

China-Europa Forum: A Human Exploration

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Background

On 3rd October 2007 a historic flight of Hainan Airlines left Beijing, carrying 250 Chinese people from all walks of life to Europe to participate in workshops for the Second China-Europa Forum, held simultaneously in 23 cities of 9 countries. Two days later the participants convened at Vrije University Brussels to proceed with the conference itself, attended by over a thousand people. Mr. Pierre Calame, the Forum Founder, Chairman of Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation for Human Progress, met the participants at Brussels airport, and spoke with emotion about the 9-months of preparation for the Forum, which is the time for gestating a life. “Dear friends, the door of this special plane of Hainan Airlines has just opened. Let us share the moment of birth.” he concluded.

This speech has been revised to act as preface to the report collection on the Forum from Chinese Media. Reviewing the unique China-Europe meeting after half a year, we may all have new thoughts, especially when we are experiencing a China-Europe relationship crisis excited by the 2008 Olympics and the Tibet Riots. Most people hope to remove misunderstandings and ease tension as soon as possible. However, there is no highway for attaining understanding, and goodwill can at any time be disturbed by calculations of interest or weakness of human nature. This makes us believe fervently in the necessity of continuous dialogue, and increases our sense of the responsibility conferred by the Forum.

The Forum originates in our enthusiasm to promote understanding, and a historical sense of the necessity of dialogue between people. From its beginnings in 16th Century Europe globalization has now in the 21st century swept the world. A pervasive sense of crisis is becoming our most characteristic emotional response. All values are challenged, rationality, political party, freedom, and democracy whether embodied in the free market-oriented “American Model” or the social-equality state-welfare oriented “European Model”. But must we judge globalisation only by technical, rational, and financial measures? How do China’s stances affect global spiritual direction, along with its economic rise? Is nationalism and the clash of civilizations the inevitable fate of human society, or does history have other choices? How can people promote mutual acceptance and understanding between culture and culture?

In contrast with the USA, a massive historical tradition is one of the characteristics common to both Europe and China. In addition, there has always a special kind of mutual attraction and interest between them. Their relationship in the world becomes especially important. How can these two time-honored civilizations with their separate traditions go beyond them to complement each other, and use their spiritual wisdom to forge a new kind of relationship? History confers on us a mission to create the biennial China-Europa Forum as a public space for communication, an experimental field for transcultural perception, and a practice of global governance. Here we will try to treasure diversity and transcend the competition caused by national sovereignty, ideological opposition and culturalist narrowness going back to the 18th century; and explore a synergic relationship in the global civil society and its governance.

The intention of the First Forum in Nansha in 2005 was to introduce the history of the formation of modern Europe, with especial reference to questions such as whether the reconciliation between France and Germany, starting even before World War Two had ended, might shed light on creating a new relationship between Japan and China? Or an alternative question: in the bloody reality of the Nazi massacre of millions and millions of Europeans, what kind of force brought together those German and French intellectual elites to transcend hatred and meet to discuss the building of the coming peace?

The success of the First Forum changed it from a one-time conference to a biennial forum held in Europe and China alternately. We want to emphasize that the concern of the Forum has never been a bilateral relationship in the diplomatic sense. However, the First Forum was designed as an exercise in the logic of knowledge: the Europeans introduced Europe to China, and then the Chinese introduced China to Europe. Benefiting from the capacity of participants at the first Forum to interact at a deep level, and the social issues brought forward, the Second Forum focused on the “**common fate**”: Can the two great civilizations of China and Europe unfold a deep dialogue, between all social fields facing the common crisis in globalization, concerning ethics, environment, energy, institution, and governance? This dialogue will mine the governing wisdom and ethics of all ages to build a platform for mutual understanding, elevate the sense of **identity of humankind**, further embrace the human fate in life and death, and join together to guard the earth, our only home.

Methodology

The workshops made full use of cartographic methods, which are designed to facilitate group working and are frequently employed in transcultural studies. They afford a progressive phased procedure designed to accord with our natural cognitive processing of complex ideas, so that instead of relying on blind individual judgement participants were able to provoke ideas, communicate and discuss major issues stage by stage in step with each other. A feature of cartography is to point to possible joint action.

The Forum lasted only 4 days, but preparation for it took 9 months. During this period, an

e-network ensured synchronous communication between areas so remote from each other. Nearly 50 team leaders from each side jointly built and managed a website and a database shared with the public, gaining the experience of team-working skills that would be required by the Forum.

The Forum does not request speech notes in advance, but asks the participants to prepare basic materials for discussion based on a true understanding of their own fields. During the Forum, each participant was also a principal speaker talking about themselves out of their own life experience. They were also listeners, attending to others patiently and carefully in order to learn their feelings and perplexity, then arguing over major differences, sharing common values, inspiring creative passion, in anticipation of a possible joint action.

Challenge of dialogue

Such a large scale cross-border forum involves dimensions of region, time difference, history, domain, stratum, nation, culture, intention, etc. From the anthropological point of view it resembles the performance of a rite, and is an opportunity for mobilization and integration. It can also be a field of crisis – a threshold: the previous “us” begins to become “the other”, previous structures are no longer stable, previous standards are out of order, previous capitals need to be integrated, and previous sources of power lose their effectiveness... People face immense challenges born out of existing knowledge, ideas and existence *per se*.

Challenge of platform construction (organizing methodology)

The Chinese and Europeans narrate to and mirror themselves in each other. In 2005 the story of the European peace epic was heard in China, and in 2007 the Chinese roused the interest of the Europeans with a picture of their own society, history and ancient wisdom. The dialogues helped us step out of ourselves and think of a common living world by extrapolating from our own; opening the mind and understanding of both parties' to shed light on our blind spots and on problems not yet discovered, and get rid of our assumptions. Through debates and discussion, both parties would discover their own uniqueness, and find the universal value and edification contained in that uniqueness, labeled as incomprehensible, leading to learning by insight and heightened desire for good. Only in this moment, the sense of “the other” can guide humankind towards the holy “us”.

Challenge of cognitive mode (thinking ability)

The earliest spiritual encounter of China and Europe can be traced back to the second half of the 16th century. We meet after a long journey, leading across remote time and space. China-Europe encounters do not reflect parallel regional histories, but a reciprocal common history. People from different times and spaces intertwined with different relations have different opinions. The identity and intention of those observers also shaped their conclusions. In this sense, this forum is expected to be a laboratory in an attempt to escape

from dichotomous thinking and attempt a complex, transcultural thinking.

As well as the delight of exploration and curiosity, the history of China-Europe encounters has brought us ideological preoccupation and hostility, culturalist opposition in knowledge structure, and blame or contempt of each other in concrete operation: you-we, spiritual-material, rationality-sensibility, democracy-autocracy... However, we are delighted that the experiments are deepening step by step, and realize that it is possible to transcend such opposition, elevating the quality of our understanding.

Challenge of existence: Who are we and who is humankind? (Value belief)

The Forum happens in an era in which “they” are among “us”. What do we mean by “us”? The TV series *The Rise of Great Nations* starts from the dualistic linear thinking to tell how the European and then American nations attained positions as world powers in modern times by great military and economic strength. The TV series implies that China with its current economic power will evolve to be a new world power in a “peaceful rise”. The wish is of course beyond reproach, but dislocation of the times is obvious. The past rise of great nations was concurrent with their establishment of sovereignty. Today with globalization, the logic of the world has experienced fundamental change, with new challenges, new technologies, new space-time and a new environment...for the first time humankind must be only human, not measuring itself by its pride. Balance of power among sovereignties by military force has become rather ineffective; the global governance needs a new mode; nations with closely interrelated fates need coordination; the participation of global civil citizens in governance become a necessity. The time to create the only one great nation has gone, and each great nation must shoulder more responsibilities in the global society than smaller nations.

Going beyond ourselves is difficult. Some people fixate on incompatible interests, and despise each other’s ignorance, cultural difference and incommunicability. These phenomena do exist, but not only between “we” and “they”. A Chinese farmer said with a sigh that “the success of the Forum also lies in a dialogue space it provides between the Chinese”. In the same way, European participants feel that the Forum endowed egoistic Europeans with a rare opportunity to talk to each other. Understanding others is important, but depth of knowledge or understanding alone cannot necessarily decide that “they” become “we”. What is important is the desire, first to admit the “other” as congener, then to listen and share his or her life experience. The nature of this desire requires a state of high spirituality. The success of European peacebuilding incarnated such a state. Miraculously surpassing the justice of revenge to the bitter end, it transferred past hatred into power for future peace through sheer human goodness. The Asian peacebuilding also needs great forgiveness to go beyond historical feuds, and a religious lovingness that believes in the human spirit.

Future prospects

From the First Forum to the Second, playing the roles of designers and practitioners, we

experienced various tests: from heavy preparation to mutual understanding between partners, from idea positioning to actual challenges, and from exploration of our thinking to its limitations. We hesitated, agitated, and tried best to persist. Four days are short, but at the end of the Forum someone told me that he felt “both China and Europe look differently now”. I then for the first time had a feeling that the China-Europa Forum is like the voyage of the ancient hero Odysseus, full of uncertainties and twists and turns but still miraculously completed. The difference is that the Forum takes place in a flatter, apathetic era, and so appears especially necessary. It requests us, the ordinary people, to participate in it with heroic courage and very special abilities. Let us create an epic together, a graspable epic, a humanistic expectation epic, an epic about building the only home possible for human beings. By nature of their enterprise friends who participate in the Forum become heroes of world history, hoping to create a masterpiece.

The second biennial Forum is over. Many people leave lingeringly and puzzlingly. Most people will long for the third, the fourth...

After the dust and arduousness of the journey, we, as organizers, are gratified with its success. In the transcultural adventure we need only start with a mind delighting in curiosity to be able appreciate each others' differences, overcome misunderstanding, and strengthen frank and friendly communications on every step of the way. As long as everyone can gather together, can be touched and spiritually moved, can attain a gleam of enlightenment and a particle of new understanding, that's enough.

A transcultural perspective firstly is a humanistic faith: admit in any human society that you know well my goals, yet how to realize them differs; that I need your company, you are my confidant, we can learn from and remind each other on the path of growth. Fresh wind will always spread the seeds of civilization, unwithered seed will grow into great trees. The China-Europa Forum invites everyone to plough the spiritual plateau of the Human community together, sow the seed and after their shared labour share the spiritual fruits.

The Forum has a unique symbolic meaning for Chinese participants: as principals themselves, they are taking part in an exercise full of challenges with regard to global governance. Of course the Forum is not a battlefield for competition among great nations. The language here is not “China and the world”. Chinese participants can no longer speak of China “opening to the world”, but “returning to the world”, or returning home.