



CHINA-EUROPA FORUM

## **Three China-Europa Forum preparatory meetings in London, Barcelona and Saarbrücken have contributed to changing the nature of the forum towards a collective adventure.**

*In autumn 2008 a subsidy from the European Commission enabled us to organise three preparatory meetings in Europe. Because of this support and the warm welcome from local organizers combined with the dynamism of the organising team and the quality of methods applied, the three meetings devoted to identifying issues on which European society would interact with Chinese society had a decisive role in giving a new face to the China-Europa Forum.*

*The cancellation of the 11th EU-China Summit, announced when the Barcelona preparatory meeting was organised, illustrated the need for the Forum: diplomatic relations were powerless when faced with a gap of misunderstanding which is widening between European and Chinese societies. The presence of journalists, a representative of the European Commission and members of the coordinating team from the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong provided a useful look in from the outside.*

### **In brief, the three European meetings:**

- Assembled 180 people from 20 European countries who have become real players in co-building the society-to-society dialogue;
- Managed to contribute to a change in the nature of the forum;
- Created a cordial atmosphere with the financial support of the European Commission and a warm welcome from local organisers;
- Used methodology in conformity with the objective: a bottom-up approach;
- Provided a wide range of proposals which will be compared in the coming weeks with the proposals from China.

### **Background:**

The success of the second biennial of the China-Europa Forum in October 2007 had been a real challenge: holding 46 simultaneous workshops in 23 different European cities and then bringing together the thousands of participants for the plenary sessions in Brussels, all within nine months. Organising a similar biennial two years later in China without a continuation of dialogue between the two, without a widening of the dialogue to other participants and other topics and without a change in the method of preparation, would certainly have been useful, interesting and even spectacular. But much more was required: **to make the forum a truly permanent and comprehensive dialogue platform between European and Chinese societies**; to transform specific meetings into continuous dialogue; to find a way of creating new dialogues each time the need was felt; and finally, to entrench on both sides this dialogue in society. Therefore the challenge noted by the organisers had become an even more formidable challenge as profiled with this change!

Just after the closing of the plenary on 7 October 2007, this change was put in building site. It was necessary to conceive a new method of management and **governance** of the forum; to set up

**two co-ordinating hubs** in Hong Kong and in Europe; to imagine **the anchoring of the various workshops** in society; to rethink the Forum **website** as a tool for continuous dialogue rather than a showcase for meetings; to follow up the **actions** taken in the various workshops of the forum; and to seek new **financing arrangements**.

**In 2008, three European preparatory meetings contributed to this change in a decisive way.**

*To understand the change, it must be remembered that the second biennial meetings of the Forum had had to be conceived in a way that was **centralised** and **directive**. The Charles Leopold Mayer Foundation for Human Progress, the main organiser, had proposed the format, the list of workshops and how to prepare for the latter. Now comes a change of scenery. Each participant becomes an equal player in the building of the society-to-society dialogue, meaning that each can participate through ideas, networking and initiatives. The format of each workshop has also become negotiable depending on subject matter and the vision of those who operate it. This is more than ready-to-wear, it's made to measure! Everyone is part of a collective adventure.*

- After repeated contacts by the Forum's European team with all those Europeans who had been informed of the Forum, 300 people expressed an interest and 180 of those actually took part in one of the meetings. In total, the meetings brought together people from 20 European countries - from Ireland to Bulgaria, from Sweden to Portugal. This diversity itself is a great encouragement.
- The three meetings, in the unanimous opinion of participants, were held in cordial and studious atmospheres. Each, indeed, was co-organised by a local partner: the London School of Economics in London, the Generalitat of Catalonia at the Casa Asia in Barcelona and the foundation ASKO-EUROPA in Saarbrücken. One university, one of the main regions of Europe, a German foundation: a good symbol of the institutional diversity of engagements in dialogue between European and Chinese societies.
- The objective: to identify widely the topics that the Europeans would like to approach at the forum. For each of these topics, the aim was also to think of the "pillars" which would provide a solid and durable foundation for each dialogue.

### **The methodology of preparation and animation**

*The working method used for the European meeting was well adapted. Only half of the participants in these meetings had actually participated in the second biennial meeting. For the others, the Forum was at its beginnings as an interesting idea, a laudable goal but nevertheless abstract. Moreover, in common with any large-scale process, the Forum could appear so vast and diverse that it was difficult for a newcomer to get an overall idea and then find his or her place in it.*

- At the London meeting we reached more than 100 workshops proposals. By the end of the meeting in Saarbrücken we had 210. Enabling each participant in the European meetings to identify his or her own added value in this multifaceted process supposes that each would have both an overview of all proposals as well as detailed information regarding topics of particular individual interest. This double requirement reflects only the permanent requirement of the Forum: to combine the diversity of geographical and socio-professional origins of the participants and the topics approached within the unit of a global society-to-society dialogue.
- The adopted format has solved the problem of squaring the circle. At the end of two hours of meeting, newcomers began to move with ease and familiarity through this phase and information. On the one hand, participants had an overall vision of the forum through the **list** of the various pre-existing proposals which were classified in a logical order by groups and sub-groups, and on the other hand they had a detailed vision for each proposal through a "**Concept map**" identifying the various «pillars» already cited for the theme.

- After an overview of the objective, the methods and the progress of the Forum by Pierre Calame, the participants worked in groups of five to 10 people around a table. These working groups enabled newcomers to learn from the "veterans" who had already taken part in previous biennial meetings and to understand in a more concrete form the spirit of the Forum.
- It was then a matter of each participant understanding what was expected of him or her: to advance new proposals on geographical, intellectual, social or media pillars for the existing proposals; and to formulate new proposals which would be admissible only insofar as they themselves or other participants could provide consistency by proposing pillars on which it could rely.
- Computerising these proposals made it possible to present a synthesis of the work done over the previous day. This immediacy of recovery, showing how much the proposals of each group were taken seriously, was for many illustrated by the quality of work on the second day.

### **A new stage begins...**

With the completion of the three European meetings, a new stage begins: a coming and going between the Chinese and European partners in this collective process for pairing the Chinese and European proposals in order to gather related themes, to discern those workshops which could be the subject of a meeting in July 2009 under the third biennial meeting of the Forum, and to identify those which require the commitment of a preliminary dialogue, something which will undoubtedly lead to a meeting only in 2011 at the fourth biennial of the Forum in Europe.

The presence of outside observers has been valuable. The attendance in Barcelona of Mr Etienne Reuter from the European Commission was greatly appreciated and showed the importance that the Commission, beyond the subsidy, attached to the Forum. The press conference also showed that the European media, notably absent from the second biennial meeting, were beginning to pay attention to these original dynamics. The presence of Chinese journalists confirmed the importance that China attached to this approach.