

Hanami and Staying Power

Laudatio zur Verleihung des Eugen und Ilse-Seibold Preis am 20. Mai 2011
in Berlin

When the Jury for the Seibold Prize met in February this year, we could not have had any idea that this year was going to be a very difficult year for the Japanese people. The only reason we came together was to select laureates for this year's Eugen and Ilse Seibold Prize.

I was asked some time later to name a title for this speech and I thought about the highs and lows in the sciences, the joy and the frustration and, therefore, Hanami, this happy cherry blossom celebration and staying power, never give up mentality, came into my mind.

A few days ago now, a picture in the media caught my eyes: A cherry tree in Japan, in full blossom, beautiful, and below the tree a devastated house and garden, a destroyed and overturned car.

Nature in all its beauty above the frightening signature of nature with all its uncontrollable, destructive forces, the contrast could not be greater. But this picture showed, without words, hope and belief that things will turn to a brighter future. In the last few months, our thoughts have been with the people of Japan and they still are with the Japanese people. The force of this ongoing catastrophe first left us speechless and the only thing we could do was to offer our help and support whenever it was needed and asked for.

But again, there is this other aspect of the beauty of the cherry blossom: It is only a transition, a brief moment in time. And often, the same is true in science: Our cherry trees are in full blossom only for a short time - blooming to perish, thus we celebrate joyfully: Hanami.

And then staying power – “ein langer Atem” - this is the antipathy and the antidote to frustration and hopelessness. Yes, in science, staying power is one of the key qualifications one needs to be successful and create new ideas, new horizons.

Today we have come together to celebrate two eminent scientists, one from Japan, one from Germany. Both have demonstrated their staying power and I am sure that both have seen the cherry trees in full blossom now and then, during their scientific lives and careers. Today we celebrate the fact that they will both receive the “Eugen and Ilse Seibold Prize 2011”, which is a generous gift of the Seibold Family. The aim of this award to make the „langjährige und enge Verbundenheit der deutschen Wissenschaft mit Japan“ the “long-term closeness of German science with Japan” visible has been reached by our two prize winners felicitously.

The analogy between the two is so striking that it is possible, without exaggeration, to characterise both with the same words; this may not be really astounding, even though this is new in the history of the Seibold Prize. Both are chemists, but not only that, both work in very similar fields, namely the chemistry of functionalised metal complexes and both have published a very large number of seminal scientific contributions, cited by colleagues around the world.

Then: Both have, aside from their scientific achievements, quite remarkable merits concerning the self organisation of their respective scientific communities – merits which are definitively also pivotal to the award we are celebrating today. Both took responsibility in their communities, both chaired influential societies such as GDCh, IUPAC (Prof. Tatsumi will be the next President of the IUPAC), both accepted memberships in leading bodies of societies and universities and all this side by side with excellent research and research organisation. Thus it is not surprising that when both met (and that came as no surprise, after all), both joined forces and personal commitment, which eventually gave birth to the idea of creating a structure known in our community as an International Research Training Group, at that time the first between Japan and Germany. Such groups are the most sustainable way to keep science excellent for the future, to create a framework for young scientists, a framework that allows us to do research at the highest possible level – that is, in an international community.

I am fully aware that internationality is nowadays a buzzword, used as standard affirmation to claim excellence, but our two prize winners make immediately evident from their vitae that internationality for them means to interconnect different cultures in the sciences with the goal of reaching new horizons. A PhD candidate having spent half a year or longer in a partner’s laboratory, with a partner feeling responsible, who opens the door to another scientific community,

to different thinking and different styles of living and acting, will come back as another person, with a life-long imprint. The mutual understanding and appreciation becomes as natural as our two prize winners have demonstrated in their lives, as both not only have this affiliation, but others as well.

Professor Kazuyuki Tatsumi started his studies at Osaka University in 1971, spent his postdoc years at Texas A&M University and at Cornell, returned to Japan and Osaka University in 1982, then moved to Nagoya University to become Professor of Chemistry there. But, besides that, he taught as a Visiting Professor in Helsinki, in Lausanne, at Suzhou University in China and in Heidelberg. He accepted students from Mainz and Aachen, from Constance, Münster and Heidelberg. He was honoured with the Inoue Prize as early as 1998; he received the Humboldt Award from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, was elected honorary professor of universities in Nanjing and Lanshou and received the Chemical Society of Japan Award - I am certain that from this list of accolades it is immediately evident what I meant by saying "internationality" is a concept for Prof. Tatsumi for achieving and maintaining excellence.

The same is true for Prof. Erker: He studied Chemistry in Cologne and Bochum from 1966, where he got his Doctorate in 1973, followed by a postdoc post in Princeton. His habilitation followed in 1981. After two years as a Heisenberg Fellow at the famous Max Planck Institute in Mülheim, Prof. Erker accepted positions in Würzburg and, then 1990, in Münster, where he is still working. He has received so many awards and prizes that a short selection will have to suffice: He was the first to receive the now prestigious Alfried Krupp von Bohlen Halbach Award for young professors, the Max Planck Research Award followed, the Otto Bayer Award, the Adolf von Baeyer Medal, to name but a few. Prof. Erker holds Professorships at the Fudan University, Shanghai, and in Santa Barbara, California. He has lectured as a guest professor by invitation in Chicago, in Amsterdam, Strasbourg, Toulouse, Vancouver, and at Fukuoka University in Japan, amongst others.

There is no doubt that when two people of that stature meet and decide to join in an effort to create something lasting and sustainable, success is almost inevitable and so it was: The first International Research Training Group between Germany and Japan on "Complex Functional Systems in Chemistry: Design, Development and Applications" was founded in 2005 and is still active. It is a most visible and efficient symbol for collaboration and mutual support, because behind the two prize winners we find many - about 20 in fact - research groups in both countries involved in this collaboration, with research interests in catalysis, material sciences, biological and medical chemistry especially of large complex molecular systems.

It should be mentioned here as well, that the JSPS in Japan and the DFG in Germany have been backing this activity with funding and encouragement for many years now and more to come.

And with this I can close the circle and come back to the beginning: Mutual support and encouragement is to be valued already for times when the cherry trees are in full blossom, but its value becomes even more precious when times are rough and difficult. Having established such deep understanding in a growing network of trust it becomes much easier to provide help and support in a timely fashion to overcome the incredible problems arising from the disaster Japan has just experienced. Thus there has never been a more appropriate time to honour two scientists for their far-sighted planning for the benefit of the next generations in Japan and Germany.