



## SEMINAR ON “MASS COMMUNICATION AND EU-CHINA RELATIONS”

On 18 December 2012 the InBev-Baillet Latour Chair of European Union-China Relations of the College of Europe, together with the *Xinhua News Agency* Europe Regional Bureau, and the Madariaga-College of Europe Foundation, organised a seminar on “Mass Communication and EU-China Relations” at the Madariaga-College of Europe Foundation in Brussels. The seminar gathered European and Chinese officials, journalists, scholars and representatives of civil society who engaged in a lively, thought-provoking and constructive discussion. Participants expressed their interest in the topic and their support to the organisers for more such events in the future.

The seminar on “Mass Communication and EU-China Relations” was introduced in the context of the tenth anniversary of the EU-China Strategic partnership and the efforts made to enhance people-to-people exchanges. The EU-China partnership has come a long way since 2003: the trade volume exchanged between the two parties has increased fourfold and the volume of investments is forty times larger than in 2003. The two partners are becoming more interdependent than they were ten years ago. On the one hand, China is able to provide the market that will enable Europe to recover from the economic crisis. On the other hand, as China is trying to boost innovation productivity and transform its production model, the EU is seen as one of its top partners. Participants stressed that issues of global scale cannot be solved without collaboration between the EU and China.

The seminar was chaired by Prof. Jing Men, the InBev-Baillet Latour Chair of EU-China Relations at the College of Europe. Six speakers, three Europeans and three Chinese, discussed, in a warm and friendly atmosphere, a large array of issues relating to the development of mass communication and its impact on EU-China relations.

### ***Exchanges between the Chinese and European media***

One important issue addressed at the seminar was that mass communication needs to face the challenge presented by the speedy evolution of the financial markets and tackle the complexity of our globalised world. The media have to find a way to deal with the high velocity of decision-making. In order to ensure a break-through in a competitive world, most media and mass communication agencies focus on results. At a time when the Western media is suffering a tremendous crisis, Chinese media is thriving. European media should get used to different non-European perspectives, in order to be able to keep up the pace with the rapidly changing world.

China's soft power is growing very fast, but nonetheless China has an image of a hard power. Building trust in the relations with its partners is a true challenge. Against this backdrop, the presence of Chinese journalists in Brussels has rapidly increased from five in 2001 to 19 in 2006, and 43 today.

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China pays more and more attention to European events. Chinese stories focus mostly on the Euro crisis, security and trade issues. The Chinese media have secured a very good follow-up of events and provide high-quality and consistent reporting. As part of their strategy, they employ foreign experts on European issues. The European counterparts to Chinese journalists confirmed that the work of the latter is excellent as they are proactive, accurate with quoting and quick in reaction.

The impressive number of Chinese journalists in Brussels and other European capitals helps to project a more sophisticated picture of China. For example, the Chinese national news agency – *Xinhua* would like to become “one of the most important bridges between the EU and China”, while the *China Daily* newspaper has a mission to report “European-tailored China stories”.

*Xinhua News Agency*, established in 1931, has 172 bureaus worldwide, 33 in China alone, and releases stories in eight languages: Chinese, English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Arabic and Japanese. Its regional bureau based in Brussels is responsible for coordinating 42 subordinate offices across Europe. *Xinhua*'s offices in Europe work in 25 different languages, and it actively competes with other major media groups in Europe. As was introduced at the seminar, *Xinhua* was the first foreign media agency to cover the tragic bus accident (in which a group of Belgian students were killed) in Switzerland that occurred in March 2012. The video shot on the spot was later projected by BBC. It was also the first to report the success of Hollande in his Presidential election in France, several seconds faster than the local French media.

*China Daily*, founded thirty years ago, is also expanding its presence globally. It already has four offices in Europe and Africa, among which are London and Brussels. In order to establish itself in the global mass communication landscape, *China Daily* is practising co-branding with other global media. *China Daily* provides stories about political meetings and decisions taken in China, Chinese economic and social events and other stories of interest for the European public.

In a highly competitive environment it is very important to find a niche of need for information targeted to a specific group. The German Press Agency, Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA), has created a special platform called “Insight EU”. This initiative aims at providing in-depth understanding of EU decisions by integrating analysis and approaches both from the EU level and the Member States level. Since the articles start by giving a general understanding of the adopted legislation and then go more into detail, they are suitable not only for the general public but also for decision-makers.

### **Country image and perceptions**

Three competing narratives on China seem to exist in the EU. Firstly, China's status creates confusion as it fits neither in the category of developed countries (mostly OECD countries), nor in the category of developing countries. Secondly, China is admired for its great achievements in combating poverty and modernising the country. The EU sees China as a responsible power and recognises that it has challenges to face. Thirdly, there

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is a general suspicion linked to a certain 'communist stigma'. China's unwillingness to be involved in human rights discussions and sanction measures against third parties together with the military assertiveness is perceived as a threat to peace.

Although China is often portrayed as being a communist country with a strong economy and a regime which is opposed to democracy, from a Chinese perspective, China is not a communist country. Currently, it is at the preliminary stage of socialism. In other words, the Chinese government has the important task of improving the economic productivity and living conditions of the whole society. Even though China's GDP is growing quite quickly, as the second largest economy in the world, the country is facing big imbalances. The richest 10 percent of the population earn 60 times more than the poorest 10 percent. China strives to reduce production costs and energy consumption and improve efficiency. It is also important to note that China and Chinese leaders are not, in principle, opposed to democracy because it is seen as a means to achieving a decent life. This being said, participants clarified that democracy, as it is understood in the West (i.e. closely linked to the separation of power vertically, horizontally and the balance between political and civil forces), is unlikely to be implemented in China since the Chinese reality is different. China is, however, constantly changing and Chinese leaders are becoming more liberal and down-to-earth. It is very likely that the new generation of Chinese growing up now will become a driving force for even bigger and faster reforms.

### ***Lack of mutual trust in EU-China relations***

From a Chinese perspective, the European media working on the topic of China is both provocative and visionary. However, even though think-tanks have greatly contributed to the development of EU-China relations, much more has yet to be done.

Despite the increased presence of Chinese journalists, perceptions of China and the Chinese media are often marked by unclear relations between the Chinese government and Chinese policy-makers and Chinese media. Moreover, EU-China relations, as often pointed out by officials from both sides, are undermined by an overall lack of mutual trust, which resurfaces in diverse trade-related disputes such as the Huawei issue or the solar panel issue.

The lack of trust is enhanced by misunderstandings concerning media ownership and freedom of expression in China. These issues, coupled with the lack of transparency and understanding of the Chinese and European decision-making processes, lead to the fundamental problem of the lack of trust. Participants argued that a more open approach toward foreign media, in particular when it comes to press conferences after major events on EU-China relations, will be rather beneficial for China. This can be an opportunity to explain the Chinese stance to the European public and thus avoid country-labelling and, to a certain extent, help reshape the image of China. In the same line, it was suggested that China pays more attention to the large variety of media and to the necessity to treat all media in an equal manner.



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**Conclusion**

Despite the fact that huge differences exist between the EU and China, speakers at the seminar all agreed that they share many common challenges and they need each other. In a globalised world and one which experiences a rapid development of informatisation, media communication plays an important role in bringing information to people, increasing either mutual understanding or misunderstanding between different societies. In the field of EU-China relations, it is necessary to pay due attention to the role of the media, and a greater number of seminars and conferences should be organised to address such an issue.