

Speech of Prof. Klaus Lehmann:

Chinas Cultural Potential in the View of a western Friend

on the presentation of my book „Teaching Design – Design Teaching“ at Jiangsu Phoenix Fine Arts Publishing House

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1. Grateful for being here

Yes, it has been a great enrichment in my life, to be invited to China and being welcomed everywhere.

It all goes back to a very early student of mine, it was Liu Guanzhong, who on his return to China, opened the first Industrial Design Course in Beijing.

About his importance , I don't have to tell you, you know him and his presence is felt everywhere

He and his students, now already Profs all over China, have opened so many doors to me.

So I came to China for the first time in 1985 and kept returning almost every year until now. That is more than 30 years.

2. Who I am

I am a designer and a Design-educator at the State Academy of Art and Design in Stuttgart, where I have been teaching for over 30 years.

I there established the Design Course , teaching many foreign students with many of whom I am still in contact.

Now I am retired.

3. About my work in China

I have been invited to many Universities, because Industrial Design was considered an important subject for the up and coming Chinese industry.

I have done many workshops there.

And the book we are presenting today , reflects the workshops,

dealing mainly with design fundamentals.

They have been my main research, my educational contribution and I have been asked in China.

to put it down in a book, encouraging me to write it in English

for a Chinese audience. And now we are presenting its bilingual result.

I also see myself as a matchmaker, introducing and creating contact to the ideologies of young western thinking.

4. Not about Art and Design

No, I don't , want to talk about art and design, which actually is my profession, and about which I have talked on many occasions,

about what is usually called design, about its technology and methods, to make products acceptable to the consumer,

No, neither do I want to talk about its economic importance, nor about its moral. where its code becomes a national or global dimension.

5. Should Chinas copying-attitude be my topic?

Yes, it's a violently discussed topic in the western world, because it has its economic implications.

I know, that this is a obvious case of two different cultures.

I have thought about this in great length, often lectured and written about it, but feel, it should not be my topic today.

I dare to take a very large view, and the occasion today challenges me, to look at China and its cultural potential, telling you about what I have learned in China in my own words.

I would like you to consider it as a contribution to Chinas self confidence.

6. What China taught me:

- its economic power,
- its craft tradition,
- its adaptability,
- its different thinking strategies
- its learning culture

- its economic power.**

There is no doubt, that Chinas economy is very powerful. It has become the worlds factory. And the recent five year plan aims to develop China into the “leading innovation power”, meaning not only “made in China, but also designed in China,”

- a very wise and ambitious intention.

---its craft tradition.

China has a long tradition, and numerous objects show great skill and art in handling materials and tools. Just think of porcelain, the white gold, which in English language is rightly called “China”.

Craft products are the evolutionary result of generations of craftsmen, mostly anonymous, who contributed to its improvement.

Maybe you think, that crafts have no value in a modern industrial society.

But I want you to recognize, that the crafts are the basics for all industrial inventions.

Not because of its past tradition nor because of its beauty, but because of its heuristic potential for the future.

(Heuristic meaning the art of invention)

---its adaptability

The Chinese, so I feel, have always been able, to adopt new ideas, their adaptability has made you very flexible, you have been able to react to any new impulse.

That's not easy, when you are proud of your own tradition. conserving it, but want to meet a new challenge, opening yourself.

In the world of permanent global change, I am convinced, adaptability is the strategy to survive.

And you have the genes!

---its different thinking strategies

Besides short term tactics and long term strategies, the chinese posses , in the view of Harro von Senger, (the most read Researcher on Chinese matters) another level of thinking, Moulüe, which goes back to master Suns scripts “the Art of War”, probably the first military tactic, 2500 years before our our time (Zeitrechnung), and stating, that “the best war is the one never done”.

Moulüe is a thinking strategy, mostly unknown in the western world, which shows to me, that ways of thinking have their culture and their history.

And China is rich on it!

---its learning culture

I know of no country where learning is considered as important as in China.

I have seen parents with their children in front of Tsing hua University, telling them what a wonderful achievement it would be, to study there, and I know, that when a child has

successfully passed exams, the whole family would financially support it.

I also know of the civil servant entrance examination, the examination which opens you a career in public service.

It was open to everybody. Its criteria and its examiners have been known and held in every province in China, annually.

Some of the examination places can still be seen today:

One thousand boxes surrounded by walls for the annual two day Beamtenprüfung, which, and this is remarkable, started around 400 ! (and was finished 1905)

It was the effort to furnish civil servants with knowledge, national history, poetry and language and may be pride.

7. My final thoughts.

One of the frequent questions after my lectures from students has been:

“How can we marry western technology with Chinese values.”

Of course I didn't have a recipe but the question made me think. I felt, that there was a uncertainty about the historical value of their cultural heritage, about which they all seem to be proud of. But obviously there was a missing link, a gap to a modern industrial society.

I remembered that Japan succeeded to translate its tradition into a modern society, where as China was more engaged in demonstrating its tradition and conserving it.

I therefore feel, that China, though economically strong, is still searching for its cultural identity.

My talk therefore wants to encourage you:

- to think about the wonderful heritage of your ancestors,

•to encourage you, to bring it alive, renew and modernise it,

•to strive, becoming a valuable member of a global community, where each nation contributes its values,

(..... in peace, I want to add)

And China has a lot to contribute.!

The end