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“Listening and Openness are the most Important Abilities for Future Leaders”

*At the 6th [stars Singapore symposium](#), Dr. **Uli SIGG**, Art Collector, Business Leader and former Swiss Ambassador to the People’s Republic of China, explained how he builds bridges through art and culture, business, diplomacy and soft power. In an exclusive stars interview, Uli shared some of his insights with Patrick RENZ of foraus, the Swiss Forum on Foreign Policy.*

Patrick RENZ: Mr. Sigg, you have worked in multiple sectors, combining various fields of interests and developing expertise on vastly different issues. Looking back at such a career, what personal advice can you give a future leader looking to improve his or her leadership development?

Uli SIGG: What I learned from my mistakes might sound quite simple: the ability to listen and the importance of remaining open-minded. To become open-minded, we first need to cultivate the activity of listening. Most of us tend to be fairly impulsive, interrupt each other and almost immediately react. This prevents us from being open towards issues that we tend to reject at first glance because they might look foolish or seem useless to us. Listening and openness are therefore some of the most important abilities we have to cultivate in future leaders, as they will help them to more effectively lead others.

You are most famous for becoming the largest private collector of contemporary Chinese art in the world. Some of the art you collected, as well as the artists themselves, are quite controversial in China. Has this influenced your decision to donate a significant number of works to the M+ in Hong Kong and not a museum in Shanghai or Beijing?

I admit that at the time (around 2010) when I came to the conclusion that I should define the future of my collection, my first impulse was to give it to a city in mainland China such as Beijing or Shanghai. However, during the many negotiations I had with the city of Beijing and the city of Shanghai, their cultural institutions, ministry of culture etc. I came to the conclusion that I will not find an institution able to absorb my collection and take care of it in the way I imagined. While the lower echelons understood the value of my collection, the higher echelons would only see how it is not compatible with how they want China to be perceived. Censorship was of course a major issue. I wanted to know the rules for censorship to understand how the presentation of my collection would be affected. It was clear to me that being in China, you have to accept censorship. However, no one could give me a clear answer on how censorship would be applied and what works could not be displayed, making it impossible for me to assess the impact on my planned donation. At the same time, Hong Kong had this huge new museum on the drawing board and was very eager to get the collection. Thoroughly assessing the situation, I ultimately decided that the conditions for the collection to be displayed and accessible to the public would be much better in Hong Kong. It is also important to consider that there are some 40 million mainland Chinese a year travelling to Hong Kong and the city is also the most visited city in the world, dominating in that sense the global tourism scene. Hence, there may be more people able to see it than when it were in a mainland Chinese city. Whether what has been promised to me in 2010/2011 about the exhibition of my collection in Hong Kong will still hold in 2020 when M+ opens is becoming

somewhat unclear. Already in 2016, when I had the first exhibition in Hong Kong, pressure had increased significantly.

You are a member of the Advisory Board of the China Development Bank, one of the three policy banks in China and an ever more important financial institution under the direct jurisdiction of the State Council. What exactly is the role of this Advisory Board?
We are best described as a sounding board for the China Development Bank. We are not involved in any strategic decisions or have a governance function, but we help them to learn about the outside world. Members like Henry Kissinger or Tony Blair will talk about their worldview, while from me they always expect a presentation about some Chinese issue. After the presentation there will be a discussion.

Switzerland can proudly look back at many firsts with China. For example, we were the first European country to give China the status of a market economy in 2007. Combined with your own experience from negotiating for Schindler the first industrial joint-venture of the People's Republic of China with a western company in 1980 and as Swiss Ambassador to China from 1995 to 1998 in mind, where do you see the Sino-Swiss relations in 10 years?

Of course, all these firsts are important, but most of them have served their purpose and beyond rhetoric they may not have the same value as they used to have. For the early ones, new generations may simply not remember them. Others might not or no longer be as important for the Chinese side as they are to Switzerland. Nevertheless, I am convinced that Switzerland will continue to have a good starting position with China, simply because we are perceived as a neutral country and have no colonial past. This is very important to China. Additionally, we rank very high in global comparison, be it in innovation or internationalization. So, even though Chinese may not know so much about Switzerland, they have a positive perception of us. Ultimately, it's up to us to make something out of this and clearly, we could always do more.

Almost 40 years after the Schindler joint-venture, many European companies in China are dissatisfied with the efforts on the rule of law and the improvement of the regulatory framework. Are their expectations to high?

China is still China. Government continues to have more weight in business dealings than we are used to in Europe. Going forward, the most important issue will be how to deal with the unique Chinese state-owned enterprise sector in relation to our own private enterprises, both back home and in China. Since it is clear that for China the involvement of government is important and carries weight, private companies could make more use of available tools such as the Swiss embassy when operating in China. However, Swiss private companies tend to not make good use of what official Switzerland is offering. For them it's tradition that business is up to themselves and the state is something different – best not to mix the two too much.

*Dr. **ULI SIGG** is a Swiss business journalist, entrepreneur, art collector, patron, castle owner, rower (he was Swiss champion in the eights discipline at the age of 22) and a former Swiss ambassador to Beijing (1995-1998) for the People's Republic of China, North Korea and Mongolia. Uli studied law at the University of Zurich and graduated with a doctorate. Not only was he the founding president of the Switzerland-China Chamber of Economics, in 1980 he also established China Schindler Elevators (CSE). At the end of the nineties, Uli returned from China to Lucerne, Switzerland. He is well-known as an art*

collector and accumulated the world's largest and most significant collection in this field. Uli personally knows most of the artists, whose works form part of the collection.

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