

# On The Tip of a Wave: How Ai Weiwei's Art Is Changing the Tide

AUTHOR

**JOANNA HO**

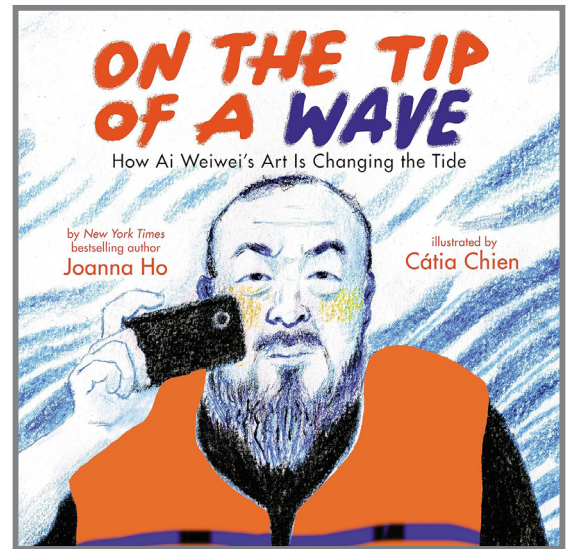
ILLUSTRATOR

**CÁTIA CHIEN**

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Lower to Mid Primary



## SYNOPSIS

*He (Ai Weiwei) felt the life jackets and an idea curled and crested through his fingertips. The way it always did.*

Told in Joanna Ho's signature lyrical writing, this is the story that shines a light on Ai Weiwei and his journey, specifically how the Life Jackets exhibit at Konzerthaus Berlin came to be. As conditions for refugees worsened, Ai Weiwei was inspired by the discarded life jackets on the shores of Lesbos to create a bold installation that would grab the attention of the world. Cátia Chien masterfully portrays the intricate life of Ai Weiwei with inspirations from woodblock printing and a special emphasis on the colour orange, the same colour of the life jackets that became a beacon of hope. Through Cátia's dynamic and stunning illustrations, we see how Ai Weiwei became the activist and artist he is today while proving the power of art within humanity.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joanna Ho is the award-winning and New York Times bestselling author of many children's books including *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners*; *Eyes that Speak to the Stars*; *Eyes that Weave the World's Wonders*, *Say My Name*, and *Playing at the Border: A Story of Yo-Yo Ma*, recipient of an Ezra Jack Keats Honor. Her debut young adult novel, *The Silence that Binds Us*, received the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature, Young Adult Honor. She earned her Masters in Educational Leadership at the Principal's Leadership Institute at the University of California, Berkeley and has been a classroom teacher, program designer and high school administrator. Her passion for equity in books and education is matched only by her love of homemade chocolate chip cookies, outdoors adventures and dance parties with her kids.

Visit her at [www.joannahowrites.com](http://www.joannahowrites.com).

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Cátia Chien is a Brazilian Taiwanese artist, who currently lives in California. She's the illustrator of such titles as *The Bear and the Moon*, which was a Society of Illustrators Gold Medal for Original Art winner and a Golden Kite Award for picture book illustration winner, *A Boy and a Jaguar*, an ALA Notable Book and recipient of the Schneider Family Book Award. Her art has been shown in galleries worldwide, including the Beijing National Gallery and the Bologna Children's Book Fair exhibition. She is also the founder of A Thousand Worlds, a curated picture book directory celebrating BIPOC creators.

**STUDY NOTES**

- Before reading the story, as a class, discuss the book cover and title. Some things to include in your discussion could be:
  - What mental images does the cover artwork inspire in you?
  - What natural feature is the cover artwork reminiscent of?
  - How does the title influence your interpretation of the meaning of the cover artwork?
  - What do you think the phrase *On the Tip of a Wave* could mean, both literally and figuratively?
  - What do you think the subtitle might mean? How do you interpret it and why?
  - Who do you think the main character of this story is? How can you tell?
  - What do you think might happen in this story? Why do you think this?
- Who are the people in the story that Ai Weiwei is helping out of the boat? Why are these people in danger? Where and when did this happen?
  - As a class, discuss the refugee crisis in Europe, what happened to all the refugees, how they reached Europe and where they are now.
- As a class, discuss how you think the people in the boat felt when Ai Weiwei helped them out of the boat. How would you feel when reaching safety after a dangerous voyage? Paint a picture that reflects the emotions you imagine they must all be feeling.
- Ai Weiwei uses his artwork and installations to try and influence the world he lives in. As a class, talk about how raising awareness of an issue can change a societal response. Can you think of any other artworks or artists whose work provides a strong social commentary?
- Visit a local art gallery or museum and look at the different exhibitions featured. When you return to class discuss the different ways that looking at various artworks has affected you, the thoughts that the art has prompted, and what you think the artist or artists were attempting to create in the viewers. Create an illustrated recount of your visit to the art gallery, focusing on your emotional response to the various exhibits.
- When Ai Weiwei was a child he had no access to art supplies of any sort, but he still managed to create art, drawing on and sculpting the dirt walls of his underground home. If he managed without anything but dirt, surely it should be possible for you to also create art without any access to art supplies. As a class, discuss what art is, and the many ways it can be created. Consider in your discussion what inspires people to create art in the first place.
  - In pairs or small groups, brainstorm possible topics, themes, or ideas that you would like to share in an artwork you create. Once everyone has decided on a theme, topic, or goal, go on a supply-finding walk around your school or local area. Collect objects that you find on your walk that you can use to create an artwork once you return to class.
  - When you return to class, have your teacher inspect your collection for safety, before using your found objects to create an artwork that represents your chosen idea.
  - Try to use only items that you have found in your artwork, and avoid using any of the art supplies in your classroom such as paper, glue or colouring equipment.
  - Once you have finished, arrange everyone's artwork for display, with cards in front of them detailing the name of the artwork, and the name of the artist who created it. Invite another class, or the school principal and admin staff to come view your class exhibition.
- Ai Weiwei has learnt from his earliest days that art is ephemeral. His earliest artworks have long returned to the dust of his underground home, while many of his installations were only temporary and have been taken down. Create an ephemeral artwork of your own using pavement chalk in the school playground. You might want to include a written message in your artwork as activists do, or you can draw a detailed picture or an interesting pattern. Photograph your artwork, and as a class, create a slideshow showcasing your ephemeral artworks to share at a school assembly. Include in your slideshow images of your artwork being washed away by rain, or by a hose.
- Why do you think Ai Weiwei chose to use the many discarded lifejackets to create a public art installation? What message was Ai Weiwei trying to send? How do you think viewers might have reacted to seeing his art installation?
- Can you identify and translate the Chinese characters shown in the images of some of Ai Weiwei's artwork? What do they say and why would he have written them with his art?

- Read the biographical notes at the end of the book. Why do you think the Chinese Government detained Ai Weiwei and confiscated his passport? Ai Weiwei is sadly not alone in having been prevented from sharing his art by an oppressive government. Throughout history, artists who criticise an oppressive regime have often found themselves in a similar situation to his. What is so influential about how an artist portrays their view of the world that a government might decide to detain an artist or prevent them from creating art and sharing it with people? As a class, discuss all the different ways that art can challenge and change people's thinking about a topic.
- Looking at the pictures of Ai Weiwei's artwork in the book, which of his works do you like the best and why? How does it make you feel?

AUTHOR OF NOTES  
**RAE CARLYLE**