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## Table of contents

- 1. A LONG TERM EU-CHINA RELATIONSHIP  
Jing MEN ..... Page 2
- 2. FROM REDISCOVERY TO NEW COOPERATION: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
CHINA AND CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE  
SONG Lilei ..... Page 8

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## A LONG TERM EU-CHINA RELATIONSHIP

Jing MEN\*

This year marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the EU-China Strategic Partnership. Yet, despite the fact that the governments on both sides wholly endorse the strategic nature of the relationship on paper, some members of the academia are not entirely convinced.<sup>1</sup> Both the EU and China must step-up their efforts to promote bilateral trust and mutual understanding through solid practices, if they are to convince observers that the two sides are indeed “strategic partners”. However, by taking a step back, one can see that the achievements in EU-China relations in the past 38 years are far from insignificant. From institutional arrangements to the development of numerous joint programmes and projects covering a wide range of areas, it is hard to deny that the EU and China have become close partners, not only with regard to bilateral issues, but also in matters of global importance.

This paper intends to argue that ups and downs are more than normal between two very different players like the EU and China. Despite disagreements and problems between the two, Brussels and Beijing have no other alternative than maintaining a long-term pragmatic working relationship which is important, not only to themselves, but also to the international community.

### **Objectives of EU-China relations**

Between 1995 and 2006, the EU issued a series of China policy papers, in 1995, 1998,<sup>2</sup> 2003 and 2006. In each of these publications, the EU stated specific objectives concerning the development of relations with China. These have undergone minor revision over the years, reflecting the changes in the international environment as well as in bilateral relations between the two actors, but have for the most part remained largely unaltered.

The EU's current China policy aims to:

- Engage China further, both bilaterally and on the world stage, through an upgraded political dialogue;
- Support China's transition to an open society based upon the rule of law and respect for human rights;
- Encourage the integration of China in the world economy by bringing it fully into the world trading system, and supporting the process of economic and social reform that is ongoing in China;

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Men, “Challenges to the EU-China Strategic Partnership”, *EU-China Observer*, 2012, issue 6, pp. 4-9.

<sup>2</sup> Two interrelated reports were published in 2000 and 2001 to evaluate the implementation of the objectives highlighted in the 1998 policy paper by the EU.

## InBev-Baillet Latour Chair of European Union-China Relations



- Raise the EU's profile in China.<sup>3</sup>

A closer look at these four objectives, in particular at the verbs selected by the European side, which include “engage”, “support”, “encourage”, seems to indicate that the EU takes a superior position in its relations with China. In other words, the EU's China policy seems to indicate that the People's Republic of China, as a late-comer to the current international system, has much to learn from the EU. The EU and China are unequal partners, with the former as a teacher and the latter as a student.

China does not share the EU's objectives in EU-China relations. When the Chinese government issued its EU policy paper in 2003 (the only policy paper on the EU), the three objectives it mentioned focused very much on equality and mutual respect. Indeed, it stated that China's aims are to:

- Promote the sound and steady development of China-EU political relations under the principles of mutual respect, mutual trust and seeking common ground while preserving differences, and contribute to world peace and stability;
- Deepen China-EU economic cooperation and trade under the principles of mutual benefit, reciprocity and consultation on the basis of equality, and promote common development;
- Expand China-EU cultural and people-to-people exchanges under the principles of mutual emulation, common prosperity and complementarity, and promote cultural harmony and progress between the East and the West.<sup>4</sup>

A comparison of the respective objectives demonstrates noticeable differences in the way the EU and China perceive each other. The EU's objectives demonstrate clearly its self-positioning both as a normative power and an economic power. Believing in the superiority of its norms and development model, the EU intends to transform China politically and economically and views such tasks both as a responsibility and as part of its ongoing efforts to extend its soft power globally. In contrast, China, conscious of its inferior position in the international system, and proud of its achievements through the reforms it has been conducting, desires an equal position in its relationship with the EU. Interestingly, the three objectives stated by China as early as 2003, coincide with the three pillars in EU-China institutional arrangements which were completed only in 2012, namely, the political dialogue, the economic and sectoral dialogue and the people-to-people dialogue.

The differences in their objectives concerning the bilateral relationship show that while the EU is reluctant to give up its patron status, China is getting increasingly assertive. Currently, the EU is still under the impact of the euro crisis, whereas China has become the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest economy in the world; the

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<sup>3</sup> See the following website on the European External Action Service, retrieved 21 October 2013, [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/eu\\_china/political\\_relations/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/eu_china/political_relations/index_en.htm).

<sup>4</sup> See *China's EU Policy Paper*, 13 October 2003, retrieved 21 October 2013, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/ceupp/t27708.htm>.

## InBev-Baillet Latour Chair of European Union-China Relations



EU is struggling between the conflicting interests of 28 Member States, and stays more divided than united in many areas, making it unnecessary for China to pursue a 'divide and rule' strategy. The relative change of comparative power and influence between the two sides, in addition to distinct political systems and norms, require relevant policy adjustment and adaptation from both sides.

### **The nature of EU-China relations**

Noticeably, neither the EU nor China has regarded the other as the most important partner on their foreign policy agenda. For the EU, aside from its focus on transatlantic relations, relations with neighbouring countries from Africa to Asia are no less important. However, China's position in the EU's foreign policy agenda has been increasing in recent years, due to both positive and negative developments in bilateral relations. On the one hand, the EU approves of China's continued reforms and increased economic 'opening up', and is eager to see the cooperation with China steadily broadened and deepened, both bilaterally and multilaterally. On the other hand, China's rise presents a global challenge. The fact that China, the country with the largest population in the world, can maintain an impressive GDP growth rate for more than three decades strongly challenges the claim that the end of the Cold War signalled the "end of history".<sup>5</sup> Its reform experience demonstrates that there is an alternative way of achieving development and growth. Such a growth model is not necessarily in line with the objectives of the EU's China policy.

China's current foreign policy attaches great importance to big power relations, as Beijing actively promotes a multipolar structure in the world.<sup>6</sup> Among the big powers, the US, for good or bad, always remains China's number one concern. Russia, as an influential neighbour and a member of the UN Security Council, is more important to China when it comes to strategic and security issues. The EU, as a regional organisation of 28 Member States, is often divided in its policymaking, and, thus, cannot live up to China's expectations to counterbalance the United States. Therefore, the EU is always overshadowed by the US or Russia in China's foreign policy agenda. The only time that the EU was given considerable attention by China was in 2003 and 2004, when the strategic partnership was established by the two sides. Yet, the EU's failure to lift the arms embargo as well as its readjusted transatlantic policy after 2003 obliged the Chinese leadership to re-evaluate the role of the EU in China's strategic design. In recent years, as China focuses more on its neighbourhood relations and its relations with the developing world, the EU can be said to be, at best, ranked second in terms of China's diplomacy.

Admittedly, while neither the EU nor China treats the other as the most important partner in the international arena, they have forged close

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<sup>5</sup> Francis Fukuyama announced "the triumph of the West" and "an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism" in his paper. See F. Fukuyama, "The End of History?", *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, No. 16, pp. 3-18.

<sup>6</sup> After Xi Jinping came to power, the Chinese foreign policy stated that they would be "taking relations with big powers as crucial; giving priority to the neighbours; treating ties with developing countries as fundamental; and taking multilateral framework as a major platform".

## InBev-Baillet Latour Chair of European Union-China Relations



cooperation on a wide range of issues. Yet, a look at the three pillar dialogue between the EU and China reveals that the first pillar, the political dialogue, and the third, the people-to-people dialogue, are much less developed compared to the second one, the economic and sectoral dialogue. In other words, trade and economic cooperation serve as the cornerstone in bilateral relations. Without trade and economic cooperation, EU-China relations are rather limited. Therefore, the nature of EU-China relations is 'doing business'. Based on the principle of mutual benefit, Brussels and Beijing should explore possibilities for increased cooperation, adding to that which was previously focused on economics and trade, and gradually extending to politics and public diplomacy.

Since the EU and China are 'business' partners, cooperation and competition coexist. Apart from rapidly growing trade volume and bilateral investment, the 'bra wars' in 2005, in which the dramatically increased trade inflows from China destroyed the textile trade balance between the EU and its importers, typified the problem of unequally distributed benefit in business relations. The many EU anti-dumping cases against Chinese imports can be regarded as Brussels warning China against the rising deficit in its trade relations. In recent years, 'reciprocity' becomes the key word in EU's economic and trade relations with China. In the coming EU-China investment agreement negotiations, the EU is expected to apply this principle of reciprocity with its Chinese counterpart in order to secure a more open market from China.

As previously stated, the EU regards itself as an economic and normative power and intends to exert influence on China's transition. In its relations with China, the EU often struggles between pragmatic economic interests and normative beliefs. Such struggles become increasingly difficult when the EU is in deep economic crisis and finds itself taking a backseat in the face of China's rising economic power. Needless to say, the soft power exertion goes in both directions. Beijing, in recent years, has become increasingly active in promoting its civilisation and culture to the world. As well as offering European students annual Chinese Government Scholarships to study in China, many Confucius schools and classes, supported by the Chinese government, have been set up in the EU, stimulating European interest in learning Chinese.

### **A long term relationship**

To a large degree, the EU and China are both partners in need and partners indeed. Both sides have made strategic development plans: the EU with the 2020 Strategy and China with the 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan. These plans "present potential for synergies to enhance cooperation for win-win results".<sup>7</sup> From energy security to sustainable development, from climate change to environmental protection, from urbanisation to agricultural modernisation, from information technology to cyber security, the EU and China have a large potential to share experience and to forge cooperation. Such cooperation is

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<sup>7</sup> *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation*, 23 November 2013, retrieved 2 December 2013, <http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/china/documents/news/20131123.pdf>.



## InBev-Baillet Latour Chair of European Union-China Relations



steadily increasing, both in depth and scope, and takes the long view, in order that both sides may continue to benefit from the partnership.

On the other hand, both the EU and China should have a realistic evaluation of each other. The EU, rather than concerning itself with what it *should* do, should revise its policy to better reflect what it *can* do with China. The idea of transforming China based on a Western liberal model may face more challenges in the future as a result of China's increasing assertiveness. Furthermore, the EU needs to develop a more pragmatic, down-to-earth attitude in its relations with China. Similarly, China should be realistic in how it positions the EU in its own foreign policy. If the EU is not perceived as a counterweight to the US, Beijing needs to reassess how much value the EU has for China both in terms of global governance and in the dynamic of US-EU-China relations.

In EU-China relations, 'domestic' factors also play a role. In most issue-areas the EU and the Member States jointly make decisions. Unlike China, which is a sovereign state, the EU is distinct as a regional organisation, with its decision-making characterised by both supra-nationalism and inter-governmentalism. There is more disaccord than accord when the EU and its Member States need to make decisions that affect interests of some members. Even at the EU level, disagreements between the Council, the Commission, and the EEAS are often in the news. Since the Lisbon Treaty came into effect, the EU has two Presidents, but nobody can tell clearly who represents the EU in its external relations. At recent EU-China summits, both Presidents were present, giving the Chinese the impression that the EU is becoming increasingly complicated rather than simplified in its structure. Nevertheless, China seems to adapt well to these features of the EU. First of all, the Mission to the EU is becoming one of the largest Chinese overseas embassies. Over 100 diplomats are busy in Brussels dealing with many EU institutions. Secondly, the Chinese embassies in the Member States are as active as the Chinese Mission to the EU, developing cooperation at the bilateral level, and strengthening Chinese diplomacy in Brussels. Third, China is learning from its experience with the EU that the problems between the European Commission and the Member States will continue to be a factor in EU-China relations. Speaking with one voice is a pipe dream for the EU.

This paper does not intend to discuss whether China is pursuing a 'divide and rule' strategy or whether the Member States find themselves in opposition because of conflicts of interest in the face of problems in EU-China relations. Disagreements will always occur and should be dealt with by both Brussels and Beijing pragmatically. As a matter of fact, it would be unimaginable if the EU and China were not harassed by disagreements. The development in bilateral cooperation and the enhanced institutionalisation of EU-China relations over the last three decades demonstrates that the leaderships on both sides recognise the complicated nature of the partnership and have a long term view of the relationship.

The immediate future of EU-China relations will continue to be dominated by economic and trade interests as many EU Member States are still in the shadow of the economic crisis and it will take some time for the Euro to get back its vitality. Moreover, China is in the process of economic



InBev-Baillet Latour Chair of  
**European Union-China Relations**



development towards global economic power. All in all, serious commitment is needed from both sides in order to set up a working agenda on bilateral relations. In the long term, the development of a strategic view is of particular importance for both sides.





## FROM REDISCOVERY TO NEW COOPERATION: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHINA AND CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

SONG Lilei\*

Affected by changes in the international system and ideological differences, relations between China and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have experienced some fluctuations. By examining the development and problems of China-CEE relations over the past 65 years, this paper intends to document the evolving relationship between China and CEE. It shows that while China's economic links with the CEE were previously weaker than those with Western Europe, the situation has been changing in recent years. While the EU faces a sovereign debt crisis, CEE countries are confronted with additional financial difficulties. They find themselves in need of a new, reliable economic partner, and China may prove to be a good alternative. It is, moreover, in China's interest to develop closer cooperation with CEE as this will help upgrade and diversify both China's foreign trade and its overseas investment options. Both China's 'Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with CEE', declared in 2012, and the establishment of a Secretariat for Cooperation in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing, can be regarded as a new start in Sino-CEE relations.

### **Review of China-CEE relations**

China established diplomatic relations with the vast majority of CEE countries as early as 1949.<sup>1</sup> During the Cold War period, the two sides developed economic ties and political communication. It is this shared history on which China bases its claims of traditional friendship and historic cooperation with CEE.<sup>2</sup> The history of China-CEE relations in the past 65 years can be divided into five periods.

The first period dates from 1949, when the People's Republic of China was founded, to the early 1960s. During this period, the Communist parties of CEE countries and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established and maintained close contacts and exchanges, and benefitted from mutual

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese diplomatic practice distinguishes among the 16 Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries according to their Europeanisation process and their status in relation to the EU. The 16 CEE countries include the 11 new EU members, two candidate countries: Montenegro (has begun accession negotiations) and Macedonia; three potential candidates: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. In short, the concept of CEE in this article contains all of the former socialist Eastern Europe (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and Yugoslavia).

<sup>2</sup> "Chinese Premier meets Central, Eastern European leaders on cooperation", *People net*, 28 November 2013, retrieved November 2013, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90883/8468729.html>.

## InBev-Baillet Latour Chair of European Union-China Relations



learning and sharing of ideas on their respective experiences of a socialist revolution and state construction. China sent many students to CEE to receive professional training and to learn European languages. These students played an important role in the development of China's infrastructure in the subsequent years.

The second period extended from the 1960s to 1978, when China launched its reform and 'opening-up' policy. China's relationship with the CEE countries was strongly affected by the split between China and the Soviet Union. With the deterioration of China-USSR relations, the vast majority of the CEE countries chose to follow Moscow, thus, cutting off contact with the CCP almost entirely. The bilateral state-to-state relations were, however, maintained at a low level.

The third period lasted from 1978 to 1989. Due to the fact that China lacked reform experience, Beijing sent observer delegations to explore and gain experience from CEE countries. As a result of Sino-Soviet detente, the inter-party relations between China and the CEE countries were gradually resumed. The exchange of visits of senior leaders was increased and economic relations were enhanced since the mid-1980s. However, the lack of common ideology halted the short-term (1986 -1989) recovery of the relationship between the ruling communist parties.

The fourth period started with the political upheaval in Eastern Europe in 1989 and continued till 2011. It can be divided into three phases. The first phase, from 1990 to 1995, saw the adjustment of relations between China and CEE countries. After the disintegration of the USSR, the Soviet dynamic, which had been so influential in the cooling of China-CEE relations, was removed. Economic relations were at the top of the agenda in bilateral relations. In the second phase, between 1995 and 2004, China developed friendly relations with CEE countries based on the Budapest Principles.<sup>3</sup> During these years, the Taiwan issue, the Tibet issue, as well as the human rights issue began to affect bilateral relations. For instance, LIEN Chan, President of the executive branch of the government of Taiwan known as "Executive Yuan"), was invited to pay a visit to the Czech Republic in June 1995 where he was received by both the Czech President and Prime Minister. The Czech President Vaclav Havel openly advocated a 'two China' principle during a special commemorative session on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations and supported Taiwan's 'return' to the United Nations. Furthermore, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) established diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 1999.<sup>4</sup> In the third phase, from May 2004 to January 2007, ten CEE countries joined the EU. As a result, their China policy has been

<sup>3</sup> When China's ex-President JIANG Zemin visited Hungary in July 1995, he mentioned five basic principles for the development of bilateral relations between China and CEE countries. For further information, please see "The relationship between China and Hungary", *People net*, 20 June 2011, retrieved 30 September 2013, <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/8198/224529/224530/14951260.html>.

<sup>4</sup> China was in favour of the UN General Assembly resolution of acceptance of FYROM as a member of the United Nations, using the temporary name "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" on 7 April, 1993. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China and Macedonia", 20 March 2013, retrieved 30 September 2013, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_chn/gjhdq\\_603914/gj\\_603916/oz\\_606480/1206\\_607184/](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/gjhdq_603914/gj_603916/oz_606480/1206_607184/).

## InBev-Baillet Latour Chair of European Union-China Relations



included in the EU's China policy framework. Under the new situation, in order to enhance its relations with the CEE countries, the Chinese President at the time, HU Jintao, paid a state visit to Poland, Hungary and Romania, and issued a joint statement with the three countries, aiming to enhance political trust and establish a "friendly and cooperative partnership".

The fifth period began with the announcement of a series of cooperation projects between China and CEE countries that the then Premier WEN Jiabao made during the first China-CEE leaders' meeting in Warsaw in April 2012.<sup>5</sup> The CEE countries, with their open political environment, comparative advantages and low investment cost, were not only an important emerging market, but also a major investment destination for China. Following the increase in China-CEE economic cooperation, a strategic document, known as the Bucharest Outline, was issued during the third China-CEE leaders' meeting in Bucharest, Romania, on 26 November 2013.<sup>6</sup> The Bucharest Outline affirmed three principles of cooperation between CEE and China: "mutual respect; equality and mutual benefit; and win-win cooperation".<sup>7</sup>

As a whole, the China-CEE relationship has experienced ups and downs in the past 65 years. Overall, due to the many differences between the two sides, both politically and with regard to the disparity of economic scale, China and the CEE have had difficulties in reaching mutual understanding.

### **Three groups of CEE countries**

After the end of the Cold War, all CEE countries pursued a 'turning to the West' strategy, and gave priority to joining NATO and the EU. CEE countries were eager to start the process of 'Europeanisation'; becoming militarily in line with NATO and politically close to the EU. Against this background, while most are in favour of economic cooperation with China, they are suspicious of China's political clout and rising military capacities. Nevertheless, CEE countries have diverging positions over two main issues: how to manage China's impact on the EU economy and how to engage China politically. Among the CEE, three groups can be identified: 'assertive industrialists', 'accommodating mercantilists' and 'EU followers'.<sup>8</sup>

The small group of 'assertive industrialists' consists of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia, who have limited political trust in China and seek to distance themselves from China. This group insists on a stronger EU position towards Beijing. Similarly, they do not want to succumb to the lure of the Chinese market. There are less high-level visits between China and these 'assertive industrialists'. In 2012, WEN Jiabao became the first Chinese Premier

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China's Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries", 26 April 2012, retrieved 30 September 2013, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/wjbispg/t928567.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> "Bucharest Outline of China – CEE cooperation", *Xinhua Net*, 26 November 2013, retrieved 30 November 2013, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/2013-11/26/c\\_118305064.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/2013-11/26/c_118305064.htm).

<sup>7</sup> H. Cui, "Latest reunion builds on past gains", *China Daily Europe*, 29 November 2013, retrieved 30 November 2013, [http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2013-11/29/content\\_17140191.htm](http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2013-11/29/content_17140191.htm).

<sup>8</sup> According to J. Fox and F. Godement, *A Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, London: European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2009, pp.11-13.

## InBev-Baillet Latour Chair of European Union-China Relations



to visit Poland in 25 years. The political dialogue between China and this group is less developed. Human rights, democracy, freedom, and the Tibetan issue constitute obstacles to the development of bilateral relations. Furthermore, the trade imbalance has been increasing the last few years. Although China is Poland's largest trading partner in Asia and Poland is China's largest trading partner in the CEE, Poland has a serious trade deficit with China. In 2011, the trade volume between China and Poland was US\$13 billion, while Poland's trade deficit with China hit US\$8.89 billion. Poland's trade deficit with China increased to US\$10.391 billion in 2012.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, China has a negative image in the mainstream media, non-governmental organisations and is portrayed negatively in political reports in this group of countries. According to a Pew poll conducted in 2013, when asked whether they had a favourable or an unfavourable view of China, only 43 percent of the people surveyed in Poland answered positively, while other 43 percent claimed to have a negative impression. The results of the same poll in the Czech Republic were even worse, with 34 percent of those surveyed having a positive and 55 percent – a negative impression of China.<sup>10</sup>

The 'accommodating mercantilists' include Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Serbia. These countries believe that good political relations with China will lead to commercial benefit for themselves. They have developed friendly relations with China and support the latter's 'one China policy' and its position on the Tibetan issue. 62 percent of the Romanian respondents to the above-mentioned poll have a positive view of China and 65 percent of Bulgarian respondents were not worried about China's military advancement.<sup>11</sup> Unlike his Czech counterpart, the Slovak President was present at the Olympic Games in Beijing.<sup>12</sup> In June 2009, during his tour eastwards, the then President of China HU Jintao visited Russia, Croatia and also Slovakia – the only EU Member States included in the tour. Serbia inherited the traditionally friendly policy of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia toward China and has the highest number of cooperation projects with China among the 16 CEE countries. The Kesi Tuo Primorac thermal power plants and the Serbian national highway are among the projects that are being built. Furthermore, the proposed construction of a railway across Hungary and Serbia is a landmark joint project being undertaken by China and this group.

The 'European followers' are those Member States that prefer to defer to the EU when managing their relationship with China, they are followers rather than leaders. The States in the Western Balkans which recently joined or

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<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Peoples Republic of China, "China's relations with Poland", November 2013, retrieved 30 September 2013, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_chn/gjhdaq\\_603914/gj\\_603916/oz\\_606480/1206\\_606722/sbgx\\_606726/](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/gjhdaq_603914/gj_603916/oz_606480/1206_606722/sbgx_606726/).

<sup>10</sup> "Opinion on China", *Pew Research Global Attitudes Project*, updated in July with polling data from 2013 spring survey, retrieved 30 September 2013, <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/24/survey/15/map/>

<sup>11</sup> "Transatlantic Trends 2012", *German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) Annual Survey*, retrieved 30 September 2013, <http://trends.gmfus.org/transatlantic-trends/>.

<sup>12</sup> R. Fürst and G. Pleschová, "Czech and Slovak Relations with China: Contenders for China's Favour", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol.62, no. 8, 2010, p.1378.

## InBev-Baillet Latour Chair of European Union-China Relations



would like to join the EU, including Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, are part of this group – they are 'European-spirited' and tend to follow EU's position. They do not consider their relationship with China as central to their foreign policy. Their main concerns are to maintain stability and consolidate democracy as well as to ensure regional security. Based on traditional factors as well as pragmatic national interests, the 'European followers' hope to expand trade and economic cooperation with China, but have less exchanges and communications with China than the other CEE countries. These Western Balkan countries are not only eager to gain EU membership, but also regard the US-led NATO as the protective umbrella for their security and attach great importance to the strategic partnership with the United States.

### **China's 'soft power' policy faces challenges in the CEE**

China has invested heavily in order to exert its 'soft power' in CEE countries in recent years. Since 2009, Chinese Cultural Festivals have been organised in Poland, Bulgaria and other CEE countries. These festivals include concerts, exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art and ink painting, China National Day photo exhibitions, China Film Weeks and other cultural activities. By the end of 2012, 23 Confucius Institutes and 58 Confucius Classrooms had been established in 12 of the CEE countries.<sup>13</sup> The then Premier WEN Jiabao called for closer cultural and people-to-people exchanges with these countries, especially in relation to youth and the media.<sup>14</sup> However, China's 'soft power' in CEE is constrained by a cognitive gap between China and these countries. China still has a lot to learn about public relations and public diplomacy.<sup>15</sup>

First of all, Chinese 'soft power' is not well received at the political level because of the region's communist past. China has utilised information technology including radio, television and blog platforms to enhance the impact of traditional propaganda efforts and to better public understanding of China's political system and foreign policy. For example, China Radio International (CRI) and its online website has launched new channels introducing various aspects of China's political, economic and cultural life/practices, targeted specifically at CEE audiences. These programmes are broadcasted in 7 CEE languages: – Czech, Serbian, Romanian, Albanian, Bulgarian, Hungarian and Polish.<sup>16</sup> This, unfortunately, has proved rather ineffective since the CEE countries link today's China with the Soviet Union in the Cold War period. The communist ideology they used to share with China only provokes antipathy to this Asian power, as anti-socialist stances in CEE are sometimes even stronger than those in Western countries. The memory of the Stalinist socialist period and the Brezhnev Doctrine has a direct impact on

<sup>13</sup> "Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms", *Hanban net*, retrieved 30 September 2013, [http://www.hanban.edu.cn/confuciusinstitutes/node\\_10961.htm](http://www.hanban.edu.cn/confuciusinstitutes/node_10961.htm).

<sup>14</sup> "Wen outlines proposals on building closer China-Central, Eastern Europe ties", *Xinhua net*, 26 April 2012, retrieved 30 September 2013, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-04/27/c\\_123044233.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-04/27/c_123044233.htm).

<sup>15</sup> D. Shambaugh, "China's propaganda system: institutions, processes and efficacy", *The China Journal*, no. 57, 2007, p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> "Description of China Radio Imitational (CRI)", *CRI net*, 26 March 2013, retrieved 30 September 2013, <http://gb.cri.cn/cri/gk.htm>.



## InBev-Baillet Latour Chair of European Union-China Relations



the way China is perceived and contributes to the creation of a negative image of China in CEE. They tend to believe that Western norms and values are useful to transform China. In their eyes, China remains “Other”; a rising power that counters the “Western values community”.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, Central and Eastern Europeans hold a relatively unfavourable attitude toward China's ‘soft power’ tactics. As most CEE populations learn about China from their own media and publications, they are suspicious towards Chinese propaganda and messages issued by Chinese official sources. Since the 1990s, CEE countries have been actively building their civil societies. They are more willing to accept the information distributed by civil groups and non-governmental organisations. It is difficult for China to bridge the cognitive gap. The information broadcast to the public in CEE countries focuses mainly on economic achievements and traditional Chinese culture. However, language, arts and other cultural exchanges cannot eliminate the negative impact of the “China threat theory” and the over-emphasis of economic growth only serves to fuel CEE concerns about China's rise, adding to the fear that an increasingly powerful China may destabilise the regional security in the near future.<sup>18</sup>

Thirdly, the lack of mutual understanding hinders China from playing its ‘soft power’ card in CEE. China's propaganda is based on a Chinese perception of what CEE countries should know rather than on what they want to know. The public in CEE countries are, above all, concerned about China's political reform, the adjustment of China's foreign policy, and the social problems ordinary Chinese people face.<sup>19</sup> Similar to the CEE publics, a majority of Chinese scholars believe that CEE publics have a limited understanding of China, while Chinese publics have a limited understanding of CEE too.<sup>20</sup> In the framework of the aid agreement signed between China and Macedonia in early 2011 and upon the request of the Macedonian government, China offered 23 school buses for free. This decision provoked a heated discussion in China. Most Chinese Weibo users said that “they do not know where Macedonia is and hardly understand why China offers aid to Macedonia”.<sup>21</sup> A Chinese Foreign Ministry official responded by stating that “the Chinese government needs to fulfil its international obligations”.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> D. W. Larson and A. Shevchenko, “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy”, *International Security*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2010, p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> R. Denny, “The ‘China threat’ issue: Major Arguments”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 8, 1996, p. 758.

<sup>19</sup> The author talked about this issue with some diplomatic officers, including Romania's Consul General, Bulgaria's Consul General and the Economic Consul of Hungary in Shanghai.

<sup>20</sup> L. Dong, “Cognitive and influencing factors of Chinese scholars on China-EU relations-based on the Chinese people see the EU 2010 survey”, *Foreign Affairs Review*, no. 5, 2012, p. 81.

<sup>21</sup> Netizens survey on Netease's blog forum shows 2810 votes expressed dissatisfaction with the Chinese decision to send aid to FYROM, while only 286 votes understood the decision, which accounted for only 9 percent. Retrieved 30 September 2013, <http://blog.163.com/hot/252/>.

<sup>22</sup> “Foreign Ministry: school bus donation to Macedonia reflects China's international obligations”, *People net*, 29 November 2013, retrieved 30 September 2013, <http://world.people.com.cn/BIG5/8212/191617/9491/211918/16422676.html>.



InBev-Baillet Latour Chair of  
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**Conclusions**

The increasing importance of China in the foreign economic and trade agenda of CEE provides opportunities for China to develop public and cultural diplomacy in this region. The immediate goal for China's public diplomacy in CEE is to consolidate the existing diplomatic achievements, create mutual understanding and win support from local governments and civil institutions. Needless to say, China needs time and patience to evaluate whether its influence in CEE countries goes beyond economics.