



China-Europa Forum
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CHINA-EUROPA FORUM

Presentation of the China-Europa Forum

Background, objectives, format, achievements, prospects

June 2011

2005 - The foundation of the Forum

The Forum was founded in 2005 as a result of a joint initiative between the Henri Fok Foundation in Hong Kong and the Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation for Human Progress in Switzerland. The initial objective was to organise a think-tank on the lessons China could draw from the process of European construction, for a Chinese audience largely made up of intellectuals. The innovative aspect of the project was the invitation of **important figures in European construction**: a dozen European personalities came to Nansha, a new town created by Henri Fok near Canton, to share their experience with 300 Chinese intellectuals. The meeting was so successful that the decision was taken **to continue the exchange of ideas through biennial meetings**, organised alternately in China and Europe.

2006 - From conference to "society-to- society" dialogue

While preparing for the second set of meetings which was to take place in 2007, the Forum experienced its first change in direction. China had become highly fashionable in Europe. Countless conferences were held in which the Chinese experience was debated. There seemed little point in organising another one. Conversely, in a context of increasing interdependence between China and Europe, we observed that **understanding between the two societies remained difficult** and we could see the need for inventing **new terms for dialogue between societies**, in order face our **common challenges** together.

The objectives, format and methods of the China-Europa Forum were therefore redefined. It aims to become the "**prototype for global dialogue between two societies**". The Forum Charter clearly sets this out:

- **the objective** is to ensure that Chinese and European societies provide mutual feedback on their experiences and their ideas to enable them to instigate changes that are conducive to reaching a truly sustainable form of development;
- **ethics** are based on mutual respect. The two societies take part in the discussions on an equal footing. Both sides shall refrain from making value judgements. The contribution of participants shall be personal;
- **the work tools used** shall evolve over time and are designed to ensure the **fostering of long-term dialogue**, symbolised by the creation of a common website (www.china-europa-forum.net);
- **dialogue shall be interactive.**

Regular major meetings (initially every two years, and now every three) are the high points of the project allowing us to mark the completion of a particular phase, expand dialogue to include other topics and other participants, and to identify common challenges.

The format chosen for the Forum reflects **the twofold objective of diversity and unity** in the dialogue between our societies. Diversity is derived from the societies involved and includes geographical, socio-professional and thematic diversity. To embody this, the Forum is organised into numerous different workshops, either socio-professional (people from the same environment discussing their position in society together), or thematic (participants of diverse origins pooling their ideas and experiences on a given topic).

The concept of unity is embodied in the two major cultural and geopolitical entities and the mirror of their shared challenges serving to unite them. To symbolise this twofold objective of diversity and unity, the 2007 and 2010 meetings (in Europe and China respectively) were organised into two parts: **workshop meetings**, as widely spread over Europe and China as possible, and **plenary meetings**, attended by representatives of all workshops in order to pool their ideas and conclusions.

2007 - The second set of meetings in Europe in 2007

The need for a global and uninhibited society-to-society dialogue was widely recognised, but when the process was launched in late 2006, not many people thought that it would come to fruition given the ambitious and innovative format and the tight deadlines involved. The risks were many and diverse: given the difference in organisation between the two societies, it was easy to doubt that an uninhibited and trusting dialogue would be possible, with the fear that it might turn into a confrontation between the "Chinese point of view" and "European point of view".

Despite this scepticism and the difficulties to be overcome, a second set of Forum meetings were held in October 2007 in nine different European countries for the workshops, and in Brussels for the plenary sessions. The general opinion was that the experience had been a successful one. Instead of the 42 workshops originally planned, **46 workshops** on a huge variety of subjects were held in **23 towns and cities**. Three European regions, Catalonia in Spain, Piedmont in Italy and the Rhône Alpes region in France, played an active role. The workshops they organised were the most successful ones.

The plenary sessions in Brussels were attended by more than 600 people, half of them Chinese and half of them European. Authorities in China and Europe (European Commission and Parliament, the Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee or EESC) used the opportunity to express **the importance they attached to this completely new kind of dialogue**. Collective work was then carried out to produce a summary of all the workshop contributions. It was clear that, despite their very many differences, the Chinese and Europeans were both confronted **with four major common challenges**: successfully combining tradition and modernity while overcoming a crisis in their respective value systems; moving towards a model of more sustainable development; devising more participative mechanisms for managing society; and successfully assuming their roles as major world players.

The Forum's second set of meetings were given widespread coverage by **the Chinese media**. The European media, organised at national level, was much more subdued.

2008 - From second to third meeting

By the end of the second set of meetings, the Forum had acquired visibility and credibility but nevertheless continued to be fragile: financially, because of its dependence on support from the Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation, which is not large enough to continue providing such assistance in the long term; and socially since its strength, stemming from its centralised approach, which was essential to ensure consistency was subsequently to prove a weak point. Most of the participants in the second set of meetings, particularly those from China, felt that they had been invited to a one-off meeting rather than being actively involved in a long-term process. Generally speaking, the workshops had given rise to interesting dialogue but, with the

exception of the workshops organised in partnership with the European regions, they were not deeply established within society.

Immediately after the meeting, a major effort was made to **consolidate the Forum**. The third set of meetings was due to take place in China, however the format of the Forum appeared to be incompatible with the way in which international meetings were generally organised in the country. The problem was resolved over time thanks to the pragmatism of the workshop organisers in China who organised the plenary sessions in partnership with Hong Kong Polytechnic University in Hong Kong.

To ensure that the Forum became a genuinely collective venture, we engaged in a **decentralised dialogue process** in 2008. Three meetings in Europe (Spain, United Kingdom and Germany) and two in China (Beijing and Canton), bringing together participants from the 2007 meetings and the coordinators of various networks, allowed us to identify the themes that all sides wished to cover. It resulted in an abundant **exchange of proposals**. On completion of this process, 200 workshop proposals were on the table. By comparing and combining the proposals, we came up with a list of around 80. This decentralised procedure assumed that in Europe we would find partners who would be interested in the Chinese proposals and partners in China interested in the European proposals, and this was one of the tasks assigned to the organisers. It was necessary for all the new themes to find coordinators to organise the dialogue. To ensure the ongoing existence of each workshop, we realised that it was necessary to establish "four pillars": a **geographical** pillar (a region or city on either side); an **intellectual** pillar, to ensure that the best experience is available on either side; a **social** pillar so that networks with experience of the workshop topic in China and in Europe are involved; a **media** pillar to facilitate intercultural dialogue and ensure that the work of the Forum is properly disseminated. Rooting the dialogue in each society is a long-drawn-out task.

We have also tried, unfortunately with little success to date, to diversify the **Forum's sources of funding** both in China and in Europe and to create **institutional structures** on both sides capable of managing the Forum in the long term. The Forum is a **social process**, not an institution, but it does need solid logistical resources.

In 2008, relations between the Chinese and European authorities became strained as a result of developments in Tibet and the passage of the Olympic flame through Europe. **These tensions illustrated, if such a thing were necessary, the absolute need for inter-society dialogue**. They often had an impact on public opinion itself, highlighting potential risks for the future. Enduring resentment on the Chinese side of the domineering West of the 19th and 20th centuries; concerns in Europe about the rise in power of China which is seen as benefiting from globalisation while circumventing its rules; the failure or refusal to understand or accept the value of the other's culture; increased competition for control of natural and energy resources; reciprocal accusations of disguised protectionism: through localised events, one could see **the potential future seeds of a conflict on a completely different scale**. The Forum's message, both to future participants and to public authorities, gained in credibility as a result of these developments.

2009 - The coordinators' meeting

In 2009, another chance event, swine flu, would subject the Forum to a major **stress test**. While the third set of meetings was in the process of being organised for July 2009, the Forum was confronted with the decision taken by the Hong Kong authorities to provisionally ban all international meetings on their territory. In the week following this decision, an **alternative strategy** was launched. It consisted of three components: postponing most of the meetings, and in particular the plenary sessions, for one year; holding around a dozen workshops in July 2009 that the Chinese partners had already prepared with great determination and creating an opportunity from the crisis by organising a meeting in Paris in July 2009 of all the Chinese and European workshop coordinators.

This prior meeting of the coordinators allowed them to get to know each other, to discuss the workshop themes and the participants required one-on-one, and to more effectively apply the methodology used by the Forum. We were also able to streamline certain elements of the project. Workshops without sufficient consensus between coordinators were postponed to a later phase.

2010 – The workshops of the third meeting

In March 2010, **the People's University of China** (Renmin University) and **Hong Kong Polytechnic University** confirmed their role as the main organisers of the meetings on the Chinese side. They were joined by the **city council of Chengdu**, the capital of Sichuan, which applied to support the Forum over the long-term and organise its fifth set of meetings (in China in 2016). This institutional support was decisive in allowing continental China and Hong Kong to host an unprecedented event.

In total, 66 Forum workshops were held in 2009 and 2010 in 17 provinces of China, in Hong Kong and Macau. The diversity of the meeting locations is a reflection of the scale of Chinese society's involvement in the Forum: the cost of hosting the workshops was borne in its entirety by the Chinese institutions in those locations. This collective involvement is a great leap forward for the Forum.

Out of the 66 workshops, 21 continued the dialogue already started in 2007, and 45 opened new areas of dialogue. **In total, the Forum meetings in 2007, 2009 and 2010 will therefore have covered 91 different themes. This is a reflection of the appetite for exchange and discussion between our two societies.**

In line with the Forum's philosophy, participants were not "specialists in Euro-Chinese dialogue" - the latter having ample opportunity to meet - but people, both in Europe and China, who have well-established experience and professional expertise. For many European participants, this third set of meetings was therefore an opportunity to discover a different side of China, whose diversity and vitality they had little idea of, and one far removed from the clichés conveyed by the media and propaganda.

To facilitate the work of summarising proceedings, workshops were classified into 9 groups. The list below gives an overview of their diversity and states where the workshop was held.

Group 1: Cities, land and development: T26a, social housing policy (Canton); T31d, urban and peri-urban agriculture (Beijing); T41a, urban design and governance (Shanghai); T41e, city, transport and energy (Shanghai); T41f, which urban utopias for the 21st-century? (Chengdu); T43i, reconstruction after earthquakes and natural disasters (Chengdu); S47c, sustainable development and civil society (Canton).

Group 2: Social development and changing lifestyles: S25a, the role and position of the elderly in society (Beijing); T22b, protection of the disabled and orphans (Kunming); T23a, communities of rural migrants and workers (Canton); T24a, psychological support for victims of natural disasters (Canton); T21b, children and families (Hong Kong); T22a, policies to combat poverty and exclusion, meeting the essential needs of the disadvantaged (Chengdu); T35a, rural development and caring for the elderly (Changshu); T46b, the Internet and citizen participation (Shenzhen); T27b, changing lifestyles and new consumption models (Canton).

Group 3: New economic models and corporate social responsibility: S31a, training corporate senior executives to manage their responsibilities (Canton); S32a, the role and responsibilities of SME managers confronted with globalisation (Ningbo); S37a, the role and responsibilities of social enterprises (Hong Kong); S39a, the social responsibility of corporate senior executives (Wuhan); S39b, devising corporate social responsibility policy, reconciling Chinese and European points of view (Shanghai); S33a, financial institutions and the economic crisis; what cooperation between Europe and China? (Beijing); T43e designing a global monetary, financial and energy framework (Beijing).

Group 4: From local to global governance: S47a, the role and responsibilities of foundations with respect to the common challenges of China and Europe (Beijing); S47b, citizenship, social responsibility and international cooperation of civil society organisations (Beijing); T43a, China and Europe as global players; what concept of world governance? (Beijing); T43b, relations between China, Europe and Africa (Macao); T45a, the design and management of public services (Chengdu); T48a, training of civil servants (Canton); T43c what agricultural policies and what contribution of China and Europe to the design of global agricultural and food policies? (Beijing).

Group 5: Relations between humans and biosphere: T 37a, sustainable tourism (Zhang Jia Jie, Hunan province); T52b, management of major river catchment areas (Zhengzhou); T55a, management of mountain

areas (Guiyang); T54a, land management and family farming (Canton); T56b, agriculture and biodiversity (Chengdu); T52c, promotion of eco-hydrology for sustainable management of ecosystems and water resources (Lanzhou).

Group 6: Science, technology and social responsibility: T13b, the Internet and changing social behaviour and relations (Shenzhen); S39c, corporate environmental responsibility (Changsha); T13c, transfer of knowledge between universities, research centres and companies (Hong Kong); T51, towards industrial and land management ecology: recycling, energy efficiency and reducing pollution (Chengdu).

Group 7: Redesigning education: T14b, the change and reform of primary and secondary education (Ningbo); T14g, education of migrant children (Beijing); T16c, the role of sport in society (Shanghai).

Group 8: Law and justice; human rights and protection: T44a, the comparison of legal cultures in China and Europe (Canton); T44e, international space law (Harbin); T44c, international regulations applicable to multinational companies (Tianjin); T44f, innovation, development and protection of intellectual property rights (Canton); S38a, employee protection (Beijing); S43a the role and responsibilities of legal practitioners in society (Chengdu).

Group 9: Value systems, culture and art: S11a, religion and society: the challenge of multiple identities (Chengdu); S15a, the social responsibility of journalists (Chengdu); T11a, European and Chinese views of the individual and society (Hangzhou); T11d, multilingualism and intercultural communication (Hong Kong); T12a, ethnic identity, national identity, global identity (Kuming); T12d, protection of tangible and intangible heritage (Guizhou); T12e, artistic creation and the market (Beijing); T44b, the culture of peace in China and Europe: what can we learn from history? (Changchun); T16a, the challenges and benefits of intercultural dialogue between Europe and China (Xiamen); S12a, the role and responsibilities of artists (Beijing); S21a, the role and responsibilities of women (Beijing); S22c, voluntary involvement of young people in community development (Beijing); S22d, the commitment of young people to energy and climate change challenges (Beijing); S26a, training social workers (Beijing); T12g, teaching art (Canton); T16b, nationalism and cosmopolitanism (Hong Kong); T31c, a sustainable food production industry (Beijing); T41b, conservation of urban heritage and restoration of old cities (Fuzhou); T46c, the role of inhabitants in managing urban communities (Shanghai).

The Forum's diversity lies not only in the themes covered. Reflecting the geographical and socio-professional diversity of participants from both societies is a major challenge for the Forum. This diversity was not sufficient in the 2007 meetings: too many academics on the Chinese side, and too many French participants on the European side. The third set of meetings was marked by real progress in this area as well. The European participants represented all Member States, and only a quarter of them were of French nationality. Academics were now in the minority in both Europe and China although they continued to be the largest contingent.

In total, 568 Chinese and 314 Europeans took part in the workshops. Around 300 people from both sides took part in the plenary sessions in Hong Kong.

2010 – The plenary sessions in Hong Kong

The plenary sessions must reconcile two contradictory requirements: **to allow the political authorities on both sides to express their support for uninhibited dialogue** between the two societies and to thus give the Forum high public visibility, especially by fostering **the conditions for genuine exchange between all participants** and joint sharing of the workshop conclusions, while ensuring the transparency of the process - proof of the legitimacy of the conclusions - and producing a summary during the session itself. Perfection was not within our grasp. The plenary session produced its share of frustrations. Nevertheless, we did make substantial progress compared with the second set of meetings. The plenary sessions were extended to give participants the possibility of meeting in workshop groups and this process allowed instantaneous sharing of the workshop conclusions.

2011 and beyond – The second phase of the Forum

You can imagine what it meant for a small team to build multiple partnerships, solve administrative and financial problems, find participants (all devoting their time to the meeting and its preparation on a voluntary basis), bringing them from the four corners of Europe to the four corners of China, getting everyone to Hong Kong and back, and training the coordinators in a common methodology. There were many shortcomings but it was greatly satisfactory to have succeeded in the core objective, to have enabled the creation of an unprecedented event in China, and at the end of this third set of meetings, to have created a new "political purpose".

The third set of meetings in Hong Kong rounded off the first phase of the Forum. Via its design and format, it had demonstrated that society—to-society meetings were both **desired and possible** in both Europe and China.

The second phase of the Forum will cover the preparation and holding of the fourth and fifth meetings. The survey conducted in Europe and China since 2010 has shown that the vast majority of workshops were determined to pursue the dialogue which had barely begun, exploring issues more fully, expanding its scope and nurturing an outcome of concrete cooperation.

The workshop organisers know that their empowerment hinges on resources. The Forum must be borne collectively. The movement, initiated in 2008 with the collective workshop selection process, will be amplified and will no doubt eventually lead to diverse, **independent Forum poles of activity**, some of which are on a geographical footing, others based on a particular theme, yet others on a socio-professional basis.

We have also observed **the diversity of ways in which the various workshops have envisaged their future**: sharing thoughts with wider networks; organisation of visits in the field; joint publications; organisation of itinerant conferences harnessing social networks and the brand image of the Forum. Some have even evoked the necessity of the Forum serving as a reservoir of ideas to face the difficult challenges in Europe and China, available to society and even public authorities to put new proposals forward.

We can already see that the Forum meetings have not only helped participants forge a more accurate idea of one another, deconstructing stereotypes as well as being nourished by new ideas. We have also witnessed the creation of vaster networks springing from some workshops and drawing inspiration from the ideas and methods of the Forum.

Change is already under foot: the Forum is becoming a social arena and an opportunity for Chinese and Europeans to learn to discuss the challenges they have in common: it is becoming **a state of mind** (strict equality between partners, freedom of speech, interactive discussion methods), **a platform, an arena** in which think tanks may be organised, **a brand image and methods** from which signatories of its Charter may benefit since signing confers the right to use the logo, be featured on the website and leverage its experience.

A decisive stage will be **the rooting of the workshops or groups of workshops in both societies**, especially via special partnerships with **local authorities**, regions, provinces and cities. The commitment of the city of Chengdu, capital of Sichuan, to organise the fifth set of meetings, slated for 2016 and the creation in Chengdu of permanent Forum staff to lead some dozen workshops is paving the way to the future.