

STEFAN AUST  
ADRIAN GEIGES

# XIJINPING

THE MOST POWERFUL MAN  
IN THE WORLD



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# **Xi Jinping**

## **The Most Powerful Man in the World**

STEFAN AUST AND ADRIAN GEIGES  
Translated by Daniel Steuer

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# Copyright Page

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## **‘Seek Truth from Facts’ ...**

... is a phrase from the *Han Shu*, a history of China dating to the first century. The phrase was deployed by Mao Zedong, the founder of the People’s Republic, and later invoked by Deng Xiaoping in justifying his reform agenda – today it is therefore often ascribed to Deng.

‘Seek truth from facts’ was also our guiding principle in writing this book about today’s Chinese leader, Xi Jinping. We have no political agenda. The book has not been influenced by the Chinese government’s point of view, but nor do we engage in any sort of ‘China-bashing’ – that vague accusation often levelled at critical accounts of the Communist Party of China.

We are not interested in presenting a partisan perspective on Xi Jinping – whether for or against. As far as possible, we have sought to portray him as he is. Our account is based on his speeches, biographical sources, his political activities and our own interviews and reports. We leave it to our readers to form their own opinions about the most powerful man in the world.

Especially in the English-speaking world, we often came across people who doubted whether Xi Jinping was in fact the most powerful world leader. Our response was always the same: ‘Who else could it be?’

For a long time, the US president was seen as the most powerful world leader. But the current president, Joe Biden, governs a deeply divided country. He is not even able to pass a law that would counteract restrictions on voting that disadvantage his Democratic Party, and the Supreme Court has a very clear conservative majority. It is true that the general secretary of the Communist Party of

the Soviet Union was not subject to a separation of powers, but the Soviet Union was, in the words of Helmut Schmidt, West Germany's chancellor at the time, 'Upper Volta with nuclear missiles' - a huge military power, but an economically insignificant one. That is still true of today's Russia, and it rules out Vladimir Putin as a candidate for 'most powerful man on earth'. Russia's economic output is no more than twice that of Switzerland, despite having a population seventeen times larger.

In military terms, the US is still superior to China. But this does not mean much; in the age of nuclear weapons, the US is unlikely to make full use of its military capabilities. Wars are also unpopular in the US: even the poorly equipped Taliban fighters were able to force the Americans out of Afghanistan. What counts in today's world is economic power. In terms of purchasing power, China overtook the US in 2014. China's infrastructure is world-leading - that of the US and other Western countries often disastrous. The Covid-19 pandemic has weakened the US and Europe, but China has emerged from it more powerful than ever. Given its rates of growth, the question of China's GDP overtaking that of the US is a matter of 'when', not 'if', even though US politicians do not dare utter this simple truth. And Xi Jinping is making targeted use of his economic power, so that countries and global corporations will toe China's line in the future, as this book will demonstrate.

Developments since the German publication of this book have confirmed our claims. After Taiwan opened a representative office in Lithuania, Chinese customs authorities deleted the Baltic state from their database, blocking the import of products, from anywhere in the world, if they contain anything produced in Lithuania.

We have also found ourselves on the receiving end of Xi Jinping's power. For our previous books on China, we had held events at Germany's various Confucius Institutes – organizations that are jointly run by Chinese universities and universities in host countries. We had wanted to do the same with *Xi Jinping: The Most Powerful Man on Earth*. At the institutes in Leipzig and Freiburg, we encountered no problems at all. But a few days before an online event hosted by the Confucius Institutes in Hanover and Duisburg-Essen, the managing directors rang us. They were clearly shocked: their Chinese partner universities had come under pressure from the very top, and they had to cancel the event. It apparently did not matter that the Chinese partner universities had explicitly approved the readings – their German counterparts had sent them key passages from the book and a translated summary. The head of the Chinese mission in Düsseldorf, Feng Haiyang, had intervened personally to prevent the event from taking place. The issue was not the content of our book, the managing director of one of the institutes told us. Rather, as she summarized the objections coming from the Chinese side: 'You can no longer talk about Xi Jinping the way you talk about any ordinary person. He is meant to be untouchable and non-negotiable from now on.'

It seems, then, that the personality cult around Xi Jinping will be enforced worldwide. Whether Xi himself is responsible for this, or whether it is a result of the anticipatory obedience of over-zealous officials, the result remains the same.



# 1

## **Who Cares If a Sack of Rice Falls over in China?**

### ***Since the emergence of Covid-19, we know that we all should***

It is 30 December 2019. At the Central Hospital of Wuhan, the physician Ai Fen, director of the emergency department, opens a letter from the CapitalBio laboratory in Beijing. The letter contains an eagerly awaited report. In recent weeks, there have been several cases of patients with mysterious fevers and pulmonary problems that have not responded to the usual treatments. Now, Ai Fen has one patient's test results in front of her. Reading it, she shudders: 'SARS Coronavirus'. She circles the two words with a red pen, takes a photo of the page with her mobile phone, and sends the picture to the other doctors in the hospital. 'I broke out into a cold sweat', she would later remember.<sup>1</sup> The SARS pandemic of 2002-4 had killed 774 people across the globe.<sup>2</sup> Might this be as bad? Ai Fen immediately calls on her colleagues to take precautionary measures, and informs the health authorities. In other words, she does what she considers her duty as a doctor.

Far from being thanked for this, however, she is summoned to appear before the hospital's disciplinary committee. 'How dare you ignore party discipline and spread rumour?' the chair of the committee shouts at her. Ai Fen is forced to agree to ask the 200 colleagues she texted to keep the information secret. She is supposed to meet each one individually, or contact them on the phone, but under no circumstances is she to write to them or use the online chat group, lest further traces of the event be created. 'You must

not even tell your husband!’ She obeys. All she says to him that evening is: ‘Should something happen to me, take care of our child.’ Their child is only a year old. It will be weeks before her husband fully understands what Ai Fen was talking about.<sup>3</sup>

Today, Ai Fen asks herself how many lives could have been saved – in Wuhan, in China and all over the world – if she had not complied. And yet her actions did ensure that the news got out. One of the recipients of her warning was Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist working on the third floor of the hospital. Li had kept in touch with seven of his former fellow students on WeChat, the Chinese equivalent of WhatsApp, and had passed on the information to the group. Seven people is not many, but it was enough to spur the Chinese government into action – not, however, action to combat the virus. Li Wenliang and his friends were summoned to the police station. Little in China escapes internet censorship.

The annual meeting of Hubei province’s People’s Congress is soon to take place in Wuhan, and the authorities want to make sure the high-profile event is not marred by bad news. The group of seven have to agree to a cease-and-desist declaration, with their fingerprints recorded in red ink at the bottom of the page. The policeman in charge of the interrogation tells them: ‘We are warning you: if you do not let go of this, if you maintain this insolence and continue to take part in illegal activities, the law will punish you.’<sup>4</sup>

Dr Li Wenliang is anything but a dissident. His white doctor’s coat sports the badge of the Communist Party – the hammer and sickle against a red background. On his blog, he rails against the protests in Hong Kong.<sup>5</sup>

In the following weeks, the new coronavirus spreads freely. Thanks to Li Wenliang, among others, the fact that an

unusual illness is circulating in Wuhan has not been kept secret, but the line from official Chinese media organizations is that the virus is 'controllable and containable'. The official story is that bats are the likely source of the virus and that the virus is 'not transmissible from human to human'. China's ruling Communist Party does not want to spoil the mood ahead of the Chinese New Year; a banquet for 40,000 families is due to take place in Wuhan on 20 January 2020.<sup>6</sup> The banquet will turn out to be the super-spreader event that transforms a few isolated cases in a hospital into a pandemic. It goes ahead even though, on the very same day, 20 January, China's leading lung specialist, Zhong Nanshan, declares for the first time in public that the new virus is in fact transmissible from human to human - and fourteen medical staff in Wuhan are already infected.<sup>7</sup>

Three days later, in the early hours of 23 January, the Chinese government hermetically seals off Wuhan, a city with a population larger than those of Berlin, Hamburg, Munich and Cologne combined. The date of the Chinese New Year is based on the lunar calendar; in 2020, it fell on 25 January. But by that time, no one in Wuhan was in a mood to celebrate. 'Because the local hospitals couldn't cope with the surge of new patients, the entire system was brought to the brink of collapse', writes Fang Fang, the city's most famous writer:

As it happens, that was precisely the period of the Chinese New Year when families normally come together for the holiday; it is a time of year that is usually filled with joy. But instead the world froze over; countless people became infected with the coronavirus, and they ended up traipsing all over the city in the wind and rain searching in vain for treatment.<sup>8</sup>

People had to walk; because of the lockdown, there was no public transport, and most people in Wuhan do not own cars.

‘What did the president know, and when did he know it?’ This is a question you often hear in the US. But it could also be asked of China’s president, Xi Jinping. As Xi tells it, he presented a paper entitled ‘Requirements for Prevention and Control of the New Coronavirus’ to the Politburo Standing Committee as early as 7 January. But, while most of his speeches are published, this one was not. All we know from sources close to the party leadership is that Xi Jinping requested that the ‘festive atmosphere’ in the run up to the Chinese New Year should not be disturbed.<sup>9</sup>

As the ‘core of the whole party’ – his official epithet – Xi Jinping is untouchable in China.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore highly unlikely that the real answer to the ‘how much did he know’ question will be known until he is toppled or dies. There is all the more reason to find out now what makes the man who has been president of the People’s Republic of China since 2013 tick. Even more important than being president is the fact that since 2012 he has also been the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. He leads the party, and in China the party is above the state.

China’s population of 1.4 billion is significantly larger than those of the European Union, the US and Russia taken together. In terms of gross domestic product and purchasing power, the country is already the largest national economy in the world, having overtaken the US in 2014. This is a major step forward – the US had been the world’s leading economy since 1872.<sup>11</sup>

Our knowledge of China – and its president – has not kept pace with these developments. This is revealed by seemingly trivial details. For instance, on one of the two German state broadcasters, the ARD, the presenter of

*Börse vor acht* [The stock markets today], Markus Gürne, who is also the economics editor of Hessischer Rundfunk responsible for stock market news, innocently referred on prime-time television to ‘the Chinese president Jinping’. In Chinese (as, incidentally, in a number of other languages), the family name comes first. Thus, he is ‘Xi’, just as ‘Mao’ is the family name of Mao Zedong. Calling the Chinese president ‘Jinping’ is therefore like referring to ‘the American president Joe’ or ‘the German chancellor Angela’.

Xi Jinping’s decisions have a direct effect on our lives, no matter whether the effects are positive or negative. Any lingering doubts about that fact have now been dispelled by the Covid-19 pandemic: it has cost the lives of several million people from virtually every country in the world, plunged the global economy into its deepest crisis since 1929 and destroyed the livelihoods and dreams of countless people. A German idiom, used as a retort to something one finds utterly insignificant, is: ‘Who cares if a sack of rice falls over in China?’ Today, if China sneezes, the whole world catches a cold.

The first people who caught Covid-19 in Wuhan were those working or shopping at the Huanan Seafood Market. As the Chinese say, this sort of market sells everything that can swim and is not a ship, everything that has four legs and is not a table, and everything that can fly and is not an aeroplane. In other words, it sells not just seafood, but crocodiles, dogs, bamboo rats ... and bats (though, because of Covid-19, the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture intends to take dogs and bats off the list of edible animals).<sup>12</sup> The Wuhan Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (WHCDC) is located only 300 metres away from the market. The fact that the centre’s laboratories also carry out work on bats has led to the theory that infected animals may have found their way from the lab to the market, and that the virus might even have emerged from experiments

carried out at the WHCDC. Alternatively, an employee might have become infected accidentally and then brought the virus to the market. 'I consider this very unlikely', says the virologist Christian Drosten, head of the Institute of Virology at the Charité in Berlin (and, since the outbreak of the pandemic, a German celebrity more famous than most popstars). 'Chinese laboratories work the same way as we do, with safety work benches where cell cultures are kept in certain areas. And from these work areas no air can escape. And even if some air did escape - let's assume that there is an accident - people are still wearing respirator hoods and only breathe in air from the laboratory that has been filtered and where no virus can get through.'<sup>13</sup> We should keep in mind, though, that Drosten is a virologist, not a sinologist, and therefore is not necessarily familiar with the sometimes relaxed attitude towards rules in China.

There is another laboratory, the Wuhan Institute of Virology, that carries out far more advanced research (and deals with more dangerous materials) than the WHCDC. But it is located far outside the city centre, 14 kilometres away from the Huanan Seafood Market. In 2017, the renowned scientific journal *Nature* wrote:

A laboratory in Wuhan is on the cusp of being cleared to work with the world's most dangerous pathogens. ... Some scientists outside China worry about pathogens escaping, and the addition of a biological dimension to geopolitical tensions between China and other nations. But Chinese microbiologists are celebrating their entrance to the elite cadre empowered to wrestle with the world's greatest biological threats.<sup>14</sup>

The institute was the first laboratory in China to work at the highest biosafety level, BSL-4 (biosafety level 4), a fact that has further fuelled suspicions that something might have gone wrong. The *Nature* article quotes Tim Trevan,

the founder of CHROME Biosafety and Biosecurity, a company based in the US state of Maryland, as saying that an open culture is important for keeping BSL-4 labs safe. Trevan wonders how such a culture could be achieved in China, a society that emphasizes hierarchy: “Diversity of viewpoint, flat structures where everyone feels free to speak up and openness of information are important”, he says.’<sup>15</sup> *Nature* later updated the article with an editor’s note, first in January 2020 and then again in March 2020. The note now says:

We are aware that this story is being used as the basis for unverified theories that the novel coronavirus causing COVID-19 was engineered. There is no evidence that this is true; scientists believe that an animal is the most likely source of the coronavirus.<sup>16</sup>

On Twitter, the spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Zhao Lijian, suggested another theory: ‘It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan.’<sup>17</sup> American soldiers had taken part in the Military World Games in Wuhan between 18 and 27 October 2019.<sup>18</sup>

On 17 April 2020, the Chinese government stated that there had been 3,896 deaths from Covid-19 in Wuhan.<sup>19</sup> One of the victims was Li Wenliang, the doctor who had been courageous enough to pass on the information about the new coronavirus. He was only thirty-three years old, and left behind a child and a pregnant wife. The Communist Party, of which he had been a member, posthumously declared him a ‘martyr’.<sup>20</sup> Had the party learned from its mistakes? Just a few days before he died, Li Wenliang had said: ‘A healthy society should accept more than one voice.’<sup>21</sup> Had the party taken Li’s remarks on board?



In the interview from which we quoted above, Ai Fen, the director of the emergency department at the Central Hospital of Wuhan, describes how the coronavirus outbreak was covered up. In China, the interview was published online on 10 March 2020 by the journal *Renwu* ('Personality'), but within three hours it was taken down by the authorities. Being familiar with such suppression tactics, many Chinese internet users had taken screenshots of the article and posted them on social media. To throw off the detection technology used by the censors, they modified the images, for example by adding emojis.<sup>22</sup>

In her *Wuhan Diary*, Fang Fang says: 'Deeply engrained habitual behaviours, like reporting the good news while hiding the bad, preventing people from speaking the truth, forbidding the public from understanding the true nature of events, and expressing a disdain for individual lives, have led to massive reprisals against our society, untold injuries against our people.'<sup>23</sup> In China, Fang Fang's book has only been published online, and has been repeatedly censored: 'I'm not sure if I'll be able to send anything out through my Weibo account. It wasn't too long ago that I had my account shut down ... I tried to complain to Sina, the company that runs Weibo, yet there is really no way to get through to them, never mind file a complaint.'<sup>24</sup>

Fang Fang is not a dissident. She avoids any criticism of the all-powerful Xi Jinping. Her novels tell the stories of ordinary people, and that has made her a well-known figure in China. She was chairperson of the Hubei Provincial Writers' Association, which gave her a certain degree of protection. However, she has frequently been attacked on the internet by fanatical communists - she calls them 'left-wing extremists' - often using obscene or misogynist language. Even though the official mission of the censors is



to 'keep the internet clean', they delete her considered contributions but not the insults directed against her.

The censorship authorities are much tougher on ordinary Chinese citizens. For instance, following the outbreak of the virus, the Wuhan businessman Fang Bin (no relation) began to film the new reality of everyday life in his city and upload the videos to the internet from his mobile phone. They show overcrowded hospitals, with dozens of people surrounding reception desks desperately seeking help. With no more space on the wards, patients lie on gurneys in the corridors. People can be heard sobbing and screaming. Fang Bin asks a young woman who is staring at her mother how the mother is doing: 'She is already dead', she says. In a minibus outside a hospital, he spots several of the deceased in body bags. His last video shows five policemen attempting to enter his flat. They want to ask him 'a few questions'. Since 9 February 2020, nothing has been seen or heard of Fang Bin. Others who posted videos, for example the lawyer Chen Qiushi, have also disappeared without a trace.<sup>[25](#)</sup>

*CoroNation* is a documentary by the artist Ai Weiwei, made using material recorded for him by residents of Wuhan. From loudspeakers in front of a crematorium, one hears the following announcement: 'Family members of the deceased with resident identity card numbers beginning 420111 and 420105, please come to Tianxiao Hall and queue up for the formalities.' Dozens of relatives sit in a long row on plastic chairs. 'If the leaders of Wuhan had closed down the city earlier, there would not be so many lost souls walking around', a young woman complains:

If a father or mother dies, the life of the children is ruined. They are left behind and are alone. My father-in-law did not need to die. The government's mismanagement killed him. There are many cases like ours here. Some who died could not even be tested. They may not even have been counted as Covid victims. They simply died. That is the painful experience we have had. We were not allowed to say our goodbyes to our relatives. When we brought them to the entrance of the quarantine area, we did not know that this would be the last time we would see them. My father-in-law must have been very much in despair when he died. For our generation, those who lived through the pandemic, this will stay as a shadow darkening our hearts forever.<sup>26</sup>

With the relatives looking on, crematorium employees compress the bags containing the ashes of the dead, one bag for each, until they fit into the decorated wooden boxes which take the place of urns here. One employee wraps a red cloth around the box and hands it over to the relatives.

The film's first scene is a view of Wuhan's central train station from the air, shot by drone. High-speed trains, much more modern than German intercity trains, are parked, unable to operate out of the sealed-off city.

When we flew from Hamburg to London in September 2020 to visit Ai Weiwei, it was as though we were in a remake of his film. There were just one or two passengers in the front and rear rows of the Eurowings aircraft; the rows in the middle section were completely empty. After disembarking at Heathrow airport, we walked through silent corridors where there was hardly a soul to be seen.

In this last respect, the reality in Europe differs from that depicted in *CoroNation*. The film also contains a scene from an airport - Wuhan's, where, as in Heathrow, everyone is wearing a face mask. But in Wuhan there are plenty of

people and there is a lot of noise. The scene resembles the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games: teams wearing identical jackets follow signs with the names of their province on them. But these are not athletes. They are nursing staff, flown in from outside Wuhan. Locals with red armbands line the sides, applauding and chanting: 'Welcome Hebei! Thank you, Hebei!' - 'Welcome Sichuan!' - 'Come on Wuhan!' The film also reveals how carefully choreographed the scene is: 'Just hold the sign - don't talk too much', a young official instructs the members of the welcome committee. 'Do not spread any negative energy! You shouldn't even mention the situation with the virus. Simply say, "Thank you for coming." When you're on the bus, calm them down by pointing out some of the sights. Some of them are still attending nursing school. They are still children, so you need to cheer them up.'

At Heathrow, we hired a car and drove to Cambridge, where Ai Weiwei was now living after having spent some years in Berlin. The Gothic university buildings of Cambridge, which resemble cathedrals, were a surreal setting for our meeting. But we should not forget that among the alumni of Trinity College are the Cambridge Five - Kim Philby, Donald Maclean, Guy Burgess, Anthony Blunt and John Cairncross - a group of civil servants and MI6 agents who were recruited by the Soviet intelligence service (NKVD, later KGB) in the 1930s.

We stayed in the University Arms Hotel, which from the outside did not exactly look the part - it resembled an old theatre more than a hotel. We sat together in the hotel's library. 'It is a bizarre thing to say in these surroundings,' Ai Weiwei said, 'but in my youth we were taught Chairman Mao's phrase: the revolution needs only two instruments, the rifle and a pen - the latter meaning brainwashing. People will follow you because they have no other information.' What happened in Wuhan, he added, simply

followed this principle. 'A piece of information becomes proper information only if the party decides to disclose it.'

Following the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic, the Chinese leadership sacked some of the top officials in Hubei, the province in central China of which Wuhan is the capital. The writer Fang Fang saw this as scapegoating:

But right now what I want to say is that what you saw from those government officials in Hubei is actually what you would expect from most government cadres in China: They are all basically on the same level. It's not that they are somehow worse than other Chinese officials; they simply got dealt a worse hand. Officials in China have always let written directives guide their work, so once you take away the script they are at a complete loss as to how to steer the ship. If this outbreak had happened in another Chinese province, I'm sure the performance of those officials wouldn't be much different than what we are seeing here. When the world of officialdom skips over the natural process of competition, it leads to disaster; empty talk about political correctness without seeking truth from facts also leads to disaster; prohibiting people from speaking the truth and the media from reporting the truth leads to disaster; and now we are tasting the fruits of these disasters.<sup>27</sup>

China provided the blueprint for lockdowns around the world. The model was more or less copied by almost all countries. In Beijing in the first months of 2020, wearing a face mask was mandatory, even outside in the streets. Residential buildings were cordoned off. Not only an army of policemen, but also security guards from housing management companies, activists from the neighbourhood committees and volunteers wearing red armbands were all on patrol. Together, they formed a public-health police force, controlling entry to buildings, inspecting permits,

writing down the names of residents and visitors, and taking people's temperatures by holding thermometers to their foreheads.

In the following weeks, the system was perfected. Everyone had to install a phone app that gave the authorities access to identity card details and mobile phone numbers. These were used to create profiles of each person's movements. Every case of Covid-19 was recorded. A digital map on the mobile phone showed the location of infected individuals. Everyone entering a building had to scan his QR code. If the app produced a white tick inside a green circle, the person was allowed in. If someone was a confirmed case of Covid-19, the screen turned red. Anyone leaving the city had to self-isolate, which the app indicated by turning yellow. Red or yellow meant a person was not permitted to enter a supermarket – and in some cases not even their own flat.<sup>28</sup> Welcome to the brave new world of Covid.

The controls were not only aimed at containing the virus. A Chinese government document lists among possible crimes during the Covid outbreak not just stockpiling face masks and trading illegally in wild animals, but also the 'malicious fabrication of epidemic information, causing social panic, stirring up public sentiment, or disrupting social order, especially maliciously attacking the party and government, taking the opportunity to incite subversion of state power or overthrow of the socialist system'.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, the virus spread across the world. The next hotspot was Italy. Initially it was suspected, plausibly enough, that the outbreak was connected to the large numbers of Chinese immigrants there. From the 1980s onwards they had come to places like Prato, in Tuscany, where they built what is almost a small-scale version of China. They set up textile factories that employed their compatriots. There are streets in which all the restaurants

and shops are Chinese and the language spoken is almost exclusively Chinese. According to official figures, there are 25,768 Chinese people living in Prato today – at least a tenth of the population, and most likely the actual percentage is significantly higher, because many Chinese people live there illegally. Given their ongoing connections with family and friends in their native country, could it be that they brought the virus to Italy, perhaps on their return from a visit to China for the New Year celebrations? And did it then spread in the textile factories, with their poor ventilation and cramped working conditions? The figures do not support this theory. At just 0.07 per cent, the rate of infection in Prato was very low compared to other regions in Italy. By comparison, in Bergamo, which has only a very small Chinese population, the rate of infection reached 0.63 per cent.<sup>[30](#)</sup>

So who brought the virus to Italy? This question can't be answered: 'patient zero' is unknown. It is possible that the Covid measures themselves are responsible for this lack of knowledge. In early February 2020, Italy was the first European country to ban all direct flights to and from China. At that point, there had not yet been a single case of Covid-19 in Italy. To get round the ban, rich businesspeople in the economically strong north of Italy flew to China via third countries, and the authorities lost track.<sup>[31](#)</sup>

The Chinese stronghold of Prato nevertheless plays a role in the story of the coronavirus outbreak in Italy. When it began to spread there, Prato produced the most face masks. In addition, masks were sent from the People's Republic of China, while other EU countries prevented the export of masks to Italy in order to stockpile them for themselves. Around this time, a poll showed that a majority of Italians named China as Italy's best friend – and Germany and France as its worst enemies.<sup>[32](#)</sup>

Subsequently, in the course of 2020 and 2021, the number of Covid-19 cases continued to decline until there were hardly any cases in China, at least if the official statistics can be trusted. But in the US, where the president at the onset of the pandemic was a certain Donald Trump – whose suggested methods of treatment for Covid-19 included injecting patients with disinfectant – the figures were skyrocketing. By spring 2021, seventeen times more people had died in Germany than in China, despite the fact that China's population is many times that of Germany. And in Germany the numbers kept rising – not so in China. Even though the two countries' statistics cannot easily be compared because of the different ways in which they are compiled, and even if the People's Republic is not exactly a beacon of transparency, it cannot be denied that China's tough approach to fighting the coronavirus has been successful. The official news agency Xinhua is jubilant: 'Drawing on its institutional strength, China's decisive measures to control the outbreak are enlightening ... Under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, people from all walks of life have joined hands in fighting the epidemic with wisdom, action and morale. ... All these are vivid manifestations of China's system advantage.'<sup>33</sup>

These words express a feeling of superiority, a feeling that Xi Jinping also conveys to foreigners, including foreign entrepreneurs who come to China. Few know the country as well as Jörg Wuttke, president of the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China. Wuttke has lived in China for more than thirty years. When the coronavirus had practically disappeared there, but was still circulating in Germany, we had a Zoom meeting with him. From Beijing, he complained about unequal treatment: 'While 120,000 Chinese nationals with German residence permits can freely travel back and forth, foreigners who left the country over the Chinese New Year holidays have been stuck



abroad for months now – globally there are about 120,000 of them – and they even dutifully continue to pay their taxes here.’ Their visas were summarily declared invalid, and it is very difficult to get new ones.

When the pandemic broke out, there were racist attacks targeting Chinese and other Asian people in Europe and the US. Now, the situation is reversed: many Chinese people see foreigners in general as spreaders of the virus. The EU Chamber of Commerce in China reported on this discrimination in its *European Business in China Position Paper 2020/2021*. In spring 2020, some restaurants and bars were refusing entry to foreigners. Africans living in China are even worse off than the Europeans. In Guangzhou in particular, after some Covid-19 cases were detected in Nigerians, people were thrown out of their hotel rooms, and even flats, because of the colour of their skin.

The world watched as hospitals were built from scratch in Wuhan within a few days. After seventy-six days of quarantine, China’s leadership opened the city to the outside world again. Even a critically minded writer like Fang Fang admits: ‘The amount of energy the government later put into the quarantine and various other measures was indeed extremely effective.’<sup>34</sup>

Christian Drosten, Germany’s celebrity virologist, agrees: ‘No one in China asks whether someone feels that their freedom or civil rights are being infringed. Measures are simply taken. Without wanting to pass judgement on this, I can only say: from an epidemiological point of view, this certainly gives track-and-trace a resounding efficacy.’<sup>35</sup>

What should we believe? Did China’s system contaminate the world with the coronavirus? Or is China saving the world? Some people have already made up their minds. When a Chinese plane with three million respirator masks



and eighty-six ventilators landed in Hungary, the prime minister, Viktor Orbán, personally came to the airport and declared: 'This is impressive.'<sup>36</sup> On a similar occasion, Serbia's president, Aleksandar Vučić, kissed the Chinese flag and said: 'I believe my brother and friend Xi Jinping. The only country that can help us is China.'<sup>37</sup>

However, many people in the West take a different view – and not just Trump sympathizers, following his talk of the 'China virus'. Madeleine Albright, for instance – born in Prague to a Jewish family that had to flee the Nazis and then the communists – is one of them. She was the US's first female secretary of state, serving in Bill Clinton's government. When her memoir *Hell and Other Destinations* was published in 2020, we joined our colleague Martin Scholz of *Die Welt* to talk to her via Zoom. 'China has messed up', she said, 'beginning with the way China communicated about the virus and how it treated its own population, for instance the doctor who was not allowed to speak about the threat posed by the coronavirus. I don't think China should get any recognition for that.

Democracies are able to deal with this pandemic, provided their political leaders understand that the scientific facts need to be taken into account – for instance, the fact that a virus does not know any borders, that cooperation with other countries is necessary in order to get a grip on it. The question is not whether democracies or authoritarian regimes are better at finding a solution. It is a question of being competent or incompetent. I would find it fundamentally wrong to claim that dictatorships were more efficient in fighting this pandemic. Throughout history, we have seen too often what happens when countries turn into dictatorships.'

Doesn't the example of China show that dictatorships are better able to deal with a pandemic than democratic countries?

'But there are democracies that have dealt very well with this pandemic', Albright replied, referring to New Zealand or Taiwan.

Ai Weiwei, by contrast, had something positive to say about the way the Chinese fought the virus. 'I admire this efficiency', he told us. For him, his documentary was a case study. Despite knowing his country so well, he was unsure about how it would cope with this emergency. 'China is the only country which may come to a standstill or perform a U-turn at an instant. From the number one, Xi Jinping, down to the people living in the remotest village, everyone acts in unison. And they move like an acrobat who can quickly change his position without breaking a bone.'

Lenin, Ai Weiwei said, thought that the imperialists would inadvertently teach repressed peoples the skills they needed to defeat their oppressors. Now, that is what the West is confronting in China. Intoxicated by the promise of China as a gigantic market, the West shared its technologies with the communists: 'Now China is laughing about the West, because China has the same technology but is better able to use it. The leadership takes simple, clear decisions, justifies them on the ground that "lives are at stake", and no one can say no.'

During the first months of the pandemic, Germans had to provide their personal details on small slips of paper when visiting bars. This itself was something of a health hazard, with many people using the same pen - and even then, some people gave false names. In China, by contrast, the process is contactless, using QR codes provided by the smartphone health app, the use of which, of course, is mandatory. Because the details of peoples' movements are recorded, chains of infection can be established immediately and automatically. In Germany, public health staff use phones to trace the contacts of infected

individuals, and they can inform only those known to the infected person – they cannot trace chance encounters. At best, those at risk are contacted within a couple of days, but in most cases they are not reached at all. Compare this to the People’s Republic, which makes use of every digital technology at its disposal to fight the pandemic, and at the same time to perfect its form of digital dictatorship. Ai Weiwei told us a story about an artist friend of his: ‘The authorities were trying to reach him, but he had turned off his mobile, so they phoned a stranger who happened to be sitting next to him on the bus: “Pass your phone to the man sitting next to you.”’

The coronavirus handed Xi Jinping an opportunity to carry out a unique experiment. It stabilized China – and set the rest of the world on a road to ruin. While the West stumbled from one lockdown to another, in China’s nightclubs young people began to celebrate again without the need to keep a distance from each other. In early 2021, the number of cinema-goers in China reached an all-time high.<sup>[38](#)</sup>

Ai Weiwei emphasized that he very much likes living in Cambridge, where he is not threatened with eighteen years in prison – the sentence handed to Ren Zhiqiang, a long-standing member of the Communist Party, in 2020. (Ren, a real estate entrepreneur, a blogger and the son of China’s former vice-minister for commerce, had called Xi Jinping a ‘clown’ for his early handling of the epidemic.) ‘But’, Ai continued, ‘I am very concerned about whether this democracy will be able to survive this. In the time that China builds ten airports, Berlin does not manage even one. And even when it is at long last completed, no one is flying any longer.’ Is Covid-19 a wake-up call? ‘Yes, but sometimes people go back to sleep after the alarm rings, or they smash the clock.’

Ai Weiwei knows the secret-police minders who were responsible for him in Beijing very well. When he was still living there, they stood outside his door day and night. They even brought his mother presents on festive days. There is a certain mutual respect here, which has partly to do with the fact that Ai Weiwei sees himself unambiguously as Chinese: 'China is my nation. I never changed my passport, although I could easily obtain citizenship in a Western country. I am not anti-Chinese.' When they heard about his Covid documentary, one of the officers texted him: 'This creates so much trouble for us you might as well have punched a hole in the sky.' The topic is very sensitive, the officer said, and the West will use it against China.

After Ai Weiwei sent the documentary to the officer, he received another message: 'Brother! I watched the film, it is pretty good. The normal people working and living through the pandemic reflect the true situation of ordinary people, how they react to the epidemic. At the same time, the film shows the ideological differences with regard to surveillance, stability, and care, which are unique in our country.'

Ai Weiwei's *CoroNation* is available on the video platform Vimeo - Amazon and Netflix turned it down. Nor did the film festivals in Venice, Toronto and New York want to screen it. Ai Weiwei regards these as acts of anticipatory obedience: the Chinese market is important, and the companies and festival organizers understand that promoting the film could have negative consequences. Ai's minder in Beijing has another theory. His text message read: 'I personally don't think the reasons are economic. Rather, they fear that the film shows the audience how successfully China fights against the epidemic. That is in sharp contrast to the way the West deals with Covid.'

Christopher Jahns is an economics professor and CEO of the Berlin-based XU Group. His main area of expertise is digitalization, and he has taught, among other places, at the renowned Tongji University in Shanghai. In October 2020, this fit and healthy fifty-one-year-old caught Covid-19, not in China but in Germany. 'An experience you can do without', he told us. 'There's no comparison with a flu. With a flu, you have a quick onset of symptoms, then they slowly ebb away. In the case of Covid, I had a few symptoms during the first couple of days, incredibly strong pain in the limbs, for instance - I mean really strong, and I am usually never ill. Then there was a progressive worsening. On the sixth or seventh day I woke up suffering from fairly extreme shortness of breath. I then had my lungs X-rayed at the hospital. They sent me back home, and did not have to put me on a ventilator. But after taking a few steps up the stairs, I had to stop and rest - and I am normally a sportsman. After exchanging a few words with someone, I needed to catch my breath. It makes you worry, when you see how the illness is getting worse. You think: today I am short of breath, and tomorrow I'll be in hospital because I need to be put on a ventilator. This is what makes this illness so unpredictable. I suffered for more than two weeks with this.'

According to Jahns, the fact that China came out of the Covid crisis so much quicker than Germany is '1,000%' down to the country's extensive digitalization. 'In Chinese cities, I stood in front of 18-metre-high screens, showing energy consumption, traffic flows, water used, and all in real time. With this kind of intelligence, it is easier to isolate parts and areas of a city, but you can also monitor the spread of infection. The major disadvantage from our point of view is the transparent citizen - but under such conditions, you have very different possibilities for controlling individuals. In China, you can detect and track a

person who is Covid positive in real time and second by second. And those who fall ill can at every moment, wherever they may be in China, consult a doctor via WeChat and book an appointment with whatever kind of doctor they need.'

In Germany, Jahns's experience was very different. After he reported his infection, it took a full six days before the German coronavirus app informed his wife, who was with him at home during that time: the app showed about 200 contacts with a Covid-19 positive patient. 'The health authorities then rang me a week after the two-week [isolation] period had ended. I was in a telephone conference and asked them to ring again at 5pm. They replied that by then the office would be closed. And tomorrow all slots were booked. They never got in touch with me again.'

On our train to Berlin at the end of October 2020 - in fact, the day before the Chancellor Merkel and the prime ministers of the federal states agreed the second lockdown - there were only two other passengers in our Deutsche Bahn carriage. At least here it was probably impossible to catch Covid. We were on our way to talk to Sigmar Gabriel, the former vice-chancellor, foreign minister and minister of the environment. We met him in a town house whose architectural style is a mixture of early classicism and Baroque. The German physicist and chemist Heinrich Gustav Magnus once lived there. Today, it is the home of the Atlantik-Brücke, a non-profit association that promotes US-German relations, and whose members are decision-makers from the worlds of politics and economics. Sigmar Gabriel is the association's chairman. But more important with regard to the Communist Party of China (CPC) and its general secretary, Xi Jinping, is the fact that between 2009 and 2017 Gabriel was the chairman of the German Social Democratic Party.