



Fang Lijun: 1995.1
1995, Oil on canvas
70 × 116 cm

The Two Cultures of China today

Several years ago, the great Swiss writer Thomas Hürlimann wrote that there were two speeds in his country. It was clear what he meant, as not all parts of Switzerland could keep pace with the cities' accelerated commerce, swift traffic and advancing industrialization. **In China today, top speed is increasingly the only speed in evidence.** As a result, the country is explosively developing into a world consisting of two cultures. Both cultures are grounded in rapid growth, in *WeChat*, fifteen-second video clips, countless games and game consoles. There is an enormous amount of production, communication, and consumption in China, and the concomitant, seemingly unbridled domestic trade, according to *Alibaba* as the motor of China's perpetually booming E-commerce, is now exceeding many billions of Yuan per day. More than other nations, the Chinese are astonishingly diligent and focused. The constant maximal investment of energy awakens endorphins: it is fun. This is the context in which the *West Bund Group* in Shanghai has managed not only to work around the meritorious *Yuz Museum* founded by the entrepreneur Budi Tek and the similarly high-quality, also private *Long Museum* founded by Wang Wei and her husband Liu Yiqian, but also to promote an art market that has since manifested itself in two fairs. *West Bund Art & Design*, along with the somewhat older *Arto21*, represent the first of the two cultures. **The entire West Bund area in Shanghai is now the brilliant pinnacle of a seemingly boundless Chinese consumer culture.** Since November 2019, an offshoot of the *Centre Pompidou* in Paris has become part of this development, making contemporary art from Europe permanently visible in China. Great art, it seems, is coming from many countries to compete and engage in economic and cultural exchange with the Middle Kingdom. **The second, predominantly state-sponsored culture appraises and sets limits on this splendor.** There are tariffs imposed on the art trade amounting to 38% in toto; this makes sales difficult, if not impossible, they might be lowered therefore. The official state culture controls the academies and invests large sums of money in building museums that become models for further constructions. In the fall of 2019, a huge building containing an opera house, concert halls, and large exhibition spaces, the *Silk Road International Cultural Exchange Center*, was erected in Langfang, south of Beijing. It officially reflects what China wants, namely, a contact with the world that is subject to strict entrepreneurial control. The great Chairman, as Mao Zedong was once called, is present in the person of Xi Jinping, and not only in such museums. Xi, wearing a friendly expression in his photographs, appears, as all the chairmen before, on the cover of the *China Daily*, a newspaper that also carries news from abroad.

Under Xi's direction, as China's economic and cultural elites are obliged to learn, the future of the country becomes an "inspiring environment." For example, at the *Central Academy of Fine Arts* (CAFA) in Beijing, the most important Chinese educational institution, art is being channeled into Science Art that is produced by "deeply engaged collaborators," experimental artists working within CAFA toward the creation of a digital Science Gallery. The artistic implications of the Chinese dream of Artificial Intelligence are also enjoying a flowering in Beijing. **In neither of the two cultures is there any sign of aversion to the West. China has many foreign professionals and artists as guests.** Starting in November, 2019, Anish Kapoor, for example, will be showing his work not only in the *CAFA Museum* but also in the *Forbidden City*. However, you will not find Fang Lijun, Zhang Xiogang, Yue Minjun, or Zen Fanzhi among the presidents of the state-run houses. The arbiter between art and government is Fan Di'an, a former director of the *National Art Museum* (NAMOC). He is a painter as well, but his prestige as an artist derives from his high social position. The problem shows up in the almost innumerable new museums that have been built with state resources or with the help of tax rebates in many places in the country. Shanghai stands for the ambition to bring the best the world has to offer to a particularly fast-moving and progressive city. The goal is apparently to make Shanghai the center for a revival of the greatness that Chinese culture attained during the imperial age. **The second culture in China is dictated by functionaries who are hardly able to appreciate and only very rarely able to produce high quality.** One well-known Chinese artist calls the striking disparity in the level of quality "very colorful." Meanwhile, the relationship of the economic and cultural elites to the Chinese government consists of a deep, barely articulated split. The issue, in both cultural camps, is not simply freedom, it is the sense of quality and the need for self-determination that important and thoroughly patriotic professional circles feel towards the government. The problem with Hong Kong also exists within China. **We have presentiments, but we do not know what the future holds.** All things considered, there will most probably be another Art Basel in Hong Kong in 2020.

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