

INTERVIEW WITH PHILIPPE KERN, DIRECTOR AND FOUNDER, KEA “China recognises importance of creative industries”

By Nathalie Vandystadt

Brussels-based KEA, a European consulting firm specialised in culture and the creative industries, has just opened an office in Shenzhen, China, which has become one of the country's richest cities following the influx of Chinese nationals and foreign investors. European creativity is often minimised but can boost trade with the Chinese, who wish to develop their own cultural industries, KEA Director Philippe Kern told *Europolitics*.

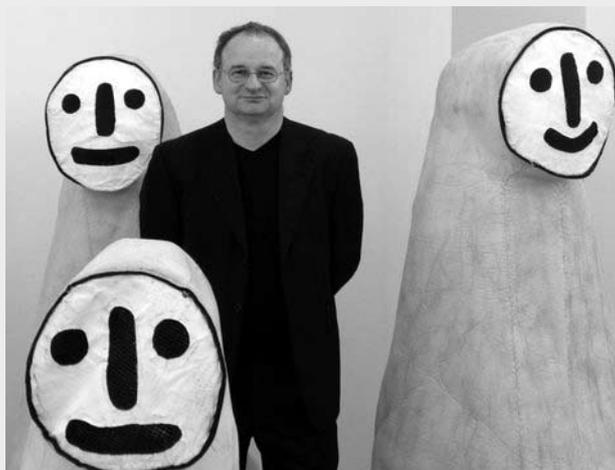
What prompted you to work with China?

While Europe overflows with creative ideas, the Chinese are much more oriented towards immediate and low-cost production, trade relations and fast ways to make money. So Europe has an extraordinary competitive advantage that is not being tapped into enough or even discouraged as this crisis continues. Conversely, the Chinese have recognised the importance of culture and the creative industries. This is even a priority policy for its leaders, who encourage local and regional public authorities and private enterprises to invest to help China develop a value-added creative economy. The Chinese therefore want to work with Europe because for them it is a place of creation, design, fashion, cultural events and so on. Six years ago, China's Trade Ministry invited me to present studies carried out in Europe on the economics of culture. He then put me in touch with different cultural players in China.

Who are these different players in the sphere of culture?

Trade shows, for example, in the fields of fashion and design. China wants to become a leader in Asia in these areas. The Chinese have also developed huge cinema and video game infra-

structures. They have built theatres and opera houses. But they don't yet have the content, the programming. Above all, they often lack the skills needed to manage these infrastructures, organise shows and events and ensure that the infrastructure is occupied year-round. The management of



Kern: “Europe overflows with creative ideas”

cultural and heritage institutions is a know-how in Europe but there is often a lack of awareness of this specialty and this competence.

Has the EU not taken any steps?

I have come across the existence of a trade programme between China and the EU, adopted at the time China joined the World Trade Organisation [in 2002]. China was still a developing country. This programme still exists. It is financed by the EU but managed by Chinese authorities. I suggested to the Chinese Trade Ministry that it should include culture and creative industries in order to institutionalise exchanges. Three years ago, the Chinese wrote to the EU Delegation in Beijing to say that they wanted to discuss this possibility. But at first they received no answer. The EU representatives wondered what this industry was. Fortunately, things have changed and since 2012 culture is included in the programme of support for trade between the EU and China.

This nevertheless illustrates the lack

of comprehension in Europe of our competitive advantage and the possibility of progressing with the Chinese on issues related to culture and creation. We don't need to leave the field to the Americans, whose globalised entertainment industry frightens the Chinese authorities. There is also demand in China for expertise in heritage preservation. They want to rediscover their cultural resources, such as ceramics, designed today just as they were in the seventh century. Embroidery artisans still work in the same way as a thousand years ago. But these real artists may disappear because the country's policy does not attach enough value to these activities and this unique cultural capital. Interaction of public policies in the area of heritage promotion between the EU and China still has to be developed.

There can be no creative economy without recognition of the work of talented people and respect for the cultural heritage.

What specific projects are you planning in China?

We are specialists in culture and the creative industries at European level, with an unmatched network of contacts in the industry and institutions. We can therefore serve as a single point of contact for access to all the competences that make up Europe's wealth. Chinese partners often ask us to help them identify European creative artists and bring them to China for exhibits or visits to study business or institutional partnerships. For the fair in Shenzhen in May, for example, KEA will head a delegation of 12 European designers who will show their work and meet Chinese producers and distributors to develop business partnerships.

Chinese cities seek our consulting expertise to make them more attractive and enhance the value of their cul-

tural resources, as is done in European cities (Barcelona, Berlin, Amsterdam, Helsinki, Nantes, Lille, etc).

Do the Chinese have specific commercial demands?

If the contract is in euro, there are no specific problems, other than the fact that the funds often have to transit via Hong Kong, the hub of international trade. So this is a bit more restrictive due to the non-convertibility of China's currency. Other than that, the difficulty with China is more cultural in nature. In Europe, a consultant tries to understand a potential client's needs and makes an offer. Then they agree on the price. In China, things proceed differently. Personal relationship is more important than the content of a contract. The parties have to get to know each other to start, share a lot of meals and socialise together (eg have foot massages). In short, they have to establish a relationship of trust that will then serve as a foundation for a potential business relationship. This takes longer. Another thing is that Chinese clients are not accustomed

to working with consultants. They want immediate and tangible results. Selling one strategy in five to develop their activities is more complicated... That is also the challenge: to understand cultural differences and adapt to them.

What impact can censorship by the Communist party have on your activities?

I try to avoid sensitive subjects, like cinema and publishing, where there can be demands in terms of censorship. It is a fact that we work on projects having a more commercial dimension related to building the value of creativity in industrial production, although safeguarding of the cultural heritage, development of cultural diversity and management of artistic institutions come within public policies.

To what extent do you take human rights into consideration in your projects?

If the Chinese want to open up to the creative industries they are going to have to accept individual freedoms, artistic expression and the like. A cre-

ative society cannot be developed if creativity and talent are stifled. The Chinese authorities are aware of this. They still have to develop trust in their local talents. The regime is what it is and you are not asked to espouse the ideology to become established in Shenzhen. Creative tensions are present across the country. The key enemies today seem to be the foreign social networks like Twitter or Facebook, which are banned. For KEA, ethical conduct, whether in Europe or China, is to defend culture, heritage, diversity, talents, cultural institutions and creative industries. It also comprises encouraging commercial trade and a dialogue of civilisations. Culture has to be at the heart of policies. This is valid in Europe and China. China has made development of these cultural industries a political and economic priority. A society is not viable without a solid cultural foundation and artistic vision. The economy alone cannot drive it. As Europe struggles with its slow economy it could take inspiration from China's pro-active approach. ■

EUROPOLITICS

**GET MORE FOR LESS
BENEFIT FROM OUR REDUCED
GROUP SUBSCRIPTION OFFER**

Tel: +32 (2) 737.77.09
subscriptions@europolitics.info

**Save €€€ on your
subscriptions**