

INTER ASIA PAPERS

ISSN 2013-1747

n° 53 / 2016

**THE CULTURAL RELATION BETWEEN
THE EUROPEAN UNION AND CHINA**

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INTER ASIA PAPERS

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Edita

Centro de Estudios e Investigación sobre Asia Oriental
Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès) Barcelona 2008
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

ISSN 2013-1739 (versión impresa)

Depósito Legal: B-50443-2008 (versión impresa)

ISSN 2013-1747 (versión en línea)

Depósito Legal: B-50442-2008 (versión en línea)

Diseño: Xesco Ortega

The cultural relation between the European Union and China

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Resumen

La relación entre la Unión Europea (UE) y China se ha desarrollado gradualmente desde 1975 hasta convertirse en una relación mutuamente interdependiente. China es el segundo socio comercial de la UE, y la UE es el mayor socio comercial de China. Esta relación se ha caracterizado por centrarse principalmente en la cooperación económica, ocupando un lugar secundario otros ámbitos importantes como las relaciones culturales. La UE y China han logrado importantes avances con el establecimiento de nuevos instrumentos institucionales de cooperación y la actualización de programas y proyectos ya existentes. En este artículo se analiza el desarrollo de la cooperación cultural bilateral e identifican los principales éxitos y debilidades que caracterizan a esta relación.

Palabras clave

China, Unión Europea, relaciones culturales, *soft power*

Abstract

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and China has developed gradually since its establishment in 1975 to become mutual interdependent; China is the EU's second trading partner, and the EU is China's biggest trading partner. This relationship has been characterized for being mainly focused on the economic cooperation, with ignorance of other important areas of cooperation such as cultural relations. Recently, important steps have been taken with the establishment of the new institutional instrument of cooperation and the actualization of programs and projects. This article analyzes the development of the bilateral cultural cooperation and identifies the main successes and weaknesses of this relationship.

Keywords

China, European Union, cultural relations, *soft power*

THE CULTURAL RELATION BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND CHINA

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) and the People's Republic of China had officially established diplomatic relations in 1975, but since then, the bilateral relations have progressed extremely slowly owing to mutual mistrust. Recently, this bilateral relationship has evolved to become interdependent, with China being the EU's second trading partner after the United States and the EU being China's biggest trading partner. China is the EU's biggest source of imports and has become one of EU's fastest growing export markets. The EU has also become China's largest source of imports. The formation of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2003 has allowed broadening the bilateral cooperation to a wide range of sectors. However, since the beginning of the establishment of the bilateral relations, the economic cooperation has represented the cornerstone of the cooperation and the privileged area of interest for both parties. Other important aspects have been largely neglected, including cultural relationships. Recently, the cultural relationships, influenced by the global tendencies of cultural policies becoming an important instrument of foreign policy of the states -commonly named soft power- for gaining eyeballs and substantiating the role of non-state actors to become more important, have become a part of the present EU-China relationships. The establishment in 2012 of the High-Level bi-annual people-to-people dialogue devoted to the culture and people-to-people cooperation represented an important step forward in the bilateral relations, and has confirmed the

identification of three pillars on which the relations are structured: economic, political, and cultural.

Recently, the cultural relations have blossomed, several actions have been initiated both in Europe and in China, and different institutional agreements of cooperation have been signed. Nevertheless, the relations remain underexplored despite the promise of adding more to the quality of the strategic partnership not only in economic terms -considering the growing explosion of the cultural industry, especially in China- but also in terms of the mutual understanding, comprehension, and respect for each other's values.

This article aims to analyze the cultural relationships between China and the European Union via analysis of their development, identification of the major successes and main weaknesses that continue to prevent exploration of all opportunities that the cooperation in this field can bring to each other. Finally, the article identifies some aspects that could benefit the cooperation and allow the strengthening of the contacts among non-state actors, who have an important role to play in the international relationships.

A general overview on the EU-China relations

The way and the speed of the world's changes often catches us wrong-footed, that is, without the appropriate instruments to interpret the change, thus resulting in a general sense of fear and disorientation. The spectacular economic growth of China has stamped its name as one of the main actors in the global arena that is spreading its overwhelming impact worldwide; this is probably an event of greatest impact in the 20th century. Despite the recent slowdown of the Chinese economy, it remains the economic center of Asia and a key partner of most countries across the world. Although China's GDP per capita remains low, as reported by the International Monetary Fund

(2014), it has overtaken the US on purchasing parity basis in 2014.

The EU–China relations have become extremely important for both parties over the past few years despite the enormous differences between them in terms of, for example, political structure or the manner in which the values and norms have been conceived, as well as, despite other important aspects such as the lack of a strong EU’s foreign and security policy and the prevalence of the member’s national interests in front of the huge opportunities that China can offer, which has evidently important consequences on the role that the EU can play as a regional entity with China and also as a global actor. Even the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2010 with the objective to reinforce the global identity of the EU has been insufficient in changing the image of the substantial disunion between the members with their inward-looking attitude. This is probably mainly caused by the fact that competition between individual European companies in the Chinese market remains considerable. This is an extremely important element to be considered when we analyze the EU–China relations (Lisbonne, 2011). The problem is not only the difference between the Chinese and European political norms and values -which has often led to divergences of interest-, rather the fact that the Chinese seems to be animated by a clear vision of where they want to take their country, whereas no comparable clarity of direction exists on the European side.

The diplomatic relations between the EU (former European Economic Community, EEC) and the People’s Republic of China were established in 1975. Since the beginning, the bilateral relationship progressed slowly over a long period of time and was characterized by a mutual mistrust, which continues to exist even today (Picciau, 2016).

The Tian’anmen Square incident in 1989 created a strong impact on this relation. This fact led the EU to an embargo on

arms sales and the interruption of the military cooperation, the suspension of the ministerial and other high-level meetings, as well as the reduction of cultural, scientific, and technical cooperation (European Council, 1989), representing at the time a point of rupture. However, the interest for the growing opportunities that the Chinese market already had and potentially could offer to the European countries was stronger than any formal sanction. At that time, China, driven by the economic reforms carried out by Deng Xiaoping, was emerging as an important economic partner for the EU in Asia. Only the embargo on arms remained in force among all other measures taken earlier -the embargo was imposed by a Declaration of the European Council that was not equipped with legal instruments in this sector at that time-. Thus, the purpose of the embargo was never very clear to anyone, thus allowing the members to interpret the issue of arms sales to China in different ways. In short, it did not represent a great obstacle to the commercial interests of member countries. Since October 1990, the European Council and the European Parliament decided to restore the bilateral relations step-by-step in 1992. In the mid 1990s, precisely in 1994, the European Commission published two important documents: the first communication was dedicated to Asia and titled *Towards a New Asia Strategy*, in which, for the first time, the importance of the Asia's rise was recognized; and the first strategy paper titled *A Long-Term Policy for China Europe Relations* in 1995 was focused on the establishment of a dialog with China, the integration of China in the world economy, the rise of the EU's profile in China, and the promotion of human rights and the rule of law.

The following years were characterized by certain positivity for the bilateral relations. In October 2003, during the EU–China Summit in Beijing, the bilateral relations were defined as a “strategic partnership”. The signature of the EU–China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership during the same year

allowed further broadening of the bilateral cooperation to a wide range of sectors.¹

Despite all these progresses, the interest in the economic sector has always prevailed, showing the lack of a certain solidity of the relationships in their entirety. The mistrust and mutual perception have generally represented an obstacle for the building of a successful global strategic partnership. Europeans have often accused the Chinese to be very bureaucratic and not transparent in their negotiations, and also that they do not hold much respect for certain values such as the rule of law, good governance, and human rights. For this reason, the Chinese have often perceived the European attitude to be assuming a certain “moral superiority” (Brown and Crossick, 2009).

Although with several exceptions -EU complains about the lack of transparency, the discrimination against foreign companies as result of the Chinese industrial policies of a non-tariff measures, a strong government’s intervention in the economy, a dominant position of state-owned enterprises, and inadequate protection of the intellectual property in China-, these elements have not generally represented any major obstacle for the development of the economic relations. China is the EU’s second trading partner only after the United States, while the EU is China’s biggest trading partner. The EU–China trade has considerably increased in recent years. China is the EU’s

¹ The *EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership* was preceded by the Solana Report *European Security Strategy* (June 2003) in which China was considered as one of the EU’s strategic partners; and by the European Commission’s document *A Maturing Partnership: Shared Interests and Challenges in EU-China relations* (September 2003) in which was affirmed the greater interest to work together as strategic partners. In China, during the same year (2003) in the *EU Policy Paper* (October 2003) EU was defined as the major force in the world and an important actor in the international affairs.

biggest source of imports and has become one of the EU's fastest growing export markets. The EU has also become China's biggest source of imports. The two parties now trade well over 1 billion € a day (European Commission.Trade). In 2014, for example, the bilateral interdependence was evident, with a two-way trade worth 467 billion € (Prodi and Gosset, 2015). The EU imports machinery, equipment, footwear, clothing, furniture, lamps, and toys, and exports machinery, equipment, motor vehicles, aircraft, and chemicals from and to China, respectively. The bilateral trade services amount to 1/10th of the total trade in goods. On the other hand, the EU's export of services only amount to 20% of the EU's exports of goods. The EU records a trade deficit with China due to the global and Asian value chains and, according to the EU Commission, to the remaining market access barriers in China (European Commission.Trade).

At the 16th EU–China Summit -held on 21st November 2013-, the two sides announced the launch of the negotiations of a Comprehensive EU–China Investments Agreement -put at the heart of the bilateral relations by the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation- that will allow progressive liberalization of investment and the elimination of restrictions for investors in both the markets. The main objective of the agreement is to provide a more secure legal framework for the investors of both sides while providing a strong protection for their investments. In January 2014, the EU and China further entered the first round of negotiations. Xi Jinping's visit to the EU headquarters in Brussels (March-April 2014) on the occasion of 40th anniversary of diplomatic relationships showed how the EU–China cooperation has become important not only for the bilateral relations but also for the international community (Picciau, 2016).

In recent years, despite the economic and financial crises, the Chinese interests in the European continent has not only grown

but has also diversified, especially for matters concerning the different European regions. It is the case, for example, of the CEE area -Central and Eastern Europe- that has led to the formation of the 16+1 dialogue to develop a platform of dialogue with the countries of the region -Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Macedonia-, in which China undoubtedly plays the leading role. The objective of the 16+1 is mainly to strengthen the economic relations between China and the countries of the region, especially considering the geographic and strategic position of this region in the implementation of the One Belt One Road plan (OBOR; also named as the New Silk Road), presented by the Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 with the objective to expand and strengthen Chinese integration with the international system and strengthen its cooperation with countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa through the improvement of the connectivity in terms of infrastructures, trade exchanges, and people-to-people interactions. The Southern Europe, particularly affected by the recent European economic crises, also become an area of interest for China -especially in the OBOR framework- as well as the natural resources of the northern part of the continent (Arctic).

China still considers the EU as a strategic partner for the construction of a multipolar order and as an important example of regional integration (Lai and Zhang, 2013). The interest shown by China in involving the EU into the realization of the OBOR is a clear sign of the country interest for the continent, which is still considered, despite all economic and political difficulties that is facing, as a crucial partner for its geostrategic interests. If is true that the implementation of a European global strategy toward China remains weak owing to the lack of a regional coordination of interests and objectives between the member states, the Chinese determination in implementing the

OBOR strategy, and its consequences on Europe cannot let EU unprepared. The initial European attitude toward OBOR, characterized by certain indifference, has been perceived by the Chinese leaders with a sense of frustration, considering all the energies invested in promoting the initiative in Europe - especially by the Vice-Premier Zhang Gaoli, chairman of the OBOR Small Leading Group and the Premier Li-. After the EU–China Summit held in Brussels on 29th June 2015, the EU started showing more interest and both the parties discussed the mutual benefits of a common strategy, especially for matters concerning a possible synergy between OBOR and the Juncker’s Investment Plan (IPE), whose objective is the financing of the re-launch of the EU’s economy. The EU’s response to the OBOR appears to be of importance for at least three reasons: the EU’s unity in elaborating a concrete action in response to the OBOR and the modalities through which the EU will engage itself; the future of the EU–China relationship that will be strongly influenced by the way EU will participate in the project; and the EU’s image on the global scenario. A strong regional strategy will definitely contribute toward ameliorating its image as a global actor.

Conversely, a fragmentary strategy based mainly on the national interest of the member states will reinforce the idea of the Chinese leadership of an EU weakness in terms of foreign policy (Picciau, 2016).

The importance of cultural relations and the role of the soft power for China and the EU

During the last decades, the international relations have deeply been influenced by globalization and the resultant technological changes that have incremented the diffusion of the information and the mobility of the people. If, in the past, the cultural relations were mainly a matter reserved to the elites -especially through the exchanges between the royal courts and the ambassadors-, they have been now extended to contacts among

individuals -people-to-people-, networks, and non-state actors among others. All these new channels of cooperation now complement the traditional diplomacy, playing an influential role in the development of cultural relations among the states -but also regional entities such as the EU-, being totally part of their *soft power*. This concept was created by Joseph Nye in 1990 and is defined as the ability to obtain what you want through attraction rather than through coercion or payments (Nye, 2004). In other words, *soft power* can be understood as the capacity to achieve certain results without the use of military and traditional economic instruments -defined as *hard power*-. The state uses their *soft power* to become more attractive in the eyes of the other states, thereby spreading a positive image and strengthening their power on the global scenario. Joseph Nye has identified three main components of the *soft power*: culture, political values, and foreign policies.

Nowadays, the term *soft power* has probably achieved too much importance in the context of cultural relations. Despite the huge and undiscussed opportunities that the *soft power* can bring to a country, it is important to highlight, according to the author, that the cultural relations have another important dimension and role: to facilitate the mutual comprehension, to understand the other values, and to perform every effort to respect them in a natural way, controlling the attitude of imposing one's own values, and finding a way to make each own value work together for the well-being of the relation. Lawson (2006) defined the cultural cooperation as an instrument against the societies' tendency to absolutize themselves. The culture of the respect of each other's values should be the base on which the relations should be constructed. These will surely benefit the dialogue between all partners of the international community, favoring their capacity to find common solutions to the questions of common interest and to promote efficient global governance.

The improvement of the EU–China relations was influenced by the increasing role that the other components of the relations play today. Despite this, as has been already mentioned, the economic cooperation remains of interest and both parties seem to realize that the cultural relations, as well as the educational cooperation, represent the fundamental component of the relations and that the realization of a strong strategic partnership passes through the improvement of the cultural component, which is necessary to deepen the mutual knowledge and to establish a partnership based on the principles of mutual respect and equity. Europe and China have strong cultures and an immense cultural heritage; both entities have been strongly affected by each other's culture in the past. Nowadays, the reinforcement of the cultural component in their foreign relations is becoming important for both by bringing important advantage to their capacity of dialogue.

Furthermore, they are both member states of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions that highlights the importance of the intercultural dialogue and the cultural exchanges with all international partners as an instrument for global peace and stability.

The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), in its articles 165 and 167 states that the Member States should foster their cooperation with third countries and international organizations by supporting the cultural and educational cooperation. However, the attention to the cultural component of its external relations is quite recent. This is in part because of the member states consider the cultural policy as a part of their national identity rather than as a policy to be developed at the regional level. Effectively, a coordinated regional cultural foreign policy still seems secondary as compared to other regional policies. But, in respect of each member's identity and cultural policies, the role of the EU can be extremely important

through, for example, the establishment of a legal framework to facilitate the development of cultural activities, the exchange and circulation of ideas, the financial support of these activities, and the creation of networks and platforms that the members can share.

The Agenda for Culture in a Globalizing World (2007) had the objective to promote the inter-cultural dialogue and increase the cultural components in the EU's relations with third countries, having stressed that the EU is not only an economic power but also a social and cultural project, because of which it represents *soft power* founded on norms and values and serving as an inspiration for the world. The *Agenda* also provided the establishment of a group of experts on culture in the external relations of the EU and, following its recommendation, a senior advisor on culture has been appointed to the European External Action Service (EEAS). Also, in the European Parliament, the consciousness of the importance of the role of culture in the development of the EU *soft power* in the world has resulted in a 500.000€ fund for the implementation of a Preparatory Action - by the Commission DG EAC and eight cultural institutions and organizations- whose final report underlined that the EU has not yet well developed a comprehensive strategy in its external relations, included with strategic Asian partners as China, Japan, South Korea, and India. More specifically, the report stressed the fact that the EU still needs a global long-term vision in its relationships with China, the creation of programs in the field of education, culture based on a long-vision strategy, and the capacity to involve schools, universities, cultural institutions, artists, and other creative industries.

The importance that cultural relations have assumed in the foreign policy of the nations, appears particularly evident in Asian countries with a growing economy, that are increasing their budget for culture to strengthen their image at the global level. China's example is particularly impressive. In an article

published in the *People's Daily* (February 2007), the former Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao insisted on the importance of the promotion of a positive image of China using soft instruments such as cultural exchanges, academic exchanges, dissemination of the Chinese art exhibitions, export of the Chinese film industries, and publishers. He defined all these instruments as a bridge that unites the hearts and minds of the peoples of all countries (Onnis, 2011). The 12th Five-Year Plan -approved on March 14, 2011- stated that the cultural industry had to be transformed into a pillar of the industry in the following five years and that the cultural sector should represent at least 5% of the GDP -against <2.5% at present-. Even the former President Hu Jintao stressed on the necessity to reinforce the Chinese *soft power* during his speech at the 17th Party Congress held in October 2007. In an article published in *South China Morning Post* (28th March 2011), titled "Culture: a key priority in five-year plan", Professor Fan Zhou, the dean of Communication University of China's Institute of Cultural Industry, affirmed that the Chinese leaders consider the cultural industry as another way of exerting their influence because cultural products contain commonly accepted values that lead foreigners to embrace China (Jia, 2011). Giving a speech at a group study session of members of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee (December 2016), Xi Jinping has reiterated the importance of *soft power* in China's foreign policy by disseminating modern Chinese values and the charm of its culture to the world (Xinhuanet, 2016).

Some example can be helpful to understand the extent of this phenomenon: in just five years (2006–2011), the number of the Confucius Institutes in the world has increased from 122 to 826, as complemented by several Confucius classrooms targeting pre-university students. Today, they are based in 104 different countries (Hanban website), many of which are in Europe. Others examples to increase their visibility include

some Chinese cities that have embraced the concept of *creative city* to strengthen the local cultural creation. Nine of them have been proclaimed members of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN):² Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen cities of design; Harbin city of music; Chengdu and Shunde city of gastronomy; Jingdezhen, Suzhou, and Hangzhou cities of crafts and folk (China Daily, 2014).

The history has deeply influenced the way China is developing its international affairs; the desire to restore the ancient Silk Road is a clear example. The government is investing enormously to connect its past with contemporary society through the strengthening of museums, the organization of exhibitions and festivals, and, in general, through the valorisation of its culture and heritage. The improvement of the national museums' attractiveness represents for Asian countries in general an important instrument of their *soft power*. In the continent, the number of visitors to museums increased by 28%, as compared with a world average of 7%. However, the phenomenon appears particularly impressive in China: in 2013, the National Museum of China was the third-most visited museum in the world, with an increase in visits of 38,7% - compared to that in the year 2012-. The number of visitors of the Zhejiang Museum increased with an average of 75% between 2012 and 2013 (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2014). The investments in global media are also impressive, with the China's Radio International (CCTV) channel, for example, having more than 45 foreign language services.

The importance that China attributes to its culture and ancient civilization in its international relations is, therefore, an

² The *UNESCO Creative Cities Network* (UCCN) was created in 2004 to promote cooperation with and among cities that have identified creativity as a strategic factor for sustainable urban development.

important element to understand why, despite the European crises and its relative decline and despite the deep differences and divergences in values and norms, Europe continues to exert a sense of admiration in most of the Chinese because it is considered as the cultural centre of the West and, furthermore, only comparable to their own. For this reason, the European historical cities are one of the Chinese favourite tourist destinations in the world, after Asia. In 2013, the Louvre registered 400.000 Chinese visitors; the number has augmented 40% with respect to 2012 (Lincot, 2015). Is it not a case that the New Silk Road (OBOR) aims to reinforce the connectivity between Asia and Africa, and Asia and Europe. This important element has been mostly ignored by the Europeans, which explains why, concretely, in several areas -education, cultural products, cultural collaborations, etcetera-, the United States remains more attractive an option than Europe. They have also developed a solid cultural network in and with China to promote their interests, which has also strongly helped the development and consolidation of their economic relations. The cooperation in the film industry, museum, and educational fields are some of the most important examples.

Nevertheless, the attraction for the old European culture and civilization possess an important advantage for the EU: the fact that, contrary to the USA, it is seen as a partnership between civilizations -with strong economic interests- rather than as a geopolitical rivalry. Jonas Parello-Plesner when talking on commercial interest, which is something that can be extended to the global European strategy toward China -including therefore the cultural cooperation-, highlighted an important aspect. He sees -as by the realists-, that the EU's greatest weaknesses include the lack of a military force, which is a strong point because the absence of an important military presence in the Asia Pacific region, gives the EU greater leeway to pursue a trade strategy without triggering military rivalries with China (Parello-Plesner, 2013). The lack of a

geopolitical rivalry and the attraction for the European civilization, culture, and history, represents an enormous opportunity for Europe to strengthen a strategic partnership with China.

The development of cultural relations between China and EU

The EU–China political and cultural cooperation suffers particularly because of the several divergent positions and the different core values that characterize the bilateral relations. Jing Men defined these differences as “the differences between a bloc of liberal democratic states and an authoritarian state, and between a developed group and a developing country” (Men, 2012: 8). But, as stressed by Michael Reiterer, “EU and China have differences in values that can be clearly recognized. However, even deep-seated differences should not be the reason for non-action or exclusions; on the contrary, they should be an incentive for dialogue, engagement, and aiming at mutual learning” (Reiterer, 2014: 144). Understanding this aspect appear to be fundamental to understanding how the relations develop, the difficulties they must face, and the appreciation to be registered for progress.

The humiliation of China by the Western powers and the consequents unequal treaties signed after the Opium Wars during the 1800 is still present in the collective memory of the country. The “Chinese Dream” or the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation to return to its greatness, presented by Xi Jinping, is a concept that is deeply linked to the Chinese history and the national experience of the “century of humiliation” that began with the first Opium War (1839–1842) and ended with the Sino–Japanese War in 1945. The concept of “asymmetry” appears as a constant element all along the development of the relationship, representing a point of conflict. The concept of asymmetry in the field of inter-regional studies, as analysed by authors like Jurgen Ruland, refers to the fact that, in a

relationship between two regional entities, one party presents itself as the most developed and advanced and so to be “imitated”, which creates an imbalance of sorts between the parties involved in the relations. This is particularly true in the framework of the Euro–Asian relations and, for this reason, it is extremely important to understand the bilateral relations between Europe and China. In the case of Euro–Asian relations, the asymmetry finds its historical origins in the era of the European domination. It seems clear that this is an element integrated into the European and Asian visions of relations, with two different perspectives. Europeans often present themselves as carriers of “good practices”, as a model of fair values, as guarantors of a unique and fair value model for the economy, as the instructors and interpreters on politics with knowledge of how exactly cultural co-operations should be conducted, and so on. This aspect is a part of the so-called normative power, which has been conceptualized by Ian Manners and become quite popular in the analysis of the EU foreign policy. The normative power considers the values such as freedom, democracy, rule of law, and the fundamental rights as universal. However, greater importance is attributed to the ideological power to consider these values as normal “norms” in the international relations. In other words, according to Manners (2006, 2008), EU considers itself “value-driven” in its external relations. Among the Asians, the colonial heritage and the humiliation experienced form a part of the collective memory, affecting their susceptibility to the attitude of the Europeans as being more and more exacerbated. As Stephanie Lawson asserts, “European colonialism is still within living memory of much of the adult population throughout the region, and its legacy will remain for a long time to come in a whole range of institutions and practices. Many of them see certain aspects of contemporary globalization as the reincarnation of a form of Western colonialism or neo-colonialism” (Lawson, 2002: 3). Thus, social interactions cannot escape from

reciprocal prejudices based on the notion of “former colonial powers” vis-à-vis those of the “formerly colonized countries” (Fitriani, 2010: 73). Europe has been accused of perpetuating the Eurocentrism as a culturally tendentious approach that takes European and, more generally, Western ideas and values as natural (Heywood, 2007). Another definition of “eurocentrism” says that “Eurocentrism refers to the practice of viewing the world from a European perspective, with an implied belief, either consciously or subconsciously, in the pre-eminence of the European culture” (De Vylder, 2011: 1). It is evident that these dynamics have consequences not only on issues related more specifically to the bilateral relations between them but also in the manner in which they perceive economic, political, and cultural global issues.

Since the establishment of the diplomatic relations between the EU–China in 1975, their cultural relations have been largely underestimated to the advantage of the economic relations. Despite the signature of the EU–China Joint Declaration in 2007, the two parties have already called for the reinforcement of the cooperation in the field of culture; the year 2012 have been crucial for the progress toward the structuring of the EU–China cultural relations. In March 2012, the European Commission set up a group of Member States’ representatives from the ministries of culture and foreign affairs co-chaired by the Commission’s Directorate General for Education and Culture -in accordance with the Council’s Work Plan for Culture 2011–2014- to reflect on a common EU strategy toward third countries, like China. The report of the group’s work *United in Diversity. Culture in the EU’s External Relations: A Strategy for EU-China Cultural Relations* highlights how acting at the regional level can benefit all the members’ initiatives, thanks to the strengthening and sharing of information and the creation of networks. The release of the High-Level bi-annual People-to-People Dialogue (HPPD) in the same year (2012), which is devoted to the culture and

people-to-people cooperation -established by the Chinese Ministry of Culture Cai Wu and the European Commission Directorate General for Education, in the person of the commissioner Androulla Vassiliou-, and the EU-China Cultural Policy Dialogue mechanism represents an important step forward toward strengthening the bilateral relations and confirming the identification of the three pillars on which the relations were structured, namely: economic, political, and cultural, as confirmed during the 14th EU–China Summit held in Beijing in 2012, in which the European and Chinese leaders indicated that cultural exchanges are one of the three pillars of EU–China relations, which represents a move beyond economics and normal diplomacy toward the “meeting of minds and souls” (Lisbonne, 2015).

The objective of the establishment of these institutional mechanisms, which should constitute the support for the development of the third pillar, is to represent a guide for the development of the EU–China cultural relationships by the implementation of concrete programs and projects concerning culture, education, multilingualism, and youth. One of the first results of the HPPD has been the organization of the first EU-China Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2012, after the EU-China Year of Youth in 2011. During the former, a total of 194 activities -exhibitions, film festivals, conferences and seminars, study visits, art performances, etcetera- were organized at three levels: i) activities organized and/or co-funded by the EU; ii) member state’s activities with an EU dimension; and iii) bilateral member states’ activities, demonstrating that the initiatives taken at the regional levels can also serve to be

profitable for a healthy relationship between China and each of the member states.³

The years thereafter have been characterized by a certain positivity for the development of cultural relationships in 2013, which includes the importance of establishing cultural centers in each other's countries to concretely continue the implementation of cultural programs, which has been highlighted in the *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation*. A year later, Xi Jinping, during his speech at the College of Europe (Bruges, Belgium) on April 1, 2014, expressed his wish to establish a "Partnership of Civilizations", focusing on peace, cultural prosperity and growth" with the intention to include fully the culture and *soft power* in China's foreign strategy so as to affirm itself as a strong global power and reinforce its relations with its partners -in this case, with the EU.

In 2014, following the advice of the expert group provided by the *Agenda for Culture in a Globalizing World*, the EU established, for the first time, a cultural chargé in the EU Delegation in China. At the same time, China signed cultural memorandum of understanding with almost all European members and organized the Years of Culture with France, Germany, UK, Italy, and Spain as well as participated in important festivals such as the Europalia festival in Belgium (as a guest of honor), the Edinburgh International Festival, the Avignon Theatre Festival, or the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival, etcetera. Important collaborations have been established, for example between the Chinese Forbidden Palace and the Louvre, with German museums. At the occasion of the

³ The complete list of the activities can be founded at European Commission. EU-China Year of Intercultural Dialogue. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/culture/initiatives/eu-china-intercultural_en

celebration of the 40th anniversary of the bilateral relations in 2015, several exhibitions have been organized.

China is the country in which the EU is developing the largest number of projects in Asia in the fields of culture, education, and human rights. In the field of education, for example, from 2001 to 2013, the EU financed 57 Jean Monnet projects in Asia -chairs, modules, center of excellence, etcetera-, of which, 31 were in China. But, when is compared these projects with other regional areas, the effort towards China still appears largely insufficient. For example, during the same years, the EU Commission financed 41 projects in the USA and 31 in Canada (European Commission. Actions. Jean Monet website).

The exchange between artists and other actors in the cultural sector starts to be important. The fields of heritage and contemporary art have become two sectors in which the cooperation is of mutual interest -especially after the signature of the Joint Declaration on EU-China Cultural Cooperation of 2012-. However, several challenges and issues to deal with still remain. For example, the absence of a dedicated budget for the High-Level People-to-People Dialogue makes it difficult to forecast the potential of the cultural and educational exchanges in the near future beyond the existing mechanisms -for example, in the framework of the Creative Europe (2014–2020), the Erasmus+ program or the scholarships for students and artists supported by the Chinese government-. Therefore, whether these developments are related to the cultural cooperation and the relatively recent inclusion of people-to-people exchanges in the bilateral relations should be considered as an important step forward, with other necessary considerations.

If recently, because of the globalization process, the contacts between Europeans and Chinese have become closer, an important issue to be considered is regarding what can be defined as the content of the cultural relations that can be

brought to the knowledge of each other. The necessity to develop the capacity to deal with China is very important in all fields -in the business world, universities, cultural institutions, and regional, national, and local institutions-, and the capacity to deal with the dynamics that characterize the relations is just as much important; for example: with the human rights conflicts, the decline of the normative character of European countries in the face of Chinese power, and the Asian countries' desire for a better balance in cultural relations.

The economic development of Asians countries has given them a greater confidence and generated a stronger desire to build relations with Europeans on a more “symmetrical” level, not only on economic and political matters but also on the cultural matters, thanks to the greater budget allowances for yielding soft power, especially because Europe is losing its central position in the new emerging world order, to the advantage of the new emerging powers. This situation is particularly true for China. As Dominique Girard (2015) asserts, “There is in Asia a form of arrogance in the face of the relative decline of Europe and, in Europe, a strong reluctance to admit the arrival of Asia in the club of the powers”.⁴ Consequently, the capacity of dialogue even today remains confined to only specific situations.

At present, Europe is facing a China that is better equipped with instruments of diverse kinds -mainly economic- to respond to the European countries that attacks the violation of human rights and democratic values. At this point, it is important to note that the European normative power and its objective to spread its core values does not seem to influence China's

⁴ Written interview to Dominique Girard, former Executive Director of the ASEF (Asia Europe Foundation) realized by the author for her PhD Doctoral research on the 29 January 2015.

values (Vandewalle, 2015). Few examples here that are useful to understand include that at a meeting with the highest authorities of important Chinese universities in early 2016 Yuan Guiren -the Chinese Minister of Culture-, said that foreign books used in universities that promote Western values should be banned. According to some Beijing and Hong Kong media, the Ministry of Education had even submitted a questionnaire to certain universities in Beijing and provinces to investigate the use of foreign teaching materials in their activities with students (Tang and Zhao, 2015). The Chinese reaction to what can be defined as the normative attitude of the EU can have deep consequences for the European countries' economies. The 2010 Nobel Prize to Liu Xiaobo -intellectual condemned in 2009 to a sentence of 11 years of prison for inciting subversion of the state power-, for example, interpreted as a Western punishment from Norway to China, has cost the Nordic country not only a rupture of political relations but also a great loss to its economy. If before 2010, the Norwegian salmon exports accounted for 90% of total salmon imports in China, it fell to 30% after 2010, representing a serious loss for this sector, as indicated by the Marine Harvest Group that runs one of the largest salmon-producing companies (Milne, 2015). This example shows the conflict of values between European countries and China and the fact that the increasing dispose of economic instruments recently goes beyond the pure values and cultural sphere, causing significant economic damage to the countries. To attempt recuperation of the relations with China, the Norwegian Foreign Minister Borge Brende, voted for the entry of China as a permanent observer to the Arctic Council⁵.

⁵ The Arctic Council is a multilateral forum for discussing issues related to security, marine routes and energy. China is necessarily interested in this ocean area because of the submarine resources it contains and the new routes needed for its trade that can open to its maritime traffic.

Another example: after the imprisonment of Liu Xiaobo, Amnesty International asked the writers of the Netherlands' delegation -guest country of the Beijing Book Fair 2011- to protest showing their solidarity with the dissident putting the badge of Amnesty during the demonstration. Some of the writers decided not to participate. On the contrary, the rest of the delegation opted for an active participation and did not wear the NGO badge to argue that this gesture can damage the relations between China and their country -defining themselves as artists and not as activists-. This question raised a debate in The Netherlands that some of the writers present at the demonstration did not get the opportunity to meet Chinese dissident writers; but, the commercial results of The Netherlands were satisfactory, especially concerning the sale of books for children. Halbe Zijlstra, Deputy Minister of Culture, said that, "Being here in China is a good thing. Thanks to Dutch books, we make Chinese readers aware of our values, such as freedom of expression and freedom of the press." The Princess Laurentien before launching her new children's book *Mr. Finney and the World Upside Down*, said that, "We believe in the power of dialogue". China is an important market for European cultural industry and is considered as a priority factor for the Dutch publishing market. In her speech at the opening of the Fair, Halbe Zijlstra said that "The Dutch government wants to give a greater role to the economic aspect of cultural policy. This is one of the reasons why we are so pleased with our relations with China. China is one of the six non-European countries on which our international cultural policy is focused" (RNW Archives website). The Dutch government therefore seemed to be aware that the massive absence of its country's writers at the Fair -as a sign of protest- would have damaged the commercial results at the event and led to a real nightmare, as the next example will demonstrate. "We are not here to take a course of democracy: this time is over!"—said the former Chinese Ambassador to Germany, Mei Zhaorong, at the

Frankfurt Book Fair Symposium -the world's biggest publishing fair- held in 2009, when China was invited as a guest of honor. Immediately after his speech, he left the room with the Chinese delegation that accompanied him, protesting against the presence of the political dissidents Bei Ling and Dai Qing. The Fair titled “China and the World—Perceptions and Reality” was inaugurated directly by Chancellor Angela Merkel and the Vice President of China Xi Jinping -who later became President in 2013- with the objective of exorcising prejudices toward China, which proved to be a real nightmare for the organizers. As a result, the organizers were forced to compromise by letting the dissidents participate in the manifestation but without delivery of any discourse. Juergen Boos, the president of the event, was accused by the dissident Bei Ling to have allowed the Chinese delegation to control the program of the seminar, sustaining that it was a campaign of propaganda (Radio Free Asia, 2009). This event created a much discussed debate in Germany; the journal *Der Spiegel* used the heading “China, the Unwelcome Guest”, to which Zhao Haiyun, the spokesman for the China's General Administration of Press and Publication, said that, “instead of focusing on literature, German media are obsessed with the questions of human rights and censorship” (Radio Free Asia, 2009). China's General Administration of Press and Publication financed the translation into German and English of over 100 Chinese books to be sold during the Fair and directly invested \$7.5 million in the event, which placed the Chinese Committee in a position of power -the publishing industry is expanding very fast in China, as a part of its soft power strategy-. The decision of the German organizers to prevent the Chinese dissenters from expressing themselves -justified as a “compromise” by the organization- shows that, once again, China's growing status and its increasing investments in cultural events in Europe, in the face of reduction of the European budgets available for this type of events, are slowly attenuating the normative power that

Europeans have always advocated as a fundamental value without any scope of compromise.

To overcome all these differences and make the Europe–China relationship stronger, the persons involved in the daily management of the inter-cultural projects and their competences can play a very important role. Richard Sobey, the creator of several cultural international projects with an important experience in China, suggests that, considering the huge difference between the parties, it will be much better to focus on the similarities in aspirations and approaches rather than on the differences to make things despite all the difficulties (Sobey, 2011). Chen Ping, responsible for the EU–China project in the Chinese Ministry of Culture, stated that Asian people knew Europeans better than vice-versa and that their lack of knowledge about Asia leads them to make mistakes, such as mixing culture, politics, and human rights in the same matter. He also said that they must understand the Chinese and accept their way of working, their methodology, and their principles (Yi, 2011). Xu Jiang, Director of the National Academy of Art of Hangzhou, artist formed in Europe, and Commissioner of several Chinese and international exhibitions are of the same opinion. According to him, Europeans cannot look at Chinese art without their ideological filters (Yi, 2011). The success of the EU–China projects and programs depends on the capacity of the operators to find a balance between the rise of possible divergence. The Urban Academy project, titled *Better City Better Life*, organized by the Goethe-Institute with The College of Architecture and Pianification of the University of Tongji and other partners, has been considered as a real success because the organizers decided to concentrate the discussions and exchanges on questions related to the issues concerning the urbanism rather than on political and ideological issues. Eva Feng, who is responsible for the External Communication of the Himalayas Art Museum of Shanghai, partner of the project, affirmed that

open discussions on political and ideological issues would be interesting, but it would also put in danger the success of the project and “(it) is preferable to be a constructive worker rather than a tragic hero!” (Feng, 2011: 206).

Changing the mutual perceptions with positive attitude and finding a balance in their way of working together is not easy. The path still seems quite long, although the recent progresses at the bilateral level and the joint initiatives realized appear very positive. A clear long-vision strategy on their cultural relations is needed using all the instruments available and by creating new ones that are necessary to transform their bilateral relations in a strong partnership for the benefit of their people.

Conclusion

For a long time, the cultural cooperation between the EU and China has been considered marginal as compared to that in the economic sector. Since 2012, the establishment of the High-Level bi-annual People-to-People Dialogue has, in some ways, given a new structure to the bilateral relations, thereby consolidating the existence of the three pillars of cooperation, namely: economic, political, and cultural. The development of cultural sector in China and the huge investments in the sector by the Chinese government -as part of its *soft power* strategy- has been perceived as an opportunity for the European cultural industry. Although the economic cooperation remains the cornerstone of the relations, since few years, some important steps have been taken. China is, for example, the first destination for the European investments in culture and education in Asia, China sees the strengthening of the relations with Europe as a partnership between civilizations, and is engaged in investing more money to develop the relations with investments in the fields of culture and education. The number of cultural events and activities organized both in the European countries and in China has augmented considerably, such as the celebration of the EU-China Year of Intercultural Dialogue in

2012, during which 194 activities -exhibitions, film festivals, conferences and seminars, study visits, art performances, etcetera- have been organized. Nevertheless, much work remains to be done. The bilateral cultural relations are far from being explored. First, the cultural policy is considered by the European members as a national prerogative to protect each member's cultural identity, preventing the development of a cultural regional strategy of the long term. On the contrary, a coordinated action would be to sustain the member's cultural policies, acting as a complement policy, allowing to reinforce the members' capacities to deal with China in order to achieve common benefits. A long-term cultural strategy and a vision in its foreign policy are necessary for EU if it wants to reinforce its role and find a new place in the world. Both the parties need to implement a cooperation based on the long-term vision, especially considering that the bilateral relations are characterized by a mutual misunderstanding and divergences that prevent the strengthening of their partnership. The cultural relations remain in the international relations as a powerful instrument to understand and respect each other values and visions, allowing the establishment of relationships based on respect and equality. Both the parties need to work together to build an institutional structure in order to facilitate the cultural exchanges, facilitate the bureaucratic procedures, and envisage specific financial supports for the development of new projects and programs. This would allow the states and non-state actors -universities, cultural institutions, and artists- to promote the reciprocal knowledge, thereby allowing the circulation of ideas that contribute to the evolution of the human thoughts. The non-state actors play a fundamental role in the promotion of mutual knowledge and in the management of the differences and divergences, as the examples presented herein have showed, although they need the institutional and financial support to continue their work. More programs engaging the youth from different environments are warranted owing to their

role in the future responsibility in building a global society based on mutual respect and social justice. If Europe and China are able to achieve better cultural relations, it will have advantages and consequences on other areas of cooperation such the politics and the economy.

Finally, the OBOR strategy represents a further opportunity to straighten the EU–China relations, especially if both parts are willing to explore more than only economic cooperation, including the reinforcement of the connectivity between people-to-people through the concrete realization of programs and projects in the field of education and culture that could allow the formation of a new dialogue between two civilizations and the development of both societies.

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