

The Future of China's Design

By Weng Ling

With the strong momentum of economic globalization and urbanization across the world, the concept of “design” has reached rapidly to every part of urban life in China today, influencing stealthily the way people view beauty, live and even think. But pitifully, since its new birth, China’s design has never escaped itself from the humidity of “made in China” and original creation crisis posed by copy cats. This is not commensurate to China’s increasingly uplifted “national image” in the world and has put the country into an embarrassing situation that its vast consumption market has been rapidly occupied by internationally strong design powers. And Japan is just one of those powers.

It is a well-known fact that Japan, a sparsely-populated neighboring country, rose to one of the developed countries and one of the most important players in the world design industry from an abysmal condition as a defeated country, in only 30 years between the end of Korean War in 1953 when it started modern design and the 1980s. Having influenced the design industry in the Scandinavian countries, Japan has also written a legendary story in modern design history. Whether in graphic design, 3D animation, advertising, fashion, auto design, interior design, or in new media, new materials, new science and technology, or in architecture and environmental design in particular, Japan has produced an impressive number of designers. Their overwhelming triumph comes from a simple Zen character which combines perfectly the traditions as an oriental nation and modern industry in the western world. It is this accomplishment that embarrasses China most given that Japan, much influenced by China’s ancient culture, has surpassed its predecessor as a symbol of oriental culture. Therefore, there is no exaggeration to say that China must first and foremost study and learn from Japan if it intends to make breakthroughs in design.

Japan’s tremendous success in design can be attributed to complicated historical and social reasons. However, we consider the following factors as the best source of inspiration for China: although Japan is younger from a historical point of view, it managed to avoid the complexity from the cultural shock and focused on one side. Instead of absorbing simple elements, Japan simplified and selected the finest parts of traditional culture and most workable parts of modernity, sought a break-down and presented a carefully refined and universally accepted “prototype” to the entire world. In this process, the “extremism” and “group fighting” survival art embedded deep in the Yamato nation has also been included. By comparison, China is firmly built on a complicated and plural culture that has experienced numerous divergence and convergence in its prolonged history of 5,000 years. To be frank, China has so rich spiritual treasures that each of them can establish itself as a “school”. However, the fact is that modern and contemporary China can be almost ignored when it comes to contribution to the world design. It is right to say that on one hand we are fortunate to have a profound tradition, but on the other hand we are beset with a heavy burden grown from such a tradition. Just bearing this reality in mind, Beijing Center for the Arts (BCA) presents “Designing Design” that aims to probe and expose the design and thinking process of key contemporary Japanese

designers instead of the finished design works (commodities). At BCA, we encourage the learning of the way these designers think and work purely and earnestly in the face of the topics of “contemporary translation of traditions” and “how to generate productivity from design”, rather than self-abating icon worship. This is the first point.

Second, BCA is a nature-minded team that stands behind environment protection. Kenya Hara, as the art director of MUJI brand, focuses more on green environmental protection than on a sense of simplicity in design and work production. Meanwhile the other internationally influential designers such as Kengo Kuma, Naoto Fukasawa and Shigeru Ban have also brought new materials and new experimental sci-tech designs, leading us to a greener, more harmonious, healthy and sustainable life style. Actually, not only in the cross-disciplinary exhibitions and projects such as “Un-natural”, “Shanshui”, “3D City” and “Omni-dimensional Design in China”, but also in the contemporary art exhibitions like “Beyond Reminiscence”, “Landscape” and “In and Beyond Mountains”, BCA has never ignored its faith in respecting and protecting nature and harmonious co-existence between human and nature while holding its art aspiration of “building contemporary designs on traditions”.

We have been involved, with love and aspiration, in contemporary art and design for all the time. If the power of contemporary art lies in deep introspection of the reality, then the charm of design is its active construction of the reality. Just in the wake of the Japanese earthquake when we contacted Kenya Hara’s studio in Japan, every member of our Chinese team was so touched by his assistant’s first response: “Please do not worry because we will surely finish the exhibition preparations on time”. In China today, there is so much said but little done about design, not to mention perseverance.

From Shanghai Biennial in 2002 that put forward the issue of city under the theme of “Urban Creation” to our successful efforts to facilitate cooperation between world top architects like Kengo Kuma, Zaha Hadid and MVRDV and China, I have always been expecting to help promote the inclusive growth among architecture, design and art. To tell the truth, these efforts proved to be not so productive. Western designers tend to take a lopsided view of China’s design or amplify the capriiousness of the developing China. Those Japanese peers, with a much similar cultural tradition, cannot capture the spiritual aspiration and spatial taste of contemporary Chinese as well. Therefore, I began to reflect on the future of China’s design, which I believe should be a new force that combines advanced technologies of the western world, fine techniques of Japan, “human and nature as one” view over nature in the orient, dream for the future of contemporary Chinese and contributing factors in all civilizations. Its designers should be a creative group that comes from different nationalities, ethnicities, geographic areas, knowledge backgrounds, identities and cultural backgrounds. This new force should be conceived in contemporary China. As a matter of fact, there is no other country like China in the world that could be developed into such a vast platform of possibilities.

A new era of design is expected to start from China!