both ran up against the limits of the political system, which in

turn criticised, censored, intimidated, persecuted, imprisoned, and ultimately exiled them. The difference is that the first generation helped establish the system, in more innocent times, and then endured it, largely in silence, while the second openly revolted against it. All the more so since Ai Weiwei didn't choose this narrative; he was born into it. Both were cast out as enemies of the state: Ai Qing within his own country, and Ai Weiwei in Europe. And yet their work remains deeply tied to their homeland. Ai Weiwei has often said that if he had not grown up in China, he might never have become an artist, and he still regards his years there as the very best of his life.

The period during which the two stories overlap – from his exile alongside his father to his departure for America – is therefore a crucial chapter in his life and work. The experiences they shared made Ai Weiwei more critical, but also angrier, more defiant, and remarkably resilient. And yet, 50 years on, the world has grown immeasurably larger, with means of communication that have changed in revolutionary ways, and their reach is now virtually limitless – circumstances that made him stronger, but also more vulnerable.

Ai Qing: A Quest in Paris

Ai Qing (the pen name of Jiang Haicheng) was born in 1910 and grew up in a wealthy landowning family in Fantianjiang, a hamlet near Jinhua in the north-eastern part of Zhejiang Province. With the fall of the Chinese Empire in 1911, his life would unfold in a country riven by internal conflicts, foreign incursions, war and civil war, and ultimately by

a communist revolution. The young Republic of China was initially governed by the nationalist Kuomintang party, led by Chiang Kai-shek from 1925 onwards. Not only did he have to contend with the presence of various foreign concessions, but he also faced Japan's increasingly aggressive territorial ambitions. In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria and seized the city of Shenyang. At the same time, another force was gaining momentum: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), founded in 1921, which called for revolution and drew strong support from both the peasantry and the workers of the country's industrial cities. Beginning in April 1927, Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang launched a ruthless campaign against the communists. A massacre took place in Shanghai and the various communist-controlled autonomous zones were besieged. During the Long March that followed (1934–35), Mao Zedong emerged as the leading figure of the CCP.

As a young man, Ai Qing paid little attention to the political turmoil shaking his country. Against his parents' expectations, he initially chose to pursue an artistic career. In September 1928, he enrolled at the Hangzhou Academy of Art, but, encouraged by his teacher, decided to continue his studies in France. In March 1929, he set off by boat from Shanghai to Marseille and from there travelled by train to Paris. He first found a place to stay in Fontenay-aux-Roses (Hauts-de-Seine). In Paris, he lodged at the Hôtel de Lisbonne on Rue de Vaugirard, where Verlaine had stayed in 1889. He took French lessons from a Polish-Jewish migrant, visited museums and galleries, and attended the open studio at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Montparnasse. His own graphic work reflected both the social

Death Mask, 2014

Bronze

18 × 17 × 21 cm

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Death masks have come down to us from every civilisation since ancient Egypt: facial imprints of the dead that, until the invention of photography, were the sole means of preserving the last memory of exceptional people. The death mask was generally restricted to prominent men in the political or cultural fields, such as Agamemnon, Napoleon, Blaise Pascal, and Beethoven. Ai Weiwei made a death mask of his poet father Ai Qing (1910–1996), despite the fact that the practice was completely outmoded; a gesture to be seen as an artist's tribute to a human being who had a remarkable destiny and whose influence on him went far deeper than their filial relationship. In several photos, Ai Weiwei can be seen wearing his father's death mask, as if trying to tell us that he is keeping this man's spirit alive in his own artistic practice.

As a young man, Ai Qing got to know Western culture in Paris between 1929 and 1932, his discoveries including the art of Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Vincent van Gogh, the poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Emile Verhaeren, and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel. On his return to China, he began to write. He was imprisoned between 1932 and 1935 for his opposition to the Kuomintang. He was accused of being a 'rightist' during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and sent into exile in 1957 for 20 years – only to be rehabilitated following the death of Mao Zedong and the end of the Cultural Revolution. The Anti-Rightist Campaign was the result of the government clampdown after the Hundred Flowers Campaign with its promises of freedom of opinion. Ai Qing's life was a series of ups and downs, of humiliations and belated fame: to cite just one example, he was long banned from publishing and then subsequently entrusted with top-level official duties as vice-president of the Chinese Writers' Association and a member of the Permanent Committee of the Popular National Assembly. In 1980 he visited Paris again and the French President François Mitterrand made him a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters in 1985. Ai Qing is one of his country's most important twentieth-century poets.



Three Clothes Hangers as a Star, 1986

Clothes hangers, wooden frame

50 × 50 × 4 cm

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

While he was residing in the United States, Ai Weiwei discovered the work of Dada founder Marcel Duchamp and was enthralled by his witty approach to art and his use of the readymade. Duchamp became a major source of influence on Ai's artistic practice and on his conception of the artist's role. One of Ai's earliest works, *Hanging Man*, is a homage to Duchamp.

Referencing the latter's use of coat hangers in his works, Ai bends the hanger to look like a line drawing of Duchamp's profile. He employs the same mundane object for *Three Clothes Hangers as a Star*, unlike Duchamp, who used arbitrary combinations of objects.



Chrysanthemum, 2007

Porcelain

Each 10 × 12 × 10 cm

Image credit: King & McGaw

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Chrysanthemum is an artwork in porcelain, created in the kilns of Jingdezhen. Following his arrest and secret detention lasting 81 days in 2011, the artist's passport was confiscated and a battery of surveillance cameras were installed around his studio house in Beijing. In response, on 30 November 2013, Ai announced that he would begin the daily practice of placing a bouquet of fresh flowers in the bicycle basket outside of his studio until his passport was returned. He photographed the flowers and shared the images on his website and social media accounts. Ai's supporters also shared images under the tag #FlowersForFreedom. The project concluded on 22 July 2015, following the return of the artist's passport.

pp. 110–111:

Remains, 2015

Porcelain

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of Ai Weiwei Studio

Remains is composed of porcelain replicas of sets of human bones excavated at the site of a labour camp that operated under Mao Zedong in the late 1950s. In 1958, Ai Weiwei's father, Ai Qing, and thousands of other intellectuals were purged during the Anti-Rightist Movement. Giving the impression of an archaeological site, *Remains* is an example of how the view of objects can be altered when exhibited in different contexts.

