



Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on November 8, 2011

## Contributors Help Chinese Artist Ai Weiwei

After being slapped with a \$2.4-million bill by the Beijing tax bureau, Chinese artist and political dissident Ai Weiwei (left) could be charged with illegal fundraising. Ai disclosed to the public his hefty tax bill only last week, and since then nearly 20,000 people have donated more than 5.3 million yuan (\$840,000) to help the artist pay an enormous sum of back taxes and fines.



The *Global Times*, a state-run Chinese newspaper, castigated Ai's funding measures and suggested that using the contributions to pay back the government "could be an example of illegal fundraising." The newspaper also attempted to downplay Ai's support from the Chinese people. "It is absolutely normal for a certain number of people to show their support for him with donations. But these people are an extremely small number when compared with China's total population," the newspaper's commentary read. "Ai's political preference along with his supporters' cannot stand for the mainstream public, which is opposed to radical and confrontational political stances."

Despite the closure last week of Ai's account on Sina Weibo, a Chinese social networking site similar to Twitter, contributions poured in Monday, as donors authorized bank and post office transfers, tossed envelopes of cash into his yard, and found other creative ways to help the artist pay his exorbitant government bill.

"The postal bureau has just notified me that there are 776 cash remittances that we need to go and pick up," the 54-year-old [told](#) AFP Monday morning. Some contributors even folded cash into paper airplanes and hurled them over his studio gate. "Every morning we have to pick up the money thrown into the courtyard. Sometimes they are folding it into planes or boats," he said.

The efficacy of Ai's campaign comes as a surprise to many critics, as the threat of governmental castigation for supporting high-profile political dissidents is high. "This shows that a group of people who want to express their views are using their money to cast their votes," the artist [told](#) the Associated Press. "It shows that in the Internet age, society will have its own judgment and its own values. People are using these methods to re-examine the accusation that I evaded taxes."

Ai is China's most internationally renowned artist, as he [designed](#) the "Bird's Nest" stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympics and has displayed his art in countless galleries and museums around the world.



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His “Sunflower Seeds” exhibition, which contains more than 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds painted by hundreds of Chinese artists, is showcased at London’s Tate Museum. Although much of Ai’s work and ideology are anti-government, his prominent status around the world has tempered the efforts of Chinese authorities to muffle his political contentions.

However, when attempting to [leave](#) the country in April, Ai was detained at Beijing Airport and held for nearly three months. He was released in June and accused of tax evasion, but he and many of his supporters claim that the charge was simply an act to silence his outspoken criticism of China’s authoritarian government.

Liu Yanping, a volunteer at Ai’s Beijing Fake Cultural Development Ltd. design firm, said many contributions have come attached with thoughtful messages, such as “Brother, let me be your creditor,” and “The whole family has been mobilized, everyone will be creditors.” Ai assured in a Google+ post Monday that he “will definitely return every penny” he has been loaned and told lenders that their loans “will not bear any interest.”

Many supporters are contributing to Ai’s cause as a way to “cast their vote” in opposition to the Chinese government’s authoritarian rule. A reader from Guangzhou [told](#) the BBC that he donated money because it was a “rare opportunity to support what I believe... I will keep my receipt of the postal order forever, because it is my first real vote.”

Feminist scholar Ai Xiaoming said her donation was “a form of support as well as an appeal... Everyone can clearly see how the whole process of accusing Ai Weiwei of tax evasion has not been transparent or fair.” Likewise, Hu Jia, another renowned civil rights activist who was recently released from prison, wrote in a Twitter post that he donated 1,000 yuan to the artist for “my great gratitude and respect for what he has done.”

Although Ai indicated that he could afford to pay the government on his own, he said he appreciates the generosity and is inspired to see the Chinese people speaking out against their government’s oppressive rule. “This is just a voluntary action by citizens,” he [averred](#). “They’re telling me it’s a way to help me out and show solidarity. I don’t need the money, but I care about their support.”



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