

When the American poets heard this, their eyes lit up. They were all in agreement about the power of the poet and his poetry. So Ginsberg was even more interested. Now Ai didn't even have to add anything to the question: "In what way do you let sex appear in your poetry?"

The Chinese poets looked at each other. Bei finally muttered: "My poetry ... has nothing to do with sex." Ai kept a serious expression and translated this sentence into something completely different that made Ginsberg and the other American poets even more curious. Several of them asked him something in English.

Without blinking an eye, he said in Chinese: "The American poets would like each of you to recite two poems on the topic of sex. I will try to translate them into English."

The invented request left the Chinese side speechless. Gong and Bei went pale. But everybody in the audience was laughing. Ai had succeeded in turning a serious international conference into a travesty. Then the poets noticed what had been going on. They didn't know if they should laugh or cry. Ai was laughing out loud; he was proud to have brought about the first Chinese-American poetry sex-exchange.

In the *Southern Weekend* interview, Ai said: "Bei Dao was the most boring person. Sometimes he would pass by New York, then he told me he wanted to see Allen Ginsberg. So I went with him and we all had a little chat. But, [for the rest of the time,] Bei was at some American university, [as part of] his bread-winning efforts."

Every day, Ai would leave his 800 sq ft basement, for which he paid US\$700 rent, and climb up to the surface world, with all its serious business, to create the excitement and adventure he craved. You'd always bump into him in the early 90s, with his typical north China face and



Ai's *One Tiger, Eight Breasts*

his already chubby figure wrapped in an army coat. I suspected he wore nothing under that coat. Maybe he had picked up this habit in his youth, in the Gobi Desert.

By the late 80s, Ai's rebellious character had been revealed. He was always looking for trouble. In those years, there were countless demonstrations on the streets of New York and Ai took part in every one. There were the Chinese demonstrations in 1989, but Ai also participated in demonstrations against the Gulf war (1990-1991), against police brutality and in support of homosexuals, the homeless and vagabonds.

One time he was in a demonstration that left the East Village and went into Greenwich Village, where the demonstrators were not familiar with the streets. He was cornered by the police, his camera smashed and he was thrown rather far. Ai was also threatened by police with film cameras - they came very close until the lens almost touched his face. Plain-clothes policemen would walk up to him, smiling, and give him a push, or a shove. These experiences proved valuable for him in his encounters with mainland security officials. His fearlessness in his homeland comes from his experiences in New York.

"To be threatened can get you hooked," Ai told *Southern Weekend*. "When state power concentrates its affections on you, you feel important."

"[Experiences in New York] made me understand the power structure; the relationship between the government, or the people in power, and the ordinary people. It is a society that propagates freedom and

democracy but, actually, power is the same wherever you go. It is completely the same."

At that time, Ginsberg also lived in the East Village. He always carried a little camera, which must have been expensive, but didn't look like much. He would wander around the streets and subway stops, always taking shots. I often ran into Ginsberg in the East Village, he would always keep babbling at me while he photographed everybody; he was hooked alright. Ai and Ginsberg were very close.

Ai was also close to African-Americans and street artists. He was always up for practical jokes.

The famous Chinese director Feng Xiaogang was in New York in the early 90s doing a television series called *Beijingers in New York*. Feng wrote about his assistant director, Ai: "He picked up two different things which had nothing to do with each other, joined them together and had them bring forth something new."

For example, he put a basketball into a bag and threw it from a tall building, just to watch people stop in their tracks and wonder what it was. Another time he bought an LP record from the Cultural Revolution: a collection of Mao Zedong's most famous essays, including, among others, the one about the old man who moved a mountain and the one on Norman Bethune, the Canadian doctor who became a hero in the mainland. They were recited by a China Central Television announcer with oratorical perfection. Ai found a record player and an amplifier, and treated the whole Village to an impromptu Maoist street oration.

In the autumn of 2000, I was deported to the US from a Beijing prison. For the next few years, every time I set foot in the East Village, I would imagine running into Ai again, although he had returned to the mainland several years earlier. I would look for his basement on East 7th Street, between First Avenue and Second Avenue, and walk back and forth around the entrance, expecting him to come out. In my mind, he was a fixture of the place: without that guy in his Chinese army coat it just wasn't the East Village any more.

AI IS AN ENERGETIC AND prolific concept artist. The word "concept" includes for him his own concept of society, of the world in general. In his 10 years as an illegal alien in New York, he spent a lot of time in museums and galleries. He always walked everywhere, so he would pass 40 to 50 blocks walking to the Museum of Modern Art or the Metropolitan Museum, for example. He often talked about his enthusiasm for Andy Warhol. Ai may be one of the very few people who have thoroughly digested and understood Warhol. But he goes further than the pop-art pioneer, because he uses concepts to challenge state power.

Ai remains preoccupied with the naked body. After he returned to the mainland, in 1993, his nude performance pieces gradually acquired levels of metaphor and satire. There is a famous photograph from Tiananmen Square, taken on June 4, 1994, the fifth anniversary of the massacre. With the skills he had learned in New York, Ai and his girlfriend, Lu Qing, were able to move through rows of police and plain-clothes detectives, to the middle of the square, opposite the portrait of Mao. Lu, who became Ai's wife, positioned herself in front of a fence, with Mao's face between her and another woman. Ai's camera captured the moment she raised her skirt and revealed her underwear, with one of her feet drawn up, as in a dancing pose. The challenge to the authorities is obvious when you see the picture but there's hardly anything illegal in it. The photo was published in underground art publications throughout the rest of the 90s.

After 2000, in the age of the digital camera, Ai became more forthright when photographing his own body. His pictures became more vulgar, flouting aesthetic standards and feelings of shame. In September 2008, he took shots of his bulging belly and posted them on his blog. These images were meant to be shocking and make the observer reflect on ugliness. The burning cigarette in his navel certainly looked vulgar enough. But there was no hidden intention to be discerned behind the vulgarity. All you can see is a shameless ageing man, who has never changed the naughty ways that have always been natural to him.

The peak of Ai's nude online presence was reached with a series of photos of himself alone or in a group, each with characteristic titles. In May 2009, Ai took five pictures. One of the pictures' titles could be translated as "the grass mud horse blocking the centre", another one as "flying high, don't forget to hide the central authority".

"Hiding" and "blocking the centre of power" are puns, because "hiding" and "blocking" sound like "party" in Chinese, and "the party centre" always means the Communist Party's Central Committee. "Flying high, don't forget the party centre" and "flying high, don't forget to hide the central authority" sound exactly the same (*tengfei bu wang dang zhong-yang*; "flying high" is a phrase often used in state propaganda to celeb-