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## The Art Market and Politics: The Case of the Sigg Collection

### ABSTRACT

On 13 June 2012 the Swiss collector Uli Sigg donated his collection of contemporary Chinese art to the new museum of visual art in Hong Kong: M+. In August 2012 Artprice published its report on contemporary art for July 2011 to June 2012 announcing that five out of the ten contemporary artists fetching highest prices at auction, were Chinese. On 29 November 2012 Xi Jinping delivered his first speech after taking office in which he set out his vision for China.

This paper argues that in order to understand the Chinese art market and the political context in which it operates, it helps to look at three events which took place in 2012 and their context. Art, the art market and politics are closely interconnected here. The case study of M+ and its foundational donation, the Sigg collection of “contemporary Chinese art”, helps to elucidate the relationships and the astonishing developments of the art market in China and Hong Kong during this time.

A common assumption of twentieth-century Western liberalism is that freedom of speech and an independent (free) art market are necessary, though not sufficient, conditions for innovative art to flourish. As George Orwell put it: “the imagination, like certain wild animals, will not breed in captivity.”<sup>1</sup> Innovative art, it is claimed, requires “wild” or “untamed” imagination, which is only possible when the arts are not controlled by the state. Separating the spheres of influence of the state, the art and the art market (which also

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1 Quoted in Richard C. Kraus, *The Party and the Art in China: New Politics of Culture* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 2.

ensures a market for art outside the state) is a precondition for innovative art, according to this perspective. In this article I will focus on three key events which became news items in 2012: first, the donation of the Sigg Collection to M+ Hong Kong; second, top prices reached at major auctions for works by artists from China; and third, Xi Jinping's vision for China's future. These three events can be mapped in the three areas of art, the art market and politics. This paper will proceed to show the complex interconnectedness of these three aspects.

From the perspective of Western liberalism, during Mao's premiership (1949-1976) the criteria for art were to be found in Mao's speeches.<sup>2</sup> Mao declared what Chinese art was to address, and it was the state, through its different institutions, that commissioned and paid for the production of art. Hence, works produced in China under Mao's leadership were perceived by Western liberalism as derivative art works that lacked innovation. They were derivative because they followed instructions by Mao<sup>3</sup> and, as such, were not the creation of an untamed, or wild, imagination, but of trained artists working to a strict political brief aimed at instruction and education. Consequently, they were deemed to be propaganda, not art.

One of the major collectors of art produced in China after Mao's death was the Swiss businessman, Uli Sigg. He had been sent to China in 1979 by his employer, Schindler Group, in order to establish the lift (elevator) business in China and east Asia. Sigg's arrival in China coincided with Deng Xiaoping's "Open Door" policy, during a time when the focus was on China's modernisation in the form of urban development. High rise buildings required lifts and the Schindler Group's business grew in parallel to the rapid Chinese urban development supported by Deng Xiaoping's policy. As Sigg rose through the ranks of the company, he became a member of the Group's Executive Committee and joined the board of shareholders. In 1995 he was appointed Swiss Ambassador to China, North Korea and Mongolia, a position which he held for four years.

Deng Xiaoping's Open Door policy focused on urbanisation and economic development, encouraging private investment and a free market economy. Its success in urbanising China was dramatic: by 2012 more people in China lived and worked in cities than in rural areas.<sup>4</sup> What was less obvious at the time was the effect of the free market economic policy on the arts. Western liberalism often assumes that under communism the arts are dormant. On the one hand, the argument goes, there is simply no demand and thus no production of innovative art in the absence of an art market. On the other hand, it claims, in the absence of an independent art market artefacts can only be commissioned by central or local authorities with the explicit aim of following a specific political agen-

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2 The most famous of which was the 1942 Yan'an speech during the Forum on Literature and Art.

3 During the Cultural Revolution Jiang Qing (Mao's wife) did have some authority on art and the performing arts, but it was a derivative influence. She always insisted that it was merely an interpretation of Mao's articulation.

4 For detailed discussion see Xuefei Ren, *Urban China* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), especially chapter 1, 1-32.

da which is presented as education.<sup>5</sup> Since, from a Western liberal perspective, such works are produced to a political brief, they are interpreted as being unoriginal. Under the above definition, art is only possible under conditions of a liberal democracy.

Unlike Mao, for whom control over the production of art and culture was a crucial element in safeguarding his personal political power, Deng Xiaoping was less interested in the role art and culture could play in supporting his political position. His focus was on modernisation, urbanisation and economic development. He was therefore less prescriptive over issues of art. As Wang points out, Deng upheld “the free development of different styles and genres” and the “free debate between different points of view and academic schools” in his 1979 speech.<sup>6</sup> Deng’s focus was on economic development. The effect of Deng’s Open Door policy on the arts was thus, as Kraus suggests, “the unintended by-product of other policies designed to secure Deng Xiaoping’s power”.<sup>7</sup> Deng’s objective was a reduction in state involvement and associated costs in driving the economy through an encouragement of private sponsorship, with the benefit of a significant overall increase in economic activities.<sup>8</sup>

The effect of this policy on the arts was that state-funded art received progressively less financial support. Nevertheless, while state support for the arts and, more widely, creative industries was strategically reduced, it continued to exist, and the state still employed a large number of people in the field. For example, by 1994 1.4 million people were still employed in art-related institutions.<sup>9</sup> However, this large number of paid employees in various institutions supported by the state represented only a fraction of the numbers previously employed by the state in the creative industries. Since “creative industries” included a vast array of works from television to films to animation, music, and more, even under Deng it was perceived as an area that demanded a measure of governmental oversight and was thus kept under state control. In contrast, the arts – which were perceived to address a relatively small elite group – went generally under the radar of government control, unless they became visible through a more publicised event, which could if necessary simply be shut down. Thus, as Wang notes, the dramatic reduction in state support was most keenly felt by artists, academics, art critics and art publications.<sup>10</sup>

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5 The argument omits to mention that many pre-modern works were of course commissioned, as are many of the most “important” works of contemporary art today. Education and prestige are still the most common motivators.

6 Peggy Wang, *Art Critics as Middlemen: Navigating State and Market in Contemporary Chinese Art, 1980-1990’s*, in *Art Journal*, 2013, 2.

7 See Kraus, *The Party and the Arty*, 2.

8 A debate over the role of private market or total government control existed during Mao’s premiership, but Mao steadfastly rejected any private involvement.

9 Kraus, *The Party and the Arty*, 3.

10 Wang, *Art Critics as Middlemen*.

Diminished state funding led many artists, art critics, art film makers, writers, musicians, dancers and other art workers to look for private and/or commercial financing options. Some welcomed this opportunity which allowed them a level of freedom and autonomy in choosing their paymasters and thus the direction they might take in their work. Others found that private and commercial sponsorship compromised their art. They, therefore, chose to earn their living through other skills while pursuing art in their spare time. This meant that at least from the 1980s, many artists were either actively looking for private sale and/or commercial opportunities for their work, or chose to produce art works without commercial outlets other than group exhibitions among friends.

However, as Wang shows, the dramatic reduction in state funding of art publications led art critics such as Peng De in his publication *The Trend of Art Thought and I* to argue in favour of the crucial role of art critics in establishing the status of artists and art works. He argues that “[a]rtworks and artists, without critical review, cannot be historicised”.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, “whether or not an artist can become famous in his lifetime [he argues] depends on whether the review is favourable or depends on whether or not the work moves the world of criticism”.<sup>12</sup> Wang goes on to explain that

This invocation of history was prompted in part by a new threat arising from the West. Critics feared that without their intervention, history would be misinterpreted by their Western counterparts and miswritten for the future. [...] The growing interest in contemporary Chinese art from foreigners – inside and outside China – led to controversies over the role that Western cultural authorities played in evaluating Chinese art.<sup>13</sup>

Since art was not a priority concern for Deng, there was no directive from the state. One of the major issues was the status of works produced under the Open Door policy. What might be expected and what might the criteria be, without state directives? Should Western criteria be adopted or former “historical” criteria be adjusted? What made the situation more difficult was that funding was more easily available on the international market, mostly by Western buyers with Western criteria and expectations.<sup>14</sup> Western interest eventually came up with the term “contemporary Chinese art”, but what might this mean? Works produced in China that fulfilled the criteria of Western contemporary art “with Chinese characteristics”? Historicising such works was crucial in order to establish their status as well as to determine new directions and new opportunities for artists in China.

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11 Peng De (1994) in Wang, *Art Critics as Middlemen*, 11.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 For a full discussion of the debates raging at the time in China see Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 2010).

Moreover, in 1991, the first gallery specialising in contemporary Chinese art, Red Gate Gallery, was established in Beijing by the Australian Brian Wallace. Wallace recalls that the market for such works was composed entirely of the expat community and foreigners passing through.<sup>15</sup> Their interest also created potential global opportunities in the form of exhibitions and more. Sigg was based in Beijing at the same time, and he began collecting art works in China in this context. In his new role as Swiss Ambassador to China, North Korea and Mongolia, Sigg was fully engaged in the phenomenon referred to by artists and critics at the time as “embassy art” – the system of providing exhibition space in foreign embassies.<sup>16</sup> The Swiss embassy under Sigg gained considerable prestige from the display of “contemporary Chinese art”. Yet public exhibition opportunities in China were very limited for the works that were shown and the works acquired by Sigg. Art institutions run by the Chinese government were not sympathetic to many of the works. There was both a lively debate amongst artists and art professionals over their status and, as shown above, considerable concern over what they saw as “foreign” criteria driving the production of art.<sup>17</sup>

In an interview with Matthias Frehner which was printed in the hefty catalogue accompanying the first touring exhibition of the Sigg Collection in 2005, the collector reflects on his experience in China since his arrival there in 1979. He explains that he started collecting “Chinese contemporary art” only in the 1990s, when the added benefit of his diplomatic position made it possible for him and his wife to move more freely and visit artists in their studios and homes, where he could talk to them, buy existing works but also discuss the commission of works.<sup>18</sup> It seems likely that at least some of the works in his collection were the result of these conversations and were created to meet Sigg’s and his wife Rita’s expectations and specifications.

Under Deng’s Open Door policy, information from the West was slowly filtering into China. There was a strong demand by ambitious artists to see what was happening in the arts elsewhere and to engage with the same debates, especially since there was a market for such works. Art books, exhibition catalogues and art theory publications were quickly being translated into Chinese, and artists gained greater access to Western art works and ideas. By the time Sigg started purchasing works which appealed to his “Western-trained eye”,<sup>19</sup> there was a considerable choice of “contemporary Chinese art” works being produced specifically for Western buyers, whose demand seemed to be growing

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15 Wang, *Art Critics as Middlemen*, 11.

16 Ibid.

17 For examples of the lively debate see Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*. See also Wu Hung, ed., *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West* (Hong Kong: New Art Media, 2002).

18 Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, *Mahjong: contemporary Chinese art from the Sigg Collection* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 15.

19 Fibicher and Frehner, *Mahjong*, 18.

fast. For here were works which could be exhibited alongside Western contemporary art – internationally – and yet, with so-called “Chinese characteristics”.

Sigg explains that in the beginning he was looking for “innovation from a Western point of view”.<sup>20</sup> Works which prompted his interest addressed some of the debates that he felt Western artists were addressing. However, Sigg argued,

I soon realised that no one was collecting contemporary art even remotely systematically – neither private individuals nor institutions, either in China or abroad. Just imagine – here’s a cultural area of this importance, perhaps the biggest in the world, and nobody is collecting its contemporary art. I thereupon changed my focus and began to collect what Chinese artists in general were doing, I tried to cover the whole spectrum, across all media and styles.<sup>21</sup>

Whilst Sigg does recognise that his approach is rooted in the perspective of Western liberalism, he seems unaware that this was precisely the point of contention for many artists and art critics. His attempt to historicise the Chinese art scene was exactly what some established artists, art critics and academics had identified as a threat to the art scene in the context of Deng’s Open Door policy.

As art was no longer under the Mao era’s state control, its structures were no longer fully funded and thus had to be adapted to meet the requirements introduced by Deng’s Open Door policy. Although this was happening, artists, art critics and art academics lacked a stable support environment – hence their concern that other interests would take over with the result that Western liberal structures would simply absorb the Chinese art scene. From the perspective of the authorities, such misgivings went under the radar, since the audience for art in China was relatively limited. At the same time, looking outside China, the authorities felt that Western interest played an important role in supporting economic development and promoting the view that China was indeed “open”.

In his 2005 interview Sigg explained that during his early days in China his criteria of what might be regarded as innovative art was based on formal originality. He thus posed the question “how formally innovative contemporary Chinese art really is”.<sup>22</sup> He admitted that he did not think they were formally innovative, or at least not sufficiently, to motivate him to buy works before the 1990s. With his liberal Western background, Sigg argues that without freedom of expression, no innovative works are possible. He interpreted Deng’s Open Door policy as the provision of an environment for art which was not radically different from that found in liberal democracies. His account of the “history” of Chinese contemporary art is that artists had little freedom to produce innovative works prior to Deng’s Open Door policy. Under the new policy, he argues, artists could

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20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Fibicher and Frehner, *Mahjong*, 15.

enjoy similar freedoms to that of their peers in the West. “Once artists had freedom”, he argued,

everything that Western artists learned as part of their training, the Chinese now had to work out individually for themselves. So they painted like the Impressionists at first, then like Expressionists, and after that had a go at abstract painting. I consider these precursors of a really individual view extremely important for Chinese art history, but not of world status for experimental art. From the mid-eighties they found an idiom of their own, and my interest grew. But, I made my first purchase in the nineties.<sup>23</sup>

The historical narrative Sigg offers is problematic, to say the least, for it suggests that the artistic “journey” undertaken by the European avant-garde artists needed to be reiterated by other, non-European artists. This journey had been considered innovative when spearheaded by the European avant-garde. Sigg was thus looking to buy works which would illustrate this historical account, where all artists needed to follow the same itinerary before they might find their own individual path, beginning with some examples from the Cultural Revolution and continuing until 2012. As I showed earlier, this is not how many artists, art critics and academics in China would have liked to present art works produced in China between 1949 and the present. The discrepancy was a central issue of the debate at the time.<sup>24</sup>

Sigg had been tirelessly publicising and promoting his collection. In the first instance, the Swiss embassy offered considerable exposure, as it served as a hub for visiting intellectuals, artists and curators who could see some of the works exhibited. It is likely that their discussions prompted the suggestion to establish the Chinese Contemporary Art Award (CCAA) in 1998. The CCAA association was responsible for presenting the award to Chinese artists every two years. It created an opportunity to invite the most established and respected people in the field, especially artists and curators, to act as judges for the award while both publicising the collection and creating awareness of its content. In addition, promoting artists and providing a platform to which artists could aspire meant that Sigg would be approached by aspiring artists and given the opportunity to see their work with a view to purchase at relatively low cost. The collector was successful in inviting several internationally renowned curators and artists to join the panel of judges for the award. These included Harald Szeemann, Hou Hanru, Ai Weiwei, Li Xianting, and Gu Zhenqing. In turn, this strategy further promoted the collection. In 1999 Harald Szeemann included twenty Chinese artists from the Sigg collection in his dAPERTutto exhibition at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. The controversy aroused by the inclusion of so many artists from China once again raised the profile of the collection. All the above-mentioned

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23 Fibicher and Frehner, *Mahjong*, 17.

24 For examples of the debate see Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, and Hung, *Chinese Art at the Crossroads*.

exposure helped to publicise the collection and paved the way for it to be displayed in prestigious public art institutions in Europe and beyond.<sup>25</sup>

By 2012, at least ten major international exhibitions of the Sigg collection had taken place. For most of them, Sigg attended the opening, giving numerous talks<sup>26</sup> and interviews. His presence both supported the event and allowed him to meet curators and other relevant figures who might engage with his project. Most exhibitions were accompanied by large-format and lavishly illustrated catalogues including comprehensive essays by well-known figures in the field. Added to this was a plethora of additional interviews, some of which are available online, others in print. Recently, even a documentary film documenting Sigg's life as a collector was produced by Michael Schindhelm.<sup>27</sup>

The cumulative effect of Sigg's extensive promotion of his collection may well have played a part in also raising the profile of individual artists in the collection. In turn, the art market took notice. For here was a collector who had gathered over 2,000 works made by contemporary artists in China and whose collection was widely publicised as being of "museum quality". Works by artists in the collection became consequently sought-after by other collectors, gallerists, as well as private and public museums. In this context it is not surprising that in 2012, out of Artprice's ranking of ten artists fetching the highest auction prices for the year, three were represented in the Sigg Collection.

Moreover, whilst Deng's focus was on generating economic prosperity through industry and investment, it was in fact the art market which had arrived in a winning position in 2012. On 5 January 2012, China's largest state-run news agency<sup>28</sup> asked its readers: "what was China's hottest investment market in 2011?" The answer was not the stock market, not even the property market, it was: the art market. Artprice published its Market Report for 2012 under the title *A dialogue between East and West*<sup>29</sup> (in cooperation with the Chinese art website Artron which provided data for China). It confirmed that "in 2012, global art auctions generated \$12,269 billion, of which \$5,068 billion was generated in China and \$7.2 billion in the rest of the world".<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, five out of the ten

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25 For example, *Mahjong* (2005) was a substantial touring exhibition showing a large selection of works from the collection. Opening at Kunstmuseum Bern and later moving to the Hamburger Kunsthalle, a reduced group of works was also exhibited at the University of California, Berkeley Art museum and Pacific Film Archive (2008).

26 Sigg continues to publicise his collection. On 5 October 2018 he gave a talk at London Asia House on collecting Chinese art from the beginning as being, "(...) a mirror of Chinese art production, across time, and across media." See <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/uli-sigg-the-art-of-collecting-chinese-art-tickets-48948956647#>.

27 The documentary is titled *The Chinese Lives of Uli Sigg* (2016). The film was shown in many international film festivals across the world.

28 Xinhua English News.

29 Available on [https://imgpublic.artprice.com/pdf/the\\_art\\_market\\_2012\\_online\\_en.pdf](https://imgpublic.artprice.com/pdf/the_art_market_2012_online_en.pdf).

30 [https://imgpublic.artprice.com/pdf/the\\_art\\_market2012\\_online\\_en.pdf](https://imgpublic.artprice.com/pdf/the_art_market2012_online_en.pdf), 6.

contemporary artists fetching the highest prices at auction that year were from China.<sup>31</sup> Though the detailed discussion in the report is much more complex and the figures are more problematic, the above-mentioned numbers are truly astonishing considering that some thirty-six years earlier – during Mao’s premiership (1949-1976) – all art production and purchases were funded solely by the state through its various institutions. To claim a direct relationship between the Sigg collection and the figures published by Artprice may be a step too far, but the two are certainly connected. The international exposure it offered to artists in China and the opportunities it generated for a certain type of art work is beyond doubt.

In a short article entitled “Why I Collected What I Collected” (2014) which appeared in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Right is Wrong: Four Decades of Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection* (2015), Sigg maintained that “The main aim of the collection is to represent the impressive breadth and depth of Chinese experimental art rather than single works or single artists. It is intended as an encyclopaedic documentation, referencing Chinese experimental art production in this specific period”.<sup>32</sup> The exhibition, as its title suggests, offers a chronological narrative of the “development”<sup>33</sup> of “Chinese contemporary art” from the Cultural Revolution until 2012.

In an earlier interview (2005) Sigg had explained his rationale for the collection slightly differently, suggesting that

until recently, hardly anyone in China was seriously and systematically interested in the art that I have made the subject of my collection, one day a great chasm will open up in the country’s collective memory. If the Chinese one day ask what artists have achieved since the end of the seventies, it will be almost impossible to find an answer in China. [...] So I set about constructing the spectrum that was missing, while at the same time, the aim of making official China aware of the gap.<sup>34</sup>

Sigg asserted that his contribution was not merely having the wherewithal to finance his purchase of so many art works, but his skill as a serious researcher in the field. He claimed that “whilst the public see me as a collector, I perceive myself rather as a researcher of my ultimate object of study – China”.<sup>35</sup> The collection, he insisted, documented (even comprehensively) the history of “Chinese contemporary art” and the works reflected the rapid changes that took place in China during Deng’s Open Door period.

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31 [https://imgpublic.artprice.com/pdf/the\\_art\\_market2012\\_online\\_en.pdf](https://imgpublic.artprice.com/pdf/the_art_market2012_online_en.pdf), 18.

32 Sigg quoted in the catalogue accompanying the touring exhibition *Right is Wrong: Four Decades of Chinese Art From the M+ Collection* (2014), 121.

33 According to the historical narrative Sigg promotes, as discussed earlier in this article.

34 Fibicher and Frehner, *Mahjong*, 20.

35 Sigg in the catalogue accompanying the touring exhibition *Right is Wrong: Four Decades of Chinese Art From the M+ Collection* (2014), 121.

In another interview at the Zurich School of Art (ZhdK) in 2015<sup>36</sup> Sigg explained that his collection did not simply reflect his individual taste and interest. He maintained that his strategy throughout had been to document the development of “contemporary Chinese art” and produce a “museum quality”<sup>37</sup> collection which would be accepted as a historical document of the time. It should thus serve as a foundational collection for China and be adopted by an official public museum in Beijing or Shanghai.<sup>38</sup> Sigg acknowledged that his offer to donate his collection to a major public museum in China met with considerable opposition. As an explanation, he suggested that officials were not familiar with contemporary art.<sup>39</sup> However, the debate over historicising art post-Mao, not to mention historicising art in China at any historical period, is still an incendiary topic. Sigg’s interpretation is not widely supported in China, since it ultimately prioritises Western liberalism over a Chinese alternative.

Since both the Sigg collection and the collector’s intention to donate it to a public museum in China were so well-known, Sigg was approached in 2012 by the proposed M+ museum in Hong Kong. The negotiations proved to be successful. On 13 June 2012 it was announced that the Sigg collection of contemporary Chinese art – comprising works from the Cultural Revolution to the year of the agreement (2012) – would form the foundation of the permanent collection of M+, the museum of modern and contemporary art to be built in the dedicated Cultural District of West Kowloon, Hong Kong. According to the press release, the bulk of the collection amassed by Uli Sigg, some 1,463 works valued at around US\$163,000,000, would be donated to the new museum whilst forty-seven works would be purchased by M+ for the sum of US\$22,700,000. The agreement was to secure their status as the “founding collection” of M+. In return, M+ would use at least 5,000 sqm of its space to display works from the Sigg collection during its first three years. The agreement thus guaranteed that a substantial proportion of the collection would be on display, at least during the museum’s initial years.

A few months after the Sigg donation was signed with M+, Xi Jinping took office as General Secretary of the Communist Party. On 29 November 2012, he delivered his vision for China under the title “The Road to Rejuvenation”.<sup>40</sup> In this, Xi adopted the title of the main exhibition room in the National Museum of China in Beijing, and his vision and main strategic points for the future thus need to be interpreted in the context of this exhibition. Xi’s vision for China’s future was to take China beyond Deng Xiaoping’s Open Door policy. He implied that while the Open Door policy helped to lift China out of poverty and turn it into a modern industrial state, some of its “by-products” now required

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36 Uli Sigg, ZhdK Lecture on Global Culture, 18 June 2015. Transcript p.31 out of 40.

37 For a discussion of the art market term “museum quality” as applied to a work or collection, see Jonathan Harris, ed., *Globalisation and Contemporary Art* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.).

38 Uli Sigg, ZhdK Lecture on Global Culture, Transcript p.31 out of 40.

39 Ibid.

40 <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2012/11/29/speech-at-the-road-to-rejuvenation/>.

“correction”. Xi’s mission was to steer China away from individualism towards the totality of the state organism: the “well-being” of the state.

The available script of the full speech provided by the Chinese Authorities and titled “The Road to Rejuvenation” opens by stating: “We just visited the exhibition ‘The Road to Rejuvenation’, this exhibition reviews the yesterday of the Chinese nation, displays the today of the Chinese nation, and announces the tomorrow of the Chinese nation”.<sup>41</sup> The exhibition focuses on the period from 1839 to 1949 and is presented as a “century of national humiliation”. Xi suggested that it related not only to the past, but also to the present and the future. Even though the exhibition only represented the period from the First Opium War (1839) to the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949, Xi declared that this was the period that paved the road for the future. His “China’s dream for a century” was to become the counterpart to the “century of humiliation”. Indeed, Xi’s proposal of a “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” implied a reversal of the “century of great humiliation”.

The period portrayed as the “century of humiliation” (1839-1949) was not only a time during which China was politically and economically weak, it also saw much of China’s cultural heritage leave the country. Most of the artefacts left China through a mix of commercial and semi-commercial transactions, though some were taken in the context of military warfare. The case of the zodiac animals from the Summer Palace recently gained particular notoriety.<sup>42</sup> In 2000, the tiger, ox and monkey heads were offered at auction in Hong Kong by Christie’s and Sotheby’s respectively. This gave rise to serious concerns expressed by the Chinese authorities who objected to the sale on the grounds that it “was insulting and deeply painful to the Chinese people to have these things sold before their eyes”.<sup>43</sup> What characterised the period presented at the exhibition as a “century of humiliation” was that nobody in authority within China was able to stop such objects from being sold and often shipped abroad.

Hence, a lively market was operating which involved all layers of local society to satisfy the demand of wealthy foreign collectors who had often made their money precisely because the Opium War had opened up trade with China in tea, silk and porcelain. These wealthy traders had basic familiarity with Chinese artefacts; some had even visited China. Several collectors were willing to spend very large sums of money to acquire ancient artefacts from China, often working in collaboration with museums in their respective countries which were promised the works for public display, either as donations or on permanent loan. Once such collections were established, the Western museums them-

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41 Ibid.

42 See Richard C. Kraus, *When Legitimacy Resides in Beautiful Objects*, in Peter Hays Gries, Stanley Rosen, *State and Society in 21st Century China: crisis, contention, and legitimation* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 194-215. Kraus notes that some objects were auctioned off in Beijing immediately after the sack of the palace. The monkey and the pig were again auctioned in October 1987 in New York. In 1989 Sotheby’s had first sold the tiger, horse and ox.

43 Ibid, 199.

selves grew in prestige, sometimes even obtaining national status. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries most of the collections of Chinese artefacts in what was to become major national museums were formed, often through donations by specific collectors. The Metropolitan Museum in New York and the British Museum in London are perhaps the most obvious examples. There was certainly strong competition over prestige between Western collectors. When their collections were donated to national museums such cachet was effectively “cashed in” by the state in the form of cultural prestige.

Xi’s narrative needs to be understood not only as a speech addressing the Chinese hierarchy and public, but also as one that proposes a vision which would reverse international perceptions of China. His emphasis was on continuing to deliver wealth. However, this focus was not on individual wealth but on that of the nation. Xi’s vision for China implies that individual wealth was not enough to deliver China out of the “century of humiliation”. The nation needed to be economically powerful, but should also be perceived as politically powerful, both internally and internationally. To achieve this Xi employed culture in a way that previous leaders had not fully embraced. Whilst military and financial power played a major role in his vision, so did the power of culture.

In 2012 Hong Kong saw itself closer to Western liberalism than to China. Though the territory was uncomfortable in its proximity to mainland China, it was not until two years later when a decision taken by the NPC (National People Congress) regarding proposed reforms to the Hong Kong electoral system sought to compromise its status. It was this event that gave rise to the Umbrella Movement<sup>44</sup> which took to the streets to oppose the suggestion of pre-screening Hong Kong political candidates by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party). In 2012 the territory still enjoyed considerable freedom from China as a Special Administrative Region, but there was at the same time an awareness that it would only be a matter of time. In the long term Hong Kong would be integrated into China.

The decision to build an ambitious cultural district in West Kowloon needs to be seen in this context. It was agreed just over ten years after the 1997 British “hand-over”, or, from China’s perspective, “return”, of Hong Kong to China. The cultural district was decided in 2008, the year in which China hosted the Beijing Olympics. This major international event was accompanied by the Chinese authorities commissioning huge developments, including building new ambitious museums. Against this background the Hong Kong government launched its own major commitment to art and culture. The financial backing was estimated in the region of HK\$ 21.8 billion (US\$ 2.8 billion),<sup>45</sup> an unprecedented sum to be spent on culture and the arts for a city that had been historically famous for

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44 For a fuller discussion of the Umbrella Movement in the context of M+ and the Sigg collection, see the article by Frank Vigneron, *Hong Kong’s M+: A Museum of Visual Culture at a time of Political Unrest*, in *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Volume 4, Number 1 (2017), 83-99.

45 See the chapter by Oscar Ho, *Under the Shadow: Problems in Museum Development in Asia*, in Michelle Antoinette, Caroline Turner, *Contemporary Asian art and exhibitions: connectivities and world-making* (Anu, Acton, A.C.T.: ANU Press, 2014).

its financial, rather than artistic and cultural, activities. On the mainland, the authorities had authorised the construction of prestigious buildings for nearly thirty new museums, solely in preparation for the 2008 Olympics.<sup>46</sup> However, as Hing-Kay points out, such buildings were perceived as symbols of civility by the authorities and the underlying rationale was predominantly financial.<sup>47</sup>

Hong Kong's ambitious museum project needs to be seen in context as an attempt to maintain the territory's international status and its separate identity from that of mainland China. A museum is a high-profile expenditure, but also a space in which cultural, social and political identities can be forged. At this juncture, the Hong Kong authorities, with an eye on maintaining the financial services industry at the heart of Hong Kong, promoted the new museum as a symbol of their cultural and political identity which supported Hong Kong as a protected and secure international financial centre. It may well be the case, as Oscar Ho Hing-Kay argues, that the Hong Kong authorities justified the West Kowloon Cultural District project to their taxpayers as "part of a series of attempts by the Hong Kong government to seek new economic solutions for the city".<sup>48</sup> However, it is unlikely that a Hong Kong authority with access to expert financial advice would seriously propose that a cultural centre would produce optimal economic return on such a huge investment. Political and cultural identity were no doubt important objectives, even if they were not explicitly mentioned.

The proposal for the cultural district in Hong Kong explicitly allocated space for contemporary art, a category which, as Hing-Kay notes, was generally perceived in China as "exported art, whose audience comprises mainly Westerners and a small circle of fashionable Chinese".<sup>49</sup> Situated between two ideologies, Hong Kong could offer the space for precisely such works. An added bonus was that by 2008 Chinese contemporary art had won international acclaim: it had been exhibited at the Venice Biennale since 1993 and later at *documenta* in Germany, two of the most prestigious art events in the world. Furthermore, since the early 1990s a growing number of international museums had hosted a wide range of exhibitions focusing on "Chinese contemporary art". This bolstered sale prices for such works in galleries and subsequently in Western, and also Chinese, auction houses. The "Western" exposure of "Chinese contemporary art", and the growing interest in such works, was certainly not unconnected to the above-mentioned promotional work undertaken by the Swiss collector Uli Sigg.

And yet, when the Hong Kong authorities accepted the Sigg donation it looked like they would continue to be responsible for the collection both financially and in terms of content. Under Deng's Open Door policy it would have probably slipped under the radar; the

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46 See the essay by Oscar Ho Hing-Kay, Government, Business, and the People: Museum Development in Asia, in Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, eds., *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 266-377.

47 Ibid, 267.

48 Ibid., 268.

49 Ibid, 267.

same could be said for his successors. However, Xi Jinping's leadership has renewed interest in the arts as part of a wider interest in culture and its role in political control. The intention was to "focus on 20th and 21st century visual culture, broadly defined, from a Hong Kong perspective and with a global vision".<sup>50</sup> To what extent this will remain the focus is hard to tell. The museum is not yet operational; it is due to open in 2020. However, since 2012 China has been slowly working towards integrating Hong Kong into China. The cost of the museum is today partially covered by China. As such, the Sigg collection may not have been adopted by Beijing, but it did achieve its goal of being adopted by China, despite the opposing ideologies. How works will be exhibited in future years remains to be seen. Uli Sigg is sitting on the Board of M+. He is also a member of the International Council of New York MOMA and International Advisory Council of Tate Gallery, London. Politics, art and the art market are interconnected, though the connections are not always predictable.

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50 See the Executive Summary of the full document at:  
[http://d3fveiluhe0xc2.cloudfront.net/media/file/Building/The%20Competition\\_130418.pdf](http://d3fveiluhe0xc2.cloudfront.net/media/file/Building/The%20Competition_130418.pdf).