

Event Report

**Visions and Actions on the New Silk Road
The Examples of Culture and Tourism**

EIAS Briefing Seminar

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Last year, the EU and China celebrated 40 years of diplomatic relations and the formation of a solid partnership between two players of significant global importance. One of the most groundbreaking areas of collaboration between the EU and China is in the latter's One Belt, One Road initiative announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013. It aims to construct a network of interconnectivity across the region of Eurasia, and is estimated to cover 4.4 billion people and USD 2.1 trillion gross production, representing respectively 63 percent of the global population and 29 percent of world GDP.

The One Belt, One Road initiative is enormous in scale, and while the initiative has rightly been lauded for its potential in forging even greater economic integration, not just between China and the EU, but across the region of Eurasia, the recreation of the Silk Road holds equally massive promise in providing a platform for the blossoming of cultural exchange and tourism. As it stands, Europe is the second largest destination for Chinese tourists. The volume of tourism is only expected to rise, given that arrivals have increased from approximately 8 million in 2014 to 12 million in 2015. It is thus evident that cultural exchanges and tourism are noteworthy areas, particularly with respect to the prospects for job creation, trade in services, and even the promotion of interpersonal relations between EU and Chinese citizens. It is in this light that the Europe China OBOR Culture and Tourism Development Committee and the European Institute for Asian Studies organized a seminar on "Visions and Actions on the New Silk Road: The Examples of Culture and Tourism".

Speakers addressed major topics surrounding the cultural implications of the initiative, alongside possible opportunities that the initiative will bring for investments, tourism and people to people exchange between the EU and China.

Welcome Remarks

Mr István UJHELYI, Member of the EP's delegation for relations with China and Vice-Chair of the Transport and Tourism Committee, opened the seminar by noting the recent increase of interest in the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) project in Brussels, and emphasising the need for concrete actions in two sectors - tourism and culture. He remarked that the two sectors are not perceived as topics of highest relevance on the EU-China agenda, and that the EU still has an insufficient number of instruments supporting cultural exchange with China. However, the growing interest in establishing long-term cultural and touristic cooperation presented (for instance, by the creation of the Tourist Task Force by the European Parliament's Transportation and Tourism Committee) presents a chance for people-to-people exchanges to gain a prominent place within EU-China relations, with the touristic dimension playing an important role.

Mr Ujhelyi further highlighted the relevance of tourism as one of the largest and fastest growing sectors of the European economy. Tourism employs 35 million people and generates EUR 351 billion per annum, which forms almost 10 percent of European GDP. As such, China could play a constructive role in the development of the European tourism industry, as the potential of China's outbound tourist market is growing rapidly. In 2000, the market constituted 10.47 million people and estimations for 2016 project 130 million tourists spending EUR 245 billion. As of now, Europe attracts 3.5 million Chinese visitors annually, which leaves room for improvement.

OBOR represents a great opportunity in this regard, as it provides the framework for effective connection of Chinese and European initiatives. Mr Ujhelyi put forward the idea of European Capital of Tourism (based on European Capital of Culture), which could be linked with a Chinese counterpart within OBOR's framework.

Presentation “*The Belt and Road Initiative: A Grand Social Project*”

Mr Jim STOOPMAN, Programme Coordinator, European Institute for Asian Studies, provided a theoretical framework for the discussion. He also emphasised the importance of culture and people-to-people dialogue in the ultimate success of OBOR. He highlighted the scope of EIAS research on OBOR since the announcement of the project in 2013 – noting the implications both for Europe and for regions located on the land and sea lines of the project.

Mr Stoopman underscored the relevance of the global context in which OBOR is unfolding. Due to the success of the Climate Change Conference in Paris and general acknowledgment of the need to find multilateral solutions to global problems, an increasing number of countries sees a benefit in developing a global agenda for integration. OBOR could play such a role.

Still, the project faces some challenges. For instance, it is crucial for China to understand and manage expectations and historical perceptions of the countries involved in OBOR, particularly as certain regions remain somewhat reluctant to embrace Chinese investments. Moreover, a number of experts question the financial feasibility of OBOR, and its performance in this regard remains to be seen. Irrespective of these points, it is impossible to deny the great potential of the project.

The debate on OBOR has been focused on tangible benefits related to the project. Should that have been the only dimension of the project, it would not be bringing about any new qualities in comparison to China's actions over the past years. Hence, it is important to appreciate and stress the role of non-tangible benefits coming from increased people-to-people exchange across the Eurasian continent - e.g. educational exchanges, increase of tourism or cultural exchanges and artistic performances.

For OBOR to be successful, there is a need to move beyond material benefits and enhance the importance of the 'civilisational identity' to forge - as said by President Xi Jinping - 'a common destiny' among the Eurasian continent.

That requires a change in a conceptual paradigm visible in the approach to culture in international relations. The current one pessimistically sees culture as a divisive force. Moving away from such a perspective is particularly important in such economically turbulent times, as it may turn negotiable economic and political conflicts into unsolvable ones.

A solution to this would be an appreciation of normative and subjective dimensions of OBOR. The enhanced connectivity granted by the project, and the subsequent increased contact between various communities and ethnicities could result in the development of a 'civilisational identity'; one that goes beyond immediate identities, and which integrates with a broader transnational community or collection of communities.

Unfortunately, the non-tangible benefits still play a secondary role, despite the fact that education is always mentioned as an important component and people-to-people exchange is listed as the third pillar of the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. That should change particularly in a globalised world, which needs mutual understanding and crossing the barriers of religious, cultural or linguistic differences.

In tackling these issues, it would be helpful to introduce a more flexible visa system and create a narrative based on a unitary vision of the ancient Silk Road, which has already been happening for instance through the UN World Tourism Organisation's that took place in Xi'an in 2015. In short, China and all the countries involved in OBOR should draw on the legacy of the historical Silk Road, where cultural heritage has almost overshadowed its commercial significance. Should that be successful, OBOR could become one of the defining projects of the 21st century.

Introduction by the Chair

Mr Bernard DEWIT, Chairman of the Belgian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce, thanked participants and organisers of the seminar and pointed out that OBOR already created some concrete results - for instance through the initiatives of the Transport and Tourism Committee. He further stressed the importance of building bridges in forming an understanding between countries and institutions.

Panel Discussion

Mr Vassilis NTOUSAS, Policy Advisor at the Foundation for European Progressive Studies, began by noting that China makes tremendous effort to properly research topics related to the OBOR initiative. Referring to his own paper - 'Back to the future: China's 'One Belt,

One Road' Initiative' - he remarked that China uses the Silk Road's tradition as a tool of shaping the foreign policy.

However, the success of the OBOR initiative depends on the fulfilment of five main components, which have to be equally respected:

First, plan and conduct of OBOR project have to be respectful towards the interests of all the countries involved in the initiative. It cannot be just about China and Europe at the two ends, but about all the countries in between too.

Second, all projects carried out in relation to OBOR need to respect the European standards - human rights, environmental protection, intellectual property rights.

Third, OBOR has to unfold and develop gradually and remain realistic in the sense of setting up achievable goals and taking under account local conditions. It is important to acknowledge the Sinophobia or reluctance to engage with China in some of the regions being part of OBOR. Pursuing with the project by applying a context-sensitive approach could shield it from the possible antagonism.

Fourth, Europe should act collectively in order to maximise the benefits coming from OBOR. That is, however, not the current practice, as the European countries seem to focus only on individual interests. Such a fragmentation decreases the EU's position in relation with China and its ability to benefit from OBOR. In order to tackle that issue, the EU's approach towards OBOR should be addressed in the EU Global Strategy, which is to be released by the end of June.

Fifth, Mr Ntousas stressed that importance of focusing equally on every pillar of the joint action plan. Putting the emphasis solely on the tangible infrastructure projects would be a mistake, as people-to-people exchanges are an equally important component, crucial in achieving the overall success. Moreover, such an exchange also produces tangible results, as exhibited by still present cultural effects of the Silk Road.

In conclusion, if the OBOR project is to be successful, all the sides have to enjoy an equal access to it and remain mindful about the cultural challenges of the project.

Mr Carlo CORAZZA, Head of Tourism, Emerging and Creative Unit at DG GROWTH, focused on presenting concrete projects carried out by the European Union in relation to culture and tourism as well as outlining European Commission's perspective on cooperation with China in this regard.

The Cultural Diplomacy concept, which was articulated by the High Representative Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Tibor Navracsics even before the economic one, emphasises the importance of culture in carrying out European foreign policy. In relation to this, the European Commission is currently drawing plans on tapping the synergies between culture, tourism, and creative industry. The projects aim at creating jobs within the European Union, particularly ones attractive for younger generations.

In relation to tourism, the Commission expects a substantial increase in the number of international visitors coming to the EU in the future - particularly coming from China. Asia is expected to provide around 500 million new visitors. The European Travel Commission aims at using that trend by offering transnational European products to

Chinese tourists through the World Bridge Tourism Programme and promoting European fashion and cultural values at tourism fairs organised in China. Moreover, the Commission aims at creating platforms connecting public money - e.g. structural funds - with private investors, who promote transnational touristic products. The transnational approach is important, as Chinese visitors tend to perceive Europe as a continent, which takes the competition on continental level and makes promoting countries or regions insufficient.

Achieving success in these two arenas will require expanding Europeans capabilities in multicultural communication and digitalisation of the touristic offer.

Ms Xuan TAN, Project Manager at Atlas International Culture, introduced Atlas International Culture (AIC) as a company active in the field of people-to-people dialogue between EU and China and effectively linked with OBOR. AIC's offer focuses on three areas: education programmes, intercultural trainings, and public relations related to China-EU cooperation. She then recalled the five goals of the OBOR initiative and - like the previous speakers - emphasised the need to appreciate the importance of people-to-people bonds.

Subsequently, Ms Tan highlighted three dimensions within which AIC's work aligns with OBOR's objectives. First, combining trade aspects of OBOR with the EU's Cultural Diplomacy by carrying out projects strengthening Chinese visibility within the EU. In the future the company hopes to pursue projects promoting the EU within China. Second, improving the perceptions of Chinese investments in the EU, which AIC aims to achieve by activities carried out by its China Cultural Centre. Third, working with the Walloon government to support exchange programmes, which can increase the number of Belgian students pursuing internships in China.

Moreover, Ms Tan emphasised the importance of cooperation and exchange within the artistic domain by pointing out the constructive role of cultural and artistic festivals organised by AIC. This activity allows to present creativity of the people of China and support mutual inspiration and exchange of ideas. In this regard she acknowledged the role of the Chinese government, which already for two years has been running a fund supporting Chinese artists activity and providing financial support for projects, which linked China with European audience. Ms Tan called for EU to take more active position and support this initiative.

Interlude

Mr Dewit remarked that the spread of awareness and the presence of Chinese cultural outreach is impressive, citing examples of cultural centres situated across the EU. He posed the question of what Europe has done in a similar vein of cultural outreach, on a collective scale, instead of on an individual member state level as has been seen from each EU member state's cultural organisations present and operating in China.

- Mr Corazza responded that the EU indeed has delegations across the world, and in China, citing approximately 200 people working specifically in China. He noted the efforts that the vice-president of the Commission, Federica Mogherini, has undertaken to create a space for culture within the framework of existing embassies, and which have significant implications for diplomatic and economic

relations with partners. He also pointed out that there is strong support from VP Mogherini to work with Chinese partners.

Mr Dewit iterated that culture and business can be affiliated to tourism. He also noted that every year, the volume of tourists increases. In this light, he raised the question of how more tourists can be attracted, but also to what extent they should be welcomed. He posed a question of whether the EU can cope with an increased volume of Chinese tourists, and whether there should be a limit on tourist visits at any given moment.

- Mr Ntousas rejoined that the volume of tourists incoming from China was not as yet an issue, as it remains low. He instead pointed out that the issue is in the nature of the tourism that takes place, noting the specificity of the reasons tourists are arriving in Europe from China. He argued that there was much greater breadth and scope for tourism, and that there was a lack of awareness about this, which is why culture and people to people bonds are crucial. He also noted that China has assumed a greater outward approach in recent times, and that it was the job of the Commission or national decision makers to expand the scope of relations between EU and China. To do so, he remarked that culture and tourism could harness huge potential as a facilitator in furthering this cause by redefining stereotypes and raising awareness of both the EU side and the Chinese side.
- Ms Xuan Tan also added that breaking down stereotypes and facilitating greater acceptance is important given the problem of perceptions and cultural differences seen in Chinese tourists visiting Europe, and in Europeans who are in direct contact with Chinese tourists. She believes that there must be greater awareness of the differences, for both Chinese and Europeans with regard to the other, and that preparation must be done beforehand to ensure that this happens. To illustrate her point, she noted the Chinese preparation of a code of conduct by the Chinese National Tourist Office to advise tourists on the differences and practices commonplace in Europe.

Q&A Session

The first participant wished to add to the discussion that there have been many initiatives aimed at fostering EU-China cooperation on the people-to-people level, for instance in the realm of education, culture, and youth. It was noted that people-to-people dialogue has allowed an increase in the number of students exchanged as a result of various programmes such as Erasmus, and the provision of scholarships from the Chinese side. Concerning culture, it was raised that there were cultural forums for artists and practitioners to meet and exchange views, as well as film festivals screening European films in China and vice versa. On the topic of youth, there are also a number of seminars where youth organisations from the EU and China are able to meet and engage in dialogue. It was pointed out that tourism is definitely an area where people to people dialogue and exchange can be furthered, but this must be done with a united front on the part of the EU towards China for internal cooperation in coordinating such efforts together.

The next participant wished to point out that the initiative does not only stress EU-China relations, and that other countries in the global community should not be ignored in the OBOR initiative. It was also raised that many valuable sites for tourism and culture have been vanishing as a result of rapid urban development. This needs to be considered, not

just in China and Europe, but for countries connected to the OBOR initiative. In connection to this, given the vast number of materials, cultural and tourism programmes, as well as the vast number of countries involved in the OBOR initiative, it was suggested that there should be a collective, integrated interface to facilitate investments in EU cities.

The next participant wished to highlight the many concrete examples of tourism investments along the OBOR route by major multinationals and global companies.

Another participant noted that culture is a regional, even global, concept. It was also noted that apart from states, there are multinational companies and independent organizations that offer opportunities as well. In this light, the dialogue around OBOR should not just focus on nations, or a particular cluster of nations. Rather, it should involve multiple actors.

The issue of granting of visas to Chinese tourists visiting Europe was raised. It was noted that there is no shortage of Chinese tourists willing to travel to Europe, but that the ability to obtain a visa was an impediment. Mr Corazza agreed that the main obstacle to increasing tourists to Europe was indeed the granting of visas. He explained that a proposal to ease the process was under consideration and that there has been a positive response. Mr Ujhelyi noted that though there is a necessity to update the visa system, problems relating to the migrant crisis in the EU might slow down its reform.

Concerns over the safeguarding of the individual cultures of countries on the OBOR route was raised, and how to regulate the influence that could penetrate, and possibly cause culture clashes as a result.

On the nature of touristic visits to European cities, it was raised that this remained one dimensional; limited to consumeristic visits. What else can be done to attract tourism of a different nature - one that showcases holistically what Europe can offer tourists? Mr Corazza replied that shopping, food culture, and fashion were very much a part of European creativity and that these are elements of culture that should not be discounted.

The issue of sustainable tourism was raised as a concern. Mr Corazza responded that the problem of sustainability was limited to certain destinations, and that studies and discussions have been ongoing in addressing the issue of sustainability in these specific areas.

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