



## Has the Tide Turned?

In Beijing, the tide has turned, says the great collector and former diplomat Uli Sigg in an interview. «President Xi is set upon a course to which everything must be subordinated. (...) There is no room for dissent.» This is being met with unmistakable disapproval in the West, especially in Central Europe. The US is even threatening China with a trade war. China surpassed the US as the largest industrial producer already in 2010. Since 2017, the country has been the world's largest automobile manufacturer, with an output of 25 million cars. China is also the largest consumer market, and not just for cars. In a time of maximum government debt incurred by the two superpowers, the issue is more than just competition. Their systemic rivalry is in the foreground, the question of which is the better kind of capitalism. **China isolated itself significantly during the pandemic, with the economy hardly growing, and is now struggling with high youth unemployment, an almost collapsing real estate market, and immensely expensive state investments that yield too little tax revenue.**

Understandably, despite these setbacks, China wants to become stronger and attain parity, not only with the US but also with Europe. President Xi and the Communist Party draw inspiration from the storied longevity and resilience of the great Han and Tang dynasties, analogous to the qualities of the mythical tortoise that bears the world in its back. The first Opium War of 1839 to 1842 shattered these ancient dreams and initiated a period of colonial domination, first by Great Britain and later also by France, Russia, Germany, and the United States. In the mid-19th century, the British introduced opium to China with military force, with the ultimate effect of making millions of Chinese dependent on the drug. Several major port cities soon fell into British hands. By 1900, the "Middle Kingdom," which had been far superior to all parts of the world for millennia, had become a colony plagued by severe war losses and mass poverty. China suffered a series of severe defeats against Japan. In World War II, following Russia, China had the second-largest estimated death toll with around 20 million fatalities. **When the Western world today talks about decolonization and launches programs against discrimination, little thought is given to the "Century of Humiliation" endured by the Chinese. President Xi, following in the footsteps of Mao Zedong, who ruled with an iron fist from 1949, has been advocating for the Sinicization of culture since he took office in 2013.**



**He Xiangyu, *Dedicated To Her: Loudspeaker* 2011, metal, copper alloy and audio player 140 × 31 × 27 cm (detail). M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong. By donation**

Visual art, which was for the first time given almost free rein during Deng Xiaoping's rule, reflecting an immensely flourishing Chinese economy, is now once again required to submit to a strict political line. The cynical realism and subtle irony of Fang Lijun's yawning bold heads, Yue Minjun's all-too broadly grinning faces, and the cold face masks of Zeng Fanzhi, who is also successful in the West today, have lost their representative status. This is also driving Hong Kong, the tax-free consumer paradise controlled by China, into a cultural crisis. The *Art Basel* fair of March 26 to 30 regained its former strength according to the numbers: there were exhibitions by more than 240 galleries from 40 countries, attended by around 70,000 visitors. However, there was a notable scarcity of mainland Chinese, nor did more Europeans and Americans attend the shows than had been observed in previous years. No queues formed at the entrances. Purchases in the seven or even eight-figure range often did not occur, although the offerings were of particularly high, even fabulous, quality. **Given the backdrop of systemic rivalry, it is essential to personally connect with the Chinese, understand their perspectives, and advise them reliably. They are genuinely curious — a rarity in our time — and truly grateful; at the same time, they don't want to be pressured or lured with attractive bait.** Their learning curve in matters of Western art has been steep. Nevertheless, they would prefer not to purchase an *Electric Chair* by Andy Warhol for a high double-digit million amount anymore. They are obviously intent on reassessing their own art. Ai Weiwei all too clearly draws only personal advantages from the denigration of practically everyone, including his colleagues. A new leading figure has not yet been found. Returning with admiration to the large and wonderful collection of Uli Sigg in the Museum M+, we encounter the vast spectrum of aesthetic positions in China. In 2011, He Xiangyu placed a small, squawking loudspeaker on a stand. The words issuing from it were those uttered at the founding of the Chinese state. Let us remember the Great Chairman and the year 1949: **"It is a very difficult task to lead the several hundred million people of the Chinese nation to a happy life, to build our economically and culturally backward nation into a rich, powerful, and culturally highly developed country."** It is a task reserved for all nations and all cultures. Contemplation of it makes more or less everyone humble.

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