

GOETHE-MEDAL 2023

LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR YI-WEI KENG

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WEIMAR, 28. AUGUST 2023

- Check against delivery -

First of all, thank you very much for the invitation to the awarding of the Goethe Medal to Yi-Wei Keng. It is a great pleasure and honour for me to be able to say a few words about the awardee.

I still remember our first meeting in Taipei in December 2014 very well. Yi-Wei Keng, artistic director of the Taipei Arts Festival since 2012, had invited me to A Cai's shop, 阿才的店 to work with the then director of the Goethe-Institut Taipei, Dr Clemens Treter, to devise a workshop for dramaturgy for the upcoming Taipei Arts Festival 2015.

Since the 1990s, A Cai's shop is – or sadly, until it moved in 2018, was – an alternative left-wing scene, a meeting place for activists, journalists, members of the extra-parliamentary opposition, exiles from China as well as artists and writers. An evocative place in an old wooden house, the walls full of theatre and exhibition posters, people sitting tightly packed on small chairs, it's “re nao 熱鬧 – hot and loud” – as situations of ultimate well-being are described in Chinese, the food down-to-earth and excellent.

Yi-Wei Keng likes to invite his guests to this or similar places, where one can directly feel the pulse of Taiwan's relatively young and admirably vital civil society. There is no doubt that Yi-Wei Keng has been at home in this milieu since his student days. Deeply rooted in the region and excellently networked, cosmopolitan and approachable, socially committed, extraordinarily versatile in his interests, and at the same time pragmatically inclined, with a sure eye for what is feasible, he is, as it were, a “man with compound eyes,” to quote the title of a great Taiwanese novel by Wu Ming-Yi, which Yi-Wei once recommended to me and which was published in German translation last year by Matthes & Seitz.

Born in the late 1960s on the east coast of Taiwan in Hualien – literally overlooking the endless expanse of the Pacific Ocean – Yi-Wei came to Taipei at the end of the 1980s to study civil engineering at the renowned National Taiwan University. It was an eventful time in Taiwan: After 38 years, due to growing social pressure, martial law was lifted in 1987 and a

democratic electoral system was introduced for the first time in 1990 after massive student protests. Taiwanese society underwent a profound democratic transformation, a peaceful system change and is still one of the most vibrant democracies in Asia today.

Civil engineering was unable to satisfy Yi-Wei's agile, curious, and open mind. His passions were literature and philosophy. He was a great reader and delved into Daoism and Buddhism, reading Heidegger, Kafka, and much more. In a 2018 interview, he explained his motivation for doing so with a reference to the socially critical writer Lu Xun, who, when asked why he was studying stone inscriptions from the Wei dynasty, replied, "For no reason, I just copied them."

But he had no money to study philosophy abroad, so he returned to Hualien, where he worked at a local TV station. As soon as he had enough money together, he embarked on an extensive journey through Europe and finally arrived in Prague, the city of Franz Kafka, whom he holds in such high esteem, and which was also experiencing profound social and political change in the 1990s. He stayed there for two years, studying at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague from 1997 to 1999.

He has made all these experiences bear fruit in different fields. In 2012, when he became artistic director of the Taipei Arts Festival, he initiated a series of international co-productions for the first time in Taipei. Instead of showing only finished productions, he invited international teams of directors from France, Japan, Germany, and other countries, to develop productions in cooperation with the Taiwanese theatre scene. Under his direction, the festival became a place of transnational and cross-border dialogue; the events are embedded in a dense network of accompanying discursive events. Yi-Wei Keng is present everywhere, he noticeably seeks dialogue with the audience, he asks questions, moderates, explains, mediates wherever the opportunity arises.

At the same time, he was and is also active in many ways as an author and editor. In addition to books on Bob Wilson, he published a *Short History of Modern Mime*, he translated Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*, the plays of Václav Havel and Franz Kafka's *Letters to Felice* into Chinese. That's just a tiny selection.

In closing, I would like to quote a passage from these same letters to Felice. On 22 January 1913, Kafka, a contemporary of Lu Xun, writes how he "ran in a dream to a bridge or a quay railing, seized two telephone earpieces that happened to be lying there on the railing and held them to his ears, and continually demanded nothing but to hear news from 'Pontus,' but received nothing and nothing from the telephone but a sad, powerful, wordless song and the roar of the sea. I well understood that it was not possible for human voices to force their way through these sounds, but I did not desist and did not leave."

News from Pontus: they are dispatches from the exiled Roman poet Ovid, poetic messages that cannot be heard. But there is the narrator who does not cease to listen and – one could speculate – eavesdrops on the murmur of the sea in the “telephone earpieces” and brings the presence of art to the people. Across all borders. Such a listener is the book and theatre man, the publicist and curator, the translator and dramaturge Yi-Wei Keng, and his manifold services to art and civil society indeed deserve nothing less than a Goethe Medal. Congratulations, Yi-Wei Keng!