



One of the redesigned lecture theatres at the Keystone Academy in Beijing, adding European oak and Scottish leather to Chinese culture and values.

CREDIT: LUKE HUGHES



What else but leather?

A specialist consultancy has combined western materials, including leather from Scotland, and knowledge of Chinese culture and values to find an ideal fit in supplying furniture and interior design concepts to an independent school in Beijing.

London design consultancy Luke Hughes has completed a new project at a school in Beijing, the Keystone Academy, which included widespread use of leather from specialist Glasgow-based upholstery tannery Andrew Muirhead & Son, part of the Scottish Leather Group. Luke Hughes has been working in China for around five years now and formally completed the setting up of a Chinese subsidiary last year. Its ties to the Keystone Academy go back further. This independent school, located in the Shunyi district of the Chinese capital, opened in 2014, offering primary, middle and high school education. There is a strong emphasis on using English,

especially in the middle and high school years, which the school sees as an important part of preparing its students for “the challenges of the modern integrated world”.

Two years after the launch of the school, Luke Hughes completed, on time and to budget, a project to provide furniture in the school’s extensive library. In all, the consultancy created and delivered 24 tonnes of furniture for use across the 820 square-metre library complex at the school. This was clearly something of a labour of love for the design consultancy’s eponymous founder. “From the start, we wanted to make the library a place where the students would want to go, where it’s

cool to be seen, conducive to work, easy to gain online access but also somewhere to browse, ponder, graze and stumble on the unexpected,” he says.

Oriental studies were part of Mr Hughes’s university education at Cambridge and he says this helped him understand and respond to the school’s requirements. For example, he took some of the furniture forms illustrated in silk paintings from the Ming and Song dynasties and, for this project, gave them “a contemporary twist”. He was delighted when Song Jingming, the Keystone Academy’s director of libraries, said at the end of this initial project: “Places where the energy not only draws you in but also



Luke Hughes had already achieved success with an earlier project at the school, fitting out the school's extensive library complex. CREDIT: LUKE HUGHES

speaks of other eras and values are so rare. The Jin-dynasty poet Tao Yuanming wrote in 'The Peach Blossom Land' about a fisherman who stumbled on a magical village where, on entering, visitors lose their sense of time and forget to leave. That is what the library feels like."

To make friends in a world context

More recently Luke Hughes brought a project to redesign two lecture theatres at the school to a successful conclusion and, once again, worked with the school's aims and values in mind. Three key values underpin the Keystone Academy: the combination of Chinese and English languages, building character and community and promoting Chinese culture and identity in a world context. It makes it clear that its focus is on producing graduates who are well prepared for top English-speaking universities around the world, and who are devoted to being what it calls "forces for positive change in their communities".

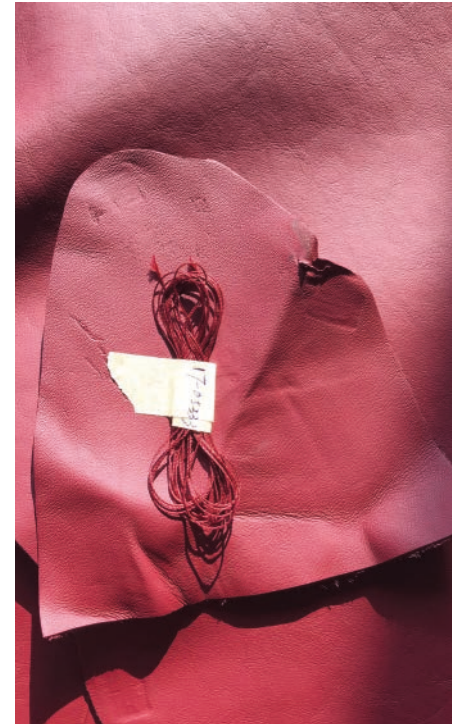
Luke Hughes has much sympathy with this. He says: "People in China are certainly curious about how to project the country's traditional values, including its literature, music and architecture, in a modern context. It's difficult to find a voice for that. It wants its students to go to universities in Europe and North America,

but to be able to share their culture with the people they meet there." While recovery from the effects of Covid-19, tensions in Hong Kong and what he calls the "the whole US-Sino fiasco" will almost certainly make this task more challenging in the immediate future, he insists large numbers of young, educated Chinese people will continue to take it up. "There are still many people in China longing to make friends," he says.

A tactile issue

The lecture theatres were in use before the redesign, but were not working to their full potential. The furniture that was in place was "inflexible" the London designer says, and quickly proved unsuitable. Site lines were poorly planned and the acoustics "dubious". The air conditioning was less than fully effective, too. All of this made it difficult for the school to make the most of these facilities; "they were not serving to differentiate the school or project its values", was Luke Hughes's pre-project assessment.

While he has used his knowledge and love of Chinese culture in his work with the Keystone Academy, he has shown a clear preference for materials that come from closer to home. The project involved designing a new concept for the interior of two lecture theatres at the school, as well



Leather from Andrew Muirhead & Son for the Keystone Academy project. Luke Hughes insists that tactile issues are of great importance because what we touch draws a response from us. The designer asks what else there is for us to use except leather.

CREDIT: SCOTTISH LEATHER GROUP/LUKE HUGHES

as all the furniture for them. Partners in China made the furniture, under supervision from Luke Hughes, and they used stainless steel that came from Taiwan, but European oak panels and the leather from Scotland are the other materials that dominate.

"This is pure snobbery on my part," Mr Hughes says. "It's European oak because I don't particularly like American white oak. The leather is from Andrew Muirhead because we have been working with them for years and it's leather because this is a tactile issue: what else is there for us to use?" He explains that coming into contact with materials always provokes a response from us and says this is especially true of young people and, therefore, especially true in a school setting. What we touch can inspire us. "Vinyl is not going to do it," he says, "and in a school you have [customer] heavy churn so textiles would wear out quite quickly. In contrast, the energy and enthusiasm we have had in response to the lecture theatres and to the earlier library project have been terrific." 🌐