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On the cleverness of people: Concluding reflections
from an ethnography of skilled practice
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On the Cleverness of People: Concluding Reflections from an Ethnography of Skilled Practice

MAREILE FLITSCH, ISEK – ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF ZURICH

In 1909, Arnold van Gennep published his book 'Les rites de passage'. Since then, we have known about the universal structure of rites of passage. Whether birth, marriage or retirement, people always go through the same process. One leaves an old status and is bid farewell, one is a liminal being in transition in order to then enter the new state. This farewell lecture is known to be part of such rites of passage. The process up to this point has been an ethnographically interesting experience indeed.

People's Cleverness

And now to the cleverness of people.

During my research into skilled practice, I repeatedly encountered the familiar phenomenon that people seem to surpass themselves at a certain moment. These were special moments in which a craftsman had achieved something surprising, a clever little victory over materials and conditions, in competition with other craftsmen; something he or she had always wanted to achieve and unexpectedly succeeded in a lucky moment with clever use of hand and tools; or cleverness in surviving an emergency situation.

At some point, the time was ripe to think about this as a whole. The farewell lecture was looming on the horizon, and today I am sharing with you for the first time how far I have come in thinking about cleverness.

In German, the term cleverness (Pfffigkeit) is derived from the German word Pfiff – not so much in the sense of whistling, but in the sense of a trick or a knack. The term apparently emerged in the context of argot. The translatability of 'Pfffigkeit' into other languages is challenging. The phenomenon of cleverness is obviously understood differently in different knowledge systems. My guess today is that the definition of cleverness can probably be used to recognise knowledge systems as either openly competitive or more controlling.

In German, as in other languages, the term 'Pfffigkeit' is as ambiguous as the phenomenon itself. On the one hand, it means funny, resourceful, the ability to recognise and implement important things well, to think of something well, to be imaginative, mentally agile, at best, cunning and resourceful. But cleverness can also be read and interpreted differently, from ingeniousness to mischievousness, cunning, shrewdness, smartness, slyness. Who or what is seen as positively clever or negatively sly is determined by the respective context and how this is read – possibly in retrospect.

And social anthropology helps us to recognise something more here, from the perspective of those who act smartly: how and for what purposes people use their cleverness, how they apply it: spontaneously? As cunning or outwitting? As strategy and triumph? As revenge perhaps, as a payback, as a calculation or as a prank, or – when faced with an emergency? This self-perception of one's own cleverness, i.e. a person's inner perspective of their actions, focuses on the person who often experiences silent, unrecognised triumphs, the person who knows that they have achieved something unexpected. And they also assess whether recognition is possible or whether a counterpart can recognise their cleverness at all, wants to recognise it or does not want to recognise it. Trickster and Eulenspiegel come to mind here. The thought also arises that, in colonialism, the refusal to concede cleverness, the realisation that one is not valued, must have been frustrating, if not frightening.

The ambiguity of the term smartness is certainly also due to the fact that smartness can visibly question hierarchies, power relations and interpretative sovereignty. For the ambiguity of the term linguistically captures the possible attitudes towards smart behaviour.

So much for my initial thoughts on the concept of cleverness.

When formulating the title of this farewell lecture my idea was by no means simply to deal with cleverness in everyday life. Rather, I am focussing on the phenomenon whereby people use their skills to find a clever solution to a specific challenge in their everyday lives. Cleverness is therefore a cultural technique that cannot be understood in isolation from the skills that people bring to the table. For this reason, I will first briefly summarise what anthropologists of technology understand by cleverness today.

About Mastery

When you think of mastery, you probably first think of competences acquired through vocational training. Particularly in the skilled trades, which will be the subject of the first examples I will use to develop my thoughts, the question arises from the fact that a great deal of mastery is based on standardised teaching knowledge, acquired, for example, during training at a vocational school. How much explicit knowledge guarantees that one can achieve a predictable, always identical or comparable result, and how much implicit and experiential knowledge is indispensable? We ourselves live in a world in which explicit knowledge and expertise acquired through training are of great importance.

In many contexts in which social anthropologists conduct research, it is less about knowledge acquired in the context of vocational training, and being 'in the field' with craftspeople is also less about workspaces such as laboratories or workshops. Rather, we often conduct research where tacit knowledge is at the centre. People are socialised into historically evolved knowledge systems or rather taught into them and gradually become familiar with them. The formation of their tacit knowledge is reflected in material environments that have always been there and yet do not remain unchanged. And it is often also reflected in the fact that the material environment is less industrially manufactured. Objects are often made by hand, with physical and manual labour and with each individual object being unique. The relationship to the object is direct here, it is not infrequently thought of as animated.

Cleverness takes place in concrete material environments. Jakob Tanner once formulated the relationship between societies and their material environments beautifully:

'People create and change their being not only through social interaction, but also by engaging with things that move them and by which they are moved. There is a surplus of possibilities in this game that keeps the future open and prevents "the human" being from ever finding itself.' (Tanner 2012)¹

The interrelationship between society and its things, described by Jakob Tanner as a 'game', points to something important. Mastery is embodied and located materially and technically, physically, sensually, in movement and gestures, in language and reflection, in meanings and structures, as a continuously developing competence, in processes of continuous updating of knowledge. Appreciation and co-knowledge, recognising each other in action, play an enormously important role in the 'communities of practice' that go along with mastery. Growing into proficiency promotes people's ability to respond to specific conditions in their actions and to react to changes, challenges and crises with the whole of their environment, in mind, body and spirit. In any case, mastery is culturally organised and conceived differently. We still know very little about alternative concepts of mastery, by the way.

In the end, the question is how people give meaning to their actions, their socio-technical orders, how they simultaneously keep them in mind and how they preserve their expertise throughout change. And how do they look at others, for example at Europe, from this perspective of the certainty of their own self-evidence?

Jakob Tanner uses the expression 'surplus of possibilities' in his quote. I am borrowing this idea here for an impression that I have repeatedly gained during my research. People with a high level of mastery and experience utilise a kind of surplus of their skills, where more is possible, for clever solutions.

Mastery is very much driven by appreciation. It is virtually worthless without the appreciation of a community that can recognise, if not celebrate, expertise. Appreciation can be conceded, or the concession can be withdrawn or withheld.

From Mastery to Cleverness

I am not presenting the results of comprehensive research here, but rather a few observations that gave me the idea of using 'On the cleverness of people' for my concluding reflections on the social anthropology of mastery.

I came across a practical example last summer. Our neighbour, a retired engine driver and machine fitter, 79 years old and respected in our street as an experienced craftsman, was confronted with a blunt scythe from a DIY store. He had no illusions about the much too hard steel of the cheap scythe. Whetting was pointless. Then he disappeared into his workshop and after a while emerged triumphantly with red ears. He had outwitted the material and managed to sharpen the scythe with a trick. Cleverness out of mastery.

The repertoire of possibilities available to a retired engine driver and machine fitter for clever solutions draws on the specialist and material knowledge acquired during his training in a society in which tools and machines are developed and available for purchase.

¹ Translation by Mareile Flitsch.

His explicit knowledge is complemented by many years of experience and thus the application of his mastery in new contexts.

In one of our research projects on artisans in China, training was only partially standardised. The porcelain craftspeople in Jingdezhen in the People's Republic of China were the subject of the exhibition 'Abgedreht! China töpfer bodennah' (Turned! China potters work close to the ground', 2010/2011; Flitsch, Mertens, Thurnherr and Leuenberger 2010). They use the technique of turning – trimming the dried slug – to produce delicate blue and white glazed bowls. And these potters may work several at a time on ONE potter's wheel sunk into the ground to throw large fish bowls and huge vases. As masters in their craft, the ceramists use their skills surplus to find sensitive and clever solutions with which they react to changes in their economic and material conditions, and to the demands of the market under the conditions of accelerated modernity. The fact that potters who work closely together as a team are often closely connected to each other in their private lives and may devise clever solutions in the event of marital disputes or partner searches also indicates that mastery is not limited to the professional sphere. Without an understanding of their mastery, their solutions are only half understood.

The ceramist and sinologist Anette Mertens and I encountered the same thing with celadon masters in Longquan in the People's Republic of China. We explored their expertise in the exhibition and publication 'Seladon im Augenmerk' (Celadon in Focus, 2019-2021; Mertens and Flitsch 2019, Flitsch and Mertens 2016). Those who are deeply embodied in material processing and technique, who are socially integrated, draw layers of glass on shards, have the aforementioned surplus of possibilities beyond their mastery, from which they are cleverly and recognisably equipped for unusual solutions within the practice community. Even the transition from wood firing to gas firing was a masterstroke.

Here, cleverness comes into focus as the ability to adapt to new circumstances. The celadon masters in Longquan are tinkering with kilns, firing materials and – of course – glaze effects. After the transition from the collective dragon kiln to the individual liquid gas kiln, with the emerging private sector, we gained the impression that, with the transformation of the craft complete, cleverness now comes into play in competition. Rivalry, the kiln secret and also hearsay stories of clever tinkering solutions are back.

The creative use of cleverness in the collaboration of craftspeople with different standardised training can be observed in an ongoing research project. In this project, which is about communicating, we are currently exploring what separates or connects craftspeople and programmers. In the DIZH project 'Partners in a Trading Zone' (June 2023 to May 2025), led by Thomas Schmalfeldt from the PHZH and myself, we are looking at how hand embroiderers, social anthropologists, IT didacts and embroidery machine programmers understand embroidery here in Zurich.² The hand embroiderers draw on their many years' experience with needle and thread and have also gained an insight into programming through the project. This also applies the other way around: the embroidery programmers also embroider by hand. It is very touching to experience the humorous, even fun embroidery ping-pong and embroidery hackathon between experts of the needle and Turtle Stitch: the hand

² <https://www.dizh.uzh.ch/en/2023/02/06/partners-in-a-trading-zone-development-of-a-trading-zone-between-ethnology-and-computer-science-in-the-context-of-embroidery/>; https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/Forschung-und-Lehre/abgeschlossene_forschungsprojekte/dizh-partners-in-a-trading-zone.html; <https://creativecomputinglab.ch/ptz/>; on Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/partners.tradingzone/>, accessed 3.9.2026.

embroiderers and the programmers compete courageously and with cleverness, they give each other tasks, challenge each other and sound out where the strengths and weaknesses, even the coexistence of machine and needle, can be renegotiated, where programmers receive impulses from hand embroiderers and vice versa. It is a respectful, slightly tongue-in-cheek cleverness that challenges the other person, as a playful ability, and a way to gain recognition. In environments full of appreciation, you can experience how cleverness, as a surplus, can bring out the best in everyone involved.

Cleverness in the Hands

Cleverness is often expressed through the hand, in gestures or actions. I have been interested in the hand as a technical and cultural human tool since my time at the TU Berlin. It is the hand that, in the process of manual production, aware of the risk of failure, repeatedly makes adjustments, sensitively and smartly, so that the unique piece can finally be created.

At some point I started to take an interest in the moment of hesitation of the hand, and recently for the catalogue of the exhibition 'Fadenspiele/String Figures. A researching exhibition'.³ The exhibition has just opened at the Museum Tinguely in Basel and was curated by Sarine Waltenspühl and Mario Schulze.

The title of my contribution to the exhibition catalogue is 'Hesitant Hands on Similar Loops. Some Reflections on the Embodiedness of String Figures' (Flitsch 2025). My aim is to show that people in all parts of the world play with string figures, all with the same loop of string; but that some communities are mathematical in their approach, while others – like us people from Europe – have only mastered simple basic forms without much mathematics, if any at all. The moment when the hand hesitates is when a person calls on their knowledge, the hand remembers what it has to do and whether it will perhaps take an unusual path in a clever way. In my contribution, I also show how cleverly descendants of the colonised people today exhibit their thread games as art captured on a surface, but they now keep the game itself to themselves.

Playing string figures is a relatively simple example of connecting threads, and the location of the 'Pfiff', the knack, is clear. Textiles can be more complex. Over the past few years, a number of colleagues have been looking into the history of weaving, which I have also become interested in for the DIZH project on embroidery. The mastery of weavers on historical looms is undisputed today, as is the cleverness they displayed in their mathematical skills. With mechanisation, the 'place' of the Pfiff, the knack, shifted, and the ingenuity derived from their skill became invisible. Without a basic knowledge of mathematics, we can no more easily follow the possible cleverness of the weavers than we can follow the mathematically framed cleverness in the string figure play of the Inuit or the people on the island of Vanuatu.

About the Appreciation of Mastery

Not being able to understand something directly is one thing. Not wanting to understand something at all is another. This brings me to the question of the appreciation of mastery

³ String Figures / Fadenspiele. A Research Exhibition. 20 November 2024 – 9 March 2025. <https://www.tinguely.ch/en/exhibitions/exhibitions/2024/fadenspiele.html>, accessed 2.12.2024.

– and the related question of whether you can always recognise and want to acknowledge cleverness. These questions are often fundamental.

In 2021 social anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow published their book, 'The Dawn of Everything. A New History of Humanity'. They write: '... the world of hunter-gatherers as it existed before the coming of agriculture was one of bold social experiments, resembling a carnival parade of political forms, far more than it does the drab abstractions of evolutionary theory' (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 15-16). In other words: humans have always been clever and smart. The concept of contemporaneity is coming back into focus, as is indigenous critique of Western civilisation and colonialism, and a new appreciation of human action. This book actually gives hope with regard to the appreciation of expertise and cleverness.

At the same time, colleagues from various disciplines have equally been looking at a new reading of history, including the behavioural psychologist Richard Hallam in 'The Evolution of Human Cleverness' (Hallam 2022). His book represents a new interest in the prerequisites that people bring to the table in the face of the challenges posed by climate change. The topic of cleverness, framed in Western paradigms of innovation and progress, is therefore already in the public eye.

In his book Richard Hallam makes a remark in passing:

'... of course, living humans do not always produce "clever" solutions to problems, and the problems they pose are not always well chosen.' (Hallam 2022: 3)

Who decides what are 'clever solutions', and whether the problems that people face today are 'well chosen'?

Therefore, a judgement is potentially concealed within the current interest in the cleverness which humans developed in the course of their evolution when they emancipated themselves from the animal kingdom due to their 'cleverness'. What is good cleverness? And what is considered less useful, or less worthy of consideration, for humanity? What has led to economically exploitable innovations, and what cleverness in humans tends to be left behind, overlooked or even wasted? And, of course, the question of (discourse) power also arises here: what should perhaps be overlooked – just as the 'anthropology of ignorance' has taught us?

In recent years, scholars from the Global South in particular have been outspoken in their criticism of Western explanations of indigenous expertise as tinkering or 'debrouillardise' (Mavhunga 2017; Wandji and Allouche 2021). Rather, they point to the necessity to pay more attention to social intelligence, to alternative concepts of locally developed and owned, and therefore sustainable, socio-technical innovations. Using local cleverness can be helpful here – provided it is recognised and also respectfully valued and given sufficient space.

Smartness in local crafts in the informal sector and the skills of people with disabilities were the subject of the SNSF r4d project 'Disability and Technology' (2014-2017)⁴, which

⁴ <https://www.disabilityandtechnology.uzh.ch/en.html>, accessed 8.3.2026; results published in the volume "Disability and Technology" in: Africa. Journal of the International African Institute, Vol. 92.4, 2022. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/africa/issue/39C167AC4460D1533A678E1340CA8993>.

was largely self-managed by doctoral students in Zurich and Uganda. The project took place in close cooperation with colleagues and students from Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, and with disability studies researcher Susan Reynolds White from Copenhagen. It was about the skills of people with different types of disability. And it was about how people in the Global South use assistive technologies; indeed, how local craftsmen in Uganda first have to modify and adapt the assistive technologies for local conditions. They use all their skills and their ingenuity to be able to use assistive technologies such as wheelchairs or hearing devices that were brought from the so-called First World to the Global South and were not designed for local conditions. Marie Schuler's research on this has been honoured several times. In her book 'Disability and Aid', she deals with how people with disabilities in Uganda have to work their way through the jungle of funding allocation under ever-changing criteria – using everything their skills enable them to do, with little appreciation – as smart as they can be. We called it expertise back then. From today's perspective, I would say it was about how people in the Global South have to deal with technologies and conditions that are largely unsuitable for them in a resourceful and smart way, drawing on their mostly unappreciated expertise. How much ingenuity is wasted when people are forced to survive under impossible conditions that are unworthy of their expertise in environments that they could also creatively mould and shape with the same energy.

Getting by with Cleverness

I finally encountered cleverness in various economic contexts. In 2009, I invited the exhibition 'The Art of Forgery' by Willibald Veit from the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin to Zurich (Veit, Bernegg, Goedicke und Neunteufel 2007). It was about the cleverness of illegal art forgers from China.

Our contribution to the exhibition consisted of a thematic expansion to include the social anthropology of authenticity (Flitsch, Isler, Henningsen and Wu 2010). The Shanzhai movement (the market for unlicensed products) was a grey area of product piracy in the People's Republic of China at the time. The public in China discussed the quality of such products along the lines of cleverness. This was recognisable, for example, in the fusion of Mao Zedong and Barack Obama into the icon Obamao, a market of ever-new products that flourished for a short time. Cleverness was found in the idea of publishing 'Harry Potter Volume 7' in Chinese, launched at midnight, in which a Chinese hero took over the story before Rowling the author had even started writing the volume in England. At this time, cleverness was found in the repeated imitations of consumer goods and tools. How does one read such cleverness? One interpretation would certainly be that people in China were searching for their place after decollectivisation and with economic reforms taking hold. As tinkerers visible in their cleverness, they also sought in a way to assert their right to contemporaneity: they used their cleverness to force their participation, their place in the rapidly modernising society. Mastery must be understood in order to understand the people who act on it.

If you want to get an idea of what kind of cleverness is possible in China, you should follow Lena Kaufmann's research on the skills of migrants in China, or her current project on digital agriculture in China (Kaufmann 2011, 2021).⁵

⁵ Lena Kaufmann, SNF Grant Ambitione: Digital agriculture: Sino-European contrasts, correspondences and collaborations. S <https://data.snf.ch/grants/grant/216361>, accessed 2.12.2024.

Trying to Save Oneself through Cleverness

In addition to rather positive readings of cleverness, I also encountered contexts in which cleverness is read with suspicion by one side, while the actors on the other side try to save themselves through cleverness.

The exhibition 'S(e)oul food' (2016-2017; Flitsch, Deuchler, Picht, Fischer-Han, Fischer-Han und Fischer, 2016), curated by Cookie Fischer-Han and myself, was about Korean nurses who were brought to work in Germany and Switzerland in the 1970s and 1980s. When the nurses arrived, they realised that the local food did not nourish them emotionally. Home-sick and often feeling degraded in the hospital hierarchies, they found creative culinary solutions, which were necessarily clever, to at least heal their souls in flavour. Cookie Fischer-Han famously painted her longing for Korean dishes on canvas. A form of artistic cleverness?

And: one of the great mortifications of colonialism or other forms of disenfranchisement is undoubtedly the attempt to devalue mastery.

Rebekka Sutter and I carried out the joint project 'Lorenz Löffler's Collection Reconnected' (2023-2024) together with the Maleya Foundation and Mrinal Kanti Tripura (Flitsch, Sutter, Kaiser und Haphang, 2021). In this peace project, students from Switzerland and from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Zurich and Bangladesh jointly investigated the significance of Lorenz Löffler's ethnographic collection – as a kind of time capsule for the future – for young people in Bangladesh today. We learnt a lot from each other, including something about cleverness. The young indigenous people from the Chittagong Hill Tracts are exposed to fierce conflict situations in their home country. They waste their skills in the constant search for solutions to these daily problems, currently under conditions of extreme violence. Meanwhile, they dream of their own future and use all their cleverness to at least get a little closer to it.⁶

And finally, I repeatedly encountered the theme of the attempted devaluation of mastery under colonial conditions. For the exhibition curated by Dr Yu Filipiak and myself, 'Looted Goods? Five questions about objects from China at the end of the Imperial Era' (2023-2024), in our workspace series 'Five questions on the collections', I read the letters from a German soldier in the Boxer War in China around 1900 to his family, excerpted from a diary. They are kept in the Ethnographic Collection of the University of Göttingen (Flitsch 2024). A difficult read. First, Lieutenant Hermann Pflughöft reports constant so-called 'requisitioning expeditions' for the troops' self-sufficiency. They robbed the local Chinese population around Beijing of their winter supplies, their eggs and chickens, their doors, windows and wooden panels for fuel, their lorries, their donkeys. Those who refused to hand them over were severely punished. Particular severity was apparently meted out to those who tried to protect their supplies in some clever – in this case read by the German soldiers as sly – way.

⁶ <https://www.isek.uzh.ch/de/ethnologie/studium/exkursionen/2024bangladesh.html>, https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/Ueber_uns/aktuell/indigenous-cht-students.html, <https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/de/ausstellungen/Vergangene-Ausstellungen/re-contextualising-ethnographic-collection-bangladesh.html>, accessed 8.3.2026.

Without going into more detail here, in our archives we keep counter-histories from the same period. They show that perhaps the subject of 'cleverness' can also be revealing in the history of colonialism.

Smartness in Old Age

Cleverness as an opportunity, in competition, and smartness in times of need – what more could be added? Of course, the one thing that comes with a farewell lecture: cleverness in old age.

The British anthropologist of technology Trevor Marchand recently published his life's work: 'The Pursuit of Pleasurable Work' (Marchand 2021). In it, based on his research into the transfer of knowledge among passionate carpenters, he seeks to prove that learning requires practice, and that people only find themselves through practice. Marchand argues that our education system needs to be fundamentally rethought in terms of the need for practical elements within it. Humans need their hands as tools for working and for thinking (Schmitz und Groninger [Hg.] 2012), and for their cleverness.

You may have read 'The underestimated thinking tool' about the writing hand, by Peter Ackermann, in the NZZ weekend supplement last Friday? (Ackermann 2024) The future will indeed show whether it is wise to abandon the deep connection between hand and brain that we cultivate when writing by hand with a pen, for example, and which also enables us humans to be clever.

Towards the end of his book, Trevor Marchand describes the case of George, a carpenter in the process of ageing in his craft. Contrary to the common assumption that a person gradually loses their abilities and skills as they age, Marchand shows something completely different: how George, as a lifelong craftsman, adjusts his senses, his work steps and his workshop as he ages, under conditions in which his skills are appreciated, so that he can continue to work as a craftsman. From George's perspective, his environment ages along with him, and he develops – unsurprisingly – all kinds of clever solutions in this process of readjusting his body, hands and tools.

In my recently opened exhibition 'Dreaming of Ginseng', the paper-cutting artist Hou Yumei 侯玉梅 provided beautiful proof of Trevor Marchand's assumption that shrewdness can accompany ageing. Hou Yumei, whose work is the focus of the small exhibition, was invited to demonstrate her freehand papercutting at the exhibition's launch in Zurich. She said to me at the airport: 'You know, I only just found my scissors before I left, and the audience will be disappointed with me, I haven't cut ginseng spirits for ages'. A short time later, she stood speechless in front of the small exhibition honouring her work. At the vernissage, she began to revive her papercuts with the tip of her scissors in folded red paper – in a freehand cut without sketching. Now back in San Francisco, she texted me on her mobile phone to say that she is daring to create new works. 我的手又开始灵. Her hand is once again '灵 ling', which means living and animated. Embodied, lifelong practice apparently does not fade away and, provided it is appreciated, can be revitalised even at the age of 72.

What other possibilities lie dormant in all of us that could revitalise our cleverness?

Concluding Remarks

This brings me to my concluding remarks on the ethnography of skilled practice. Looking back at just a few of these research projects at 'my museum' and chair has led me to 'human cleverness'. My aim here was to show that mastery harbours a surplus of possibilities that are available for clever action. All too much human cleverness has apparently been overlooked so far – or we need knowledge to be able to see it. And obviously the context – the power relations – is decisive for whether cleverness is valued as resourcefulness or fought against as supposed slyness, or whether cleverness is simply ignored and overlooked. The colonial insult of devaluing cleverness has a long-lasting effect. It seems to me that it is up to us today whether we give people's cleverness space. Whether we recognise the potential of smart action and use it for sustainable development, for strengthening local, socially developed, viable innovations.

Mareile Flitsch is a Professor Emerita of Social and Cultural Anthropology at ISEK and former Director of the Ethnographic Museum Zurich (VMZ). This text is an English version of her farewell lecture, delivered on December 5, 2024.

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