

On November 7th, petitioners from all over the country celebrated at the 'River Crab Banquet' in Shanghai. The main organiser, prominent Chinese modern artist Ai Weiwei, wasn't able to attend because he was under house arrest in Beijing.

Ai Weiwei has a new art studio in Shanghai. Construction was recently completed. The studio was supposed to be a new cultural precinct where Ai Weiwei could teach students. The building however has been targeted for demolition. Ai Weiwei claims this is despite a high ranking official actually being responsible for its initial construction. The river crab banquet is a way of farewelling the studio.



The 'River Crab Banquet' in full swing.

What was served at the banquet? Over 10,000 river crabs.

Why the name? River crab is a satirical reference to the guiding ideology of current Chinese leader Hu Jintao.

Human rights abuses

Thousands of people attended the banquet, to farewell Ai's studio and to also raise awareness of human rights abuses in China. Among the attendees were many petitioners had lost their homes in housing demolitions. Some attendees noticed plain-cloth police officers were also present. SOH interviewed several petitioners who were dining at the event.

Li Lirong, a petitioner from Beijing told SOH: "More than one thousand people came in the morning. After noon, or maybe after one o'clock, people still kept joining us. (We started the activities) at around 2:30. We distributed posters, Ai Weiwei's books, postcards bearing his image and message, and DVDs. These are all publications by Ai Weiwei."

Zhou Li, another petitioner from Beijing said: "I think everyone is not only concerned for Ai Weiwei, we are also concerned for ourselves. We all know the responsibility of defending human rights shouldn't fall on just Ai Weiwei. Today, many internet users and many petitioners came. Many of them are local Shanghai residents. There are also people who came from far away. As far as I know, there were people from Guizhou, Hangzhou, and Yunnan Province. That is a really long distance away."

Petitioners hope the banquet will prompt authorities to stop housing demolitions. Longtian, a netizen from Guangzhou, said: "Many warm-hearted netizens came to join this activity. We hope through our activities we let those people with vested interests know netizens are helping oppressed groups defend their rights. These suppressed people are not afraid of hardship. Therefore we all came here."

Shen Peilan, a petitioner from Shanghai, commented: "We want to voice our support for Ai Weiwei, and stop the illegal demolition (of homes). We hope the government will correct these illegal acts, and issue regulations to get everything on the right track. In addition, we hope petitioners' problems can be resolved."

Han Zhongming, another petitioner from Shanghai said the construction and demolition of Ai Weiwei's studio was an example of the authorities contradicting themselves. "When the local government demolished Ai Weiwei's art studio, it didn't have long-term vision. Don't you lose a good amount of income? You cannot use a poor excuse to encroach on his rights. We feel this government is absurd. Everyone feels it's irrational. The permit was issued by the government when construction began, now the government wants to demolish. The government carries things out at will. It comes up with an idea and then denies it at will. We civilians, and artists (like Ai Weiwei) feel there isn't much room for us to sustain our lives."

Ma Yalian, a cyber-dissident from Shanghai also came to the banquet. Local authorities tried to stop her from coming but she was able to escape their attention. Ma says Ai Weiwei is warm-hearted and upright. She hopes this round of activities will help curb the suppressive conduct from the authorities.

"I came as early as yesterday. If I were to set out today, I wouldn't have made it. My family told me policemen went to my home in the morning today. We too are victims of forced demolition. We suffered a lot, and therefore we are very sympathetic towards Ai Weiwei. In addition, Ai Weiwei is an artist of conscience. He often speaks out for suppressed groups, and he fights against immoral acts by the government. There are very few such people among the upper

class. Lastly, I hope China will create a better environment which will bring about rapid progress in literature and arts, and in science.”