

Event Report

**EU-China Cultural and Science Diplomacy  
Workshop**

*30 November 2017*

Cultural and science diplomacy have played an increasingly important role in European and Chinese diplomatic stories in the recent years. Both the EU and China have made a major start in articulating the relevance of culture and science for their external relations. The EU as a civilian power and China as an emerging soft power have different approaches to cultural and science diplomacy in practice.

The high-level workshop organised by the European Institute for Asian Studies in collaboration with the Confucius Institute at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB); Brussels Academy for China and European Studies; and the programme on European Leadership in Cultural, Science and Innovation Diplomacy at VUB threw light on this emerging field, and explored the similarities and differences in the European and Chinese approaches. The workshop was moderated by Prof. Xinning Song of Renmin University of China & VUB. It involved an exchange with experts like Prof. Richard Higgot, an Emeritus Professor from University of Warwick, Institute for European Studies and Vrije Universiteit Brussel; Prof. Jian Shi from Sichuan University; Prof. Jincheng Kang from Chinese Academy of Engineering in Beijing; and Prof. Luk van Langenhove from VUB.

## ***Panel Discussion***

***Prof. Richard Higgott, Emeritus Professor, University of Warwick; Institute for European Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussels***

Prof. Richard began by addressing the core of the issue from a European perspective — namely, how cultural diplomacy could be used to strengthen Europe's global standing. He pointed out that the Global Strategy for the European Union (EU) stressed the importance of new forms of diplomacy; cultural diplomacy being one of them. The strategy set the agenda for nurturing societal resilience by deepening work on education, culture and youth to foster pluralism, coexistence and respect. This, according to Prof. Higgott, is the essence of cultural diplomacy. Elaborating on the concept, he explained, "more realistically, it means putting the EU's diverse national cultures at the service of shared interests." However, he also cautioned the audience that in the EU, where foreign policy continues to be the preserve of individual nation states rather than that of the collective whole, the idea that it was possible to have a shared position on cultural diplomacy was a major challenge. Further, he stated that even if the differences in national cultures could be controlled, there would always be a coordination problem among the member states.

He also observed that the optimism of the early 2000s had given way to an existential crisis in Europe in the current context. Comparing the 2003 EU Global Strategy paper to the one released in 2016, he found that while the former congratulated the normative power of Europe and portrayed European values of liberal democracy, free economy and rule of law in a superior light, the latter began with the lines, "we live in a time of existential crisis." The reasons for this existential crisis, he noted, were manifold: legacy problems of the financial crisis, legacy problems of the eurozone, refugee and migration problems, the increasing power of Russia, growth of nationalism and populism in liberal democracies within and outside Europe, Brexit, and the unpredictability in US foreign policy. It was in this context that the EU's new international cultural relations strategy was adopted. According to him, the strategy was adopted for three main purposes. First, to enhance Europe's external image and influence. Second, to enhance cultural dialogue between EU and rest of the world. Third, to enhance Europe's economic competitiveness in international transactions. In these regards, however, he opined that High Representative Mogherini's statement that called Europe a cultural superpower was a cardinal mistake, since it denoted a hierarchical relationship with external actors. Moreover, he was skeptical of the idea that cultural soft power could adequately replace the declining hard power. Further, he stated that the universality of European values and norms was itself questionable.

He then moved on to comparing the concept of cultural diplomacy in China with that of Europe. He explained that in China, diplomacy is primarily state-driven and received an impetus from the various successful economic initiatives like the Asian

Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), cooperation in Africa, East Asia regional institution building etc. Further, it does not face the same coordination problems as the EU. In this sense, he said that China has an advantage. A crucial question yet to be answered according to him was whether and to what extent Chinese cultural diplomacy could be a new source of global norms.

**Prof. Jian Shi, Sichuan University**

Prof. Shi commenced his address with a fourfold definition of cultural diplomacy by a famous Chinese philosopher: self-cultivation rooted in the heart; self-consciousness without being reminded; self-consciousness on the premise of constraints; and kindness to others. He then moved on to investigating the role of cultural issues in diplomacy and communication. Prof. Jian pointed highlighted the emphasis laid on creating a community of shared future for mankind in the 19<sup>th</sup> Communist Party of China Congress, and to create this community, he believed that cultural diplomacy would play a crucial role. He also stated that the pragmatic base for strengthening cultural ties was in fact infrastructure development. He demonstrated how better road and transport connectivity, and provision of IT and communication services across China were furthering people to people dialogue within China and also between China and the rest of the world. This cultural exchange according to him was extremely important as it facilitated better understanding of different societies and communities, especially among the youth, the future world leaders.

**Prof. Luk van Langenhove, VUB**

Prof. Langenhove introduced the concept of science diplomacy defining it as “using science as practice and scientists as persons for pursuing goals of foreign policy especially if they are related to peace and security issues.” He saw the scientific community as a binding force all over the world, since all scientists share the same core values and loyalties. He recalled numerous success stories, where science diplomacy had been able to reduce inter-state tensions, for example, space diplomacy. For this reason, he observed that there was a massive focus on science diplomacy in Europe and the US. He observed that the depth and potential of the principle, however, was yet to be actualised. Currently, science diplomacy was seen as a broad and loose concept, limited to soft measures like exchange programs, bilateral science and technology meets etc. He therefore made three critical observations. First, he observed that there was a lack of strategy at the EU as well as the member state level, i.e. there were hardly any official documents that would concretely lay down a definition, scope and course of action for science diplomacy. Second, there were multiple tools that could be used for science diplomacy and the most important among these were bilateral science and technology agreements. Third, while a lot of exchanges are ongoing between countries in the field of science, whether this was being done in a diplomatic

manner is questionable. Prof Langenhove then moved on to explaining the EU-China science diplomacy relations. As the two largest spenders in science R&D, the EU and China, according to him, must take their relations beyond the current broad policy mechanisms like the Joint Steering Committee and innovation cooperation dialogues. He invited the EU and China to come together and find common areas of science invention, to achieve two key shared objectives of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the BRI. He concluded by urging the two regions into action, by stating that "opening doors to science meant opening doors to ideas and progress."

**Prof. Jincheng Kang, Chinese Academy of Engineering, Beijing**

As a science diplomat, he explained that he worked at the intersection of diplomacy, and international scientific exchange. His speech focused on four main themes: diplomacy (i.e. national soft power); scientific diplomacy, which is an essential element for national diplomatic strategy; the idea that science diplomacy should be backed by science technology and innovation activities within and among countries; and finally, the BRI.

He traced the roots of Chinese diplomacy to ancient times. In the contemporary context, he said that Chinese diplomacy began with the Bandung conference in 1955. Prof. Kang drew from the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) to define science diplomacy as the use of science to build bridges between countries, promote scientific cooperation, create a forum for thought and analysis and initiate bilateral activities. In this sense, he noted that science diplomacy was an essential element of the overall national diplomacy strategy of a country, and had three objectives. First, to promote goodwill and friendship between countries. He gave the example of the US and China, where scientific exchange preceded the normalisation of diplomatic relations. The second objective was to increase collaboration and cooperation and the third was to have collective actions for global concerns. To achieve these objectives, he strongly asserted that there was a need to back science diplomacy with concrete investment scientific innovation.

He then demonstrated a few achievements of China's progress in diverse areas of science and innovation like the 500-meter Aperture Spherical Telescope (FAST) that is the biggest telescope installation in the world; the Dark Matter Particle Explorer satellite or 'Wukong'; Jiaolong, which is a Chinese manned deep-sea research submersible; the three largest hydroelectric power stations in the world; high speed railways; bridge building etc. Most of these initiatives, he mentioned, would not have been possible without a scientific dialogue among various countries. He also there light on some joint EU and China initiatives like the Galileo Collective Research into space, fusion research work etc. He also reiterated the importance of the BRI for creating a solid base for diplomatic exchange among countries.

From his vast experience, he said that the most important quality for a science diplomat was for them to be proactive. Their consistent interaction with the scientific community is very important. He concluded by stating the core principles driving the philosophy of Chinese science diplomacy: To seek common ground while recognising differences, to seek friendship and brotherhood, to work towards a shared future and common prosperity, to worry before other people worry and enjoy after other people enjoy, and to ensure that “all flowers should blossom in full spring.”

## **Q&A Session**

### **Question 1**

The BRI is an extremely important part of China’s foreign policy today. What is the interplay between the more concrete economic and political objectives and the cultural objectives of the BRI and which of these takes priority?

### **Answer**

Prof Langenhove responded by saying that the BRI has both, economic, political as well as cultural objectives. He compared the BRI to the Marshall Plan of the US, which was driven by a large number of motivations— geopolitical, economic and ideological. Prof. Shi added that geopolitical and economic objectives were a priority considering China’s geographical location. He said that the ultimate goal was to foster domestic development, which was only possible by creating a peaceful and harmonious environment for all its neighbours in the region.

### **Question 2**

Can China’s Smart Cities project be an area of future cooperation in the scientific field?

### **Answer**

Prof Kang reaffirmed the importance of the Smart Cities project as a new avenue for diplomatic relations. He said that such projects gave scientists the opportunity get directly involved in strategic policy-making, and interact with experts from other fields like art design, public policy, cultural policy etc.

### **Question 3**

What are the challenges of using science as a tool for diplomatic exchange?

### **Answer**

Prof. Higgot pointed out that if asked, many scientists did not want to be associated with political or diplomatic activities. He felt this tension between the scientific community and the government was the biggest challenge for science diplomacy. Prof. Kang agreed that using science as a tool for diplomacy was indeed challenging, because scientists operate on very different values and principles than

diplomats. Science is driven by research and curiosity. However, he also gave examples of how the same values become a binding factor among scientists from different countries, resulting in various collaborations between scientists from China and Europe. As a result, collective research paves the way for cooperation between countries. In terms of using this for China diplomacy, Prof. Kang noted that China had many objectives. First, it aimed at strengthening research and innovation within its own country. Second, it also had the responsibility to promote research in other developing countries, especially in Africa. Thus, the promotion of science and technology strengthens its diplomatic relations with other countries.

#### **Question 4**

Science diplomacy seems to encompass a broad range of areas and activities. How exactly do you define science diplomacy?

#### **Answers**

Prof. Langenhove explained that there were different ways of defining science diplomacy, but the most common of them was given by AAAS, which defines three forms of science diplomacy: science for diplomacy, science in diplomacy and diplomacy for science. He also acknowledged that the concept must be redefined with a better, clearer outline and he was working on trying to do the same.

#### **Question 5**

How can China learn from EU and UK to transform patents into greater productivity?

#### **Answers**

Prof. Higgot acknowledged that one of the traditional problems of curiosity driven research in European universities was the transformation of academic research into profitable business models. In this regard he agreed that UK must learn in fact from the US.

#### **Question 6**

Is cultural and science diplomacy a part of the broader common security policy of the EU, or is it a separate category of its own? Who drives what?

#### **Answers**

Prof. Higgot stated that it was essential to understand the dynamics of how an idea transforms into a policy; considering all the stakeholders involved in decision making processes was key to answering this question. He stated that Europe's hard power was diminishing to the extent that it was looking for alternatives to fill this void of power and influence, and this is where cultural diplomacy had in fact taken priority. He added a caveat to this trend—the coordination problem among member states of the EU. However, he said that each country had its own organisation working on cultural diplomacy as well. He highlighted examples like

Alliance Francais, Instituto Cervantes as well as the collaborated efforts by the European External Action Service (EEAS).

*Report Prepared by Saniya Singh*

European Institute for Asian Studies – EIAS a.s.b.l.  
26 Rue de la Loi, 10<sup>th</sup> Floor, 1040 Brussels/Belgium  
Tel.: +32 2 230 81 22 E-mail: [eias@eias.org](mailto:eias@eias.org) Website: [www.eias.org](http://www.eias.org)

 EiasBrussels

 European Institute for Asian Studies

 @EIASBrussels