



# Clingendael

Netherlands Institute of International Relations

## Conference Report:

Culture and Understanding in China-Europe  
Relations

19–21 September 2013, The Hague

Susanna Theresia Mocker

---



Conference Report  
Culture and Understanding in China–Europe Relations

Date: 19-21 September 2013

Venue: Clingendael Institute, The Hague

Chair: Professor Jan Melissen of the Clingendael Institute

Participants: 38, Dutch, Chinese, German and other European and US participants, mostly government-, academic-, and private sector representatives from *inter alia*, the Clingendael Institute, the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa), the Charhar Institute, and the major funder of this conference, Robert Bosch Foundation.

Rapporteur: Susanna Theresia Mocker.

This seminar took place under the Chatham House Rule, as reflected in this report.

See also: <http://www.clingendael.nl/event/culture-and-understanding-china-europe-relations-international-conference-19-21-september-2013>.



*„Wer sich selbst und andere kennt,  
Wird auch hier erkennen:  
Orient und Okzident  
Sind nicht mehr zu trennen.“*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, West-östlicher Diwan

## INTRODUCTION

A majority of Europeans (55 per cent) believe that cooperation between the European Union and China is impossible. Supposedly, the difference in values is too profound to allow for coordination of policies.<sup>1</sup> These 55 per cent are alarming. In the twenty-first century China cannot be circumvented by either major or minor powers. Vice versa, China cannot forgo the need to communicate its intentions to the world and to Europeans. It is essential to keep communication channels open between the largest developing country and the polity with the largest number of developed states. This report argues that cultural relations can significantly contribute to this end.

This conclusion was drawn by 38 Chinese and European scholars and practitioners during the conference ‘Culture and Understanding in China–Europe Relations’, held in September 2013 in The Hague. This conference represents the sequel to the 2012 forum on the ‘Wisdom of Public Diplomacy’, which took place in Beijing, and is to be followed by conferences in Shanghai and Berlin in 2014 and 2015 respectively.

Before delving into the findings of the 2013 conference, the organisational framework deserves mentioning. The event was co-organised by the Dutch hosting institution, the Netherlands Institute of International Relations ‘Clingendael’ (hereafter the Clingendael Institute), the Charhar Institute from China, and the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (*Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen*, ifa) from Germany. The two-day conference, from 19–20 September 2013, was enabled by the generous funding of the Robert Bosch Foundation.

This report represents a *personal reflection* about the conference, and the views held are not necessarily in concordance with the participants’ opinions. It seeks to identify the golden thread of the rich debate and thus present what was discussed under Chatham House Rules

---

<sup>1</sup> *Transatlantic Trends: Key Findings 2012*, available online at: [http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2012/09/TT-2012\\_complete\\_web.pdf](http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2012/09/TT-2012_complete_web.pdf), accessed 1 December 2013.



to a wider audience. To do so, the following topical clusters will be addressed: terminology; actors; practices; and lessons learned.

## NOMEN EST OMEN: ON TERMINOLOGY

Perhaps surprisingly, the participants did not engage in a deep discussion of the term 'culture'. The Chinese equivalent, 文 (wén), is very comprehensive, including almost everything besides nature. One participant stressed that the Chinese associate 'cultivation' with culture, rather than a particular expression of the latter. This understanding is close to the German interpretation, where '*Kultur*' and '*Bildung*' (education) are closely interconnected. Sharing this attitude, the participants agreed with the usage of the term 'culture' as an 'umbrella term for all aesthetic fields such as music, theatre, dance, the visual arts, literature; the humanities such as philosophy and sociology; the promotion of languages in primary, secondary and tertiary education; and foreign science policy'. It was understood that this also includes 'the broad area of everyday culture, including aspects such as food culture'. All these elements of culture hold the potential either to divide or unite people. They can reinforce one's belonging to a certain group or build a bridge towards others.

While consensus on this was found, a central point of discussion evolved around the term 'cultural diplomacy'. The very term incorporates the dilemma faced by the participants: Is one talking about 'diplomacy for culture' or 'culture for diplomacy'?

The latter term suggests that culture can be an instrument. It is deliberately used by states as part of their foreign policy. Within this realm, two aspects were discussed. The first concerns the usage of cultural knowledge for policy formulation: one can see 'the others' culture as part of one's own resources' to anticipate reactions to one's policies. The second aspect addresses one's own culture as one dimension of soft power. While non-state actors can be involved, the state has a predominant position – for example, not only in funding an exhibition, but also deciding on its topic and where to display it. Culture, then, is a means towards the power to attract and influence.

According to China's former President Hu Jintao, this reflects Western practices towards China: 'International hostile forces are intensifying the strategic plot of Westernizing and dividing China, and ideological and cultural fields are the focal areas of their long-term infiltration'.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, others associate China's closed political system with propaganda

---

<sup>2</sup> Hu Jintao, 'Resolutely Walk the Path of Socialist Culture Development with Chinese Characteristics



that is also directed towards Europe. One participant, however, highlighted that the ‘idea that culture should primarily serve moral goals is not only something advocated by the Chinese government’. As stated by China media specialist Ying Zhu, the idea is ‘rooted in a longer tradition of Chinese aesthetics that defines art (and entertainment). According to Chinese aesthetics, art is meant to represent the “good and the beautiful”. This perspective can be traced to a moral and ethical fabric grounded in Confucianism’.<sup>3</sup> In summary, it was acknowledged that ‘culture for diplomacy’ is a perceived phenomenon on both sides of European–Chinese relations.

What then constitutes ‘diplomacy for culture’, the second interpretation of ‘cultural diplomacy’? Here, the state acts as an enabling force. It provides the circumstances in which culture can blossom and flourish. Those circumstances involve freedom of expression, freedom to travel and the protection of intellectual property. This approach was preferred by the practitioners in the room. Not only do they acknowledge state support in creating cultural goods and experiences, but they also do not want to be associated with ‘soft power’ in any meaning of the word. Culture, then, is an end in itself, with politics supporting it. In conclusion, the participants acknowledged that ‘cultural diplomacy’ was both a means and an end in European–Chinese relations.

As ‘diplomacy’ refers only to state practice for the overwhelming majority of people, there was a linguistic preference for ‘cultural relations’ instead of ‘cultural diplomacy’. Cultural relations thus also incorporate the private act of cultural exchange in which states neither actively enable nor shape the interaction.

## THE VARIETY OF ACTORS

It follows from the last sentence that the concrete actors in cultural relations are people. As one participant stressed: ‘Cultures cannot cooperate or engage in dialogue with one another; people can’. This is beautifully captured by the Chinese term for cultural diplomacy: 人文外交 (rénwén wàijiāo).

---

Striving to Construct a Strong Socialist Culture Country’, in: *Qiushi*, January 2012, translated by China Media and Copyright, available online at:

<http://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2012/01/04/hu-jintaos-article-in-qiushi-magazine-translated/>, accessed online on 1 December 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Ying Zhu, ‘The Cultivated War and the Vulgar: China’s Cultural War’, in: *Asian Creative Transformations*, 2 April 2012, available online at:

<http://www.creativetransformations.asia/2012/04/the-cultivated-and-the-vulgar-chinas-cultural-war/>, accessed on 1 December 2013.



The question remains on which level these people interact with each other. On the national level, the importance of arm's length institutions like the *Goethe Institut* (Germany), *British Council* (the UK) or *Alliance Française* (France) was emphasised. These institutions have special funding and operating policies, which are to ensure funding through the government, but hinder direct influence by the latter on the cultural activities devised.

There was broad consensus that cultural relations also take place on the subnational and supranational level. On the subnational level, cities are increasingly important, as a recent study, instigated by the Mayor of London, shows. Cities accumulate investment in culture over the years and, arguably, specialise in certain sectors of culture.<sup>4</sup> Regions, too, engage in cultural relations, and the examples of Catalonia, Lombardy, Flanders, Wallonia and North Rhine-Westphalia were mentioned in this context.

Within Germany's federal system, cultural relations are left to the provincial level. This is due to painful lessons from history, showcasing how easily a monopoly on cultural and educational policy can be misused. The whole picture of cultural actors in Germany is thus very colourful: 'There are over 300 institutions active in the broader sphere of foreign cultural policy in Germany, including nine ministries, sixteen federal states, regional foundations, political foundations, churches, sports associations and corporate foundations [...] and numerous civil society initiatives. If we add to this all the cities and universities, the number of institutions active in foreign cultural and educational policy in Germany rises to over 1,000.'

While Germany has only sixteen provinces aiming to promote their unique culture, China features more than 30 subnational administrative units with arguably greater variety. The diversity of both entities – Europe and China – provides a vast potential for cultural exchange on the national and subnational levels respectively.

The EU is tapping into this potential and is increasingly willing to do so. Contrary to widespread assumption, the role of culture is acknowledged by the EU member states even in times of crisis. The 'More Europe' campaign, initiated in 2011, was highlighted by participants as exceptionally successful, as it adds a cultural dimension to EU foreign policy and relies on a people-to-people approach.

---

<sup>4</sup> Mayor of London, *World Cities Report*, 2013, available online at: <http://www.worldcitiescultureforum.com/data>, accessed on 1 December 2013.



On the supranational level networks like the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) have proven their efficiency. EUNIC comprises 31 institutes from 26 countries, and taken together, these institutes work in more than 150 countries in the world.

## WHAT WORKS?

In a nutshell, three approaches to cultural relations were discussed during the conference: 1) one-directional communication; 2) dialogue; and 3) common projects.

An enabling component for all three models, however, is language. A group of Chinese actors performing Shakespeare in Chinese at the Glasgow Festival in Scotland experienced this first-hand. Lacking any subtitles, the performance arguably failed to deliver the desired effect.

For Europeans and the Chinese, it is not easy to find a common medium of communication: Cantonese and Mandarin have a reputation for being hard to learn and few have the stamina to master it. The Chinese acknowledge that learning English might be comparatively easier, but using intonation correctly remains a challenge, as a Chinese participant pointed out. Furthermore, Europe has over 50 spoken languages and English is not available everywhere. Promoting one's language abroad will thus continue to be the traditional pillar of cultural relations. On top of this pillar, three models can be deployed:

1) Not many words were spent on the one-directional communication approach, in which one side directly communicates a cultural message to its audience. Dutch practitioners held that attempts to showcase something from the Netherlands in China were not too successful. Another European joined in, saying: 'It cannot be megaphone diplomacy. That's old; it's gone'. Participants portrayed credibility as *conditio sine qua non* for cultural relations. In their assessment, one-directional approaches frequently lack this necessity. A repeatedly mentioned example was China's Confucius Institutes. The conference, however, showed that *Hanban* (the 'Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language') does not interfere in the daily business of the 429 Confucius Institutes worldwide. The accusations of propaganda are likely exaggerated for several reasons.

2) Credibility is easier to obtain when a genuine exchange or dialogue happens. The underlying assumptions about the audience are different here: it is in fact less of an audience than an equal other. The other has a possibility to choose whether to engage in the dialogue. Practitioners confirmed this model as a real-world phenomenon: 'The better we make the offer, the more likely the offer will be accepted'. One needs to emphasize what often gets lost



in writings about cultural relations or cultural diplomacy: consuming cultural goods takes time and attention. Both are scarce resources and not available to everybody in the media age. Offers by cultural 'envoys' need to compete with everything else that demands one's attention.

If the invitation to dialogue is accepted, cultural messages are sent indirectly instead of directly. As one participant put it: 'Passing on a message is still a legitimate goal'. The EU focuses on this model and has devised the 'Dialogue Support Tool', which essentially funds dialogue initiatives between Europe and China. Some of the Chinese participants joined the essentially Western choir: 'The best propaganda is no propaganda at all'.

3) The third approach to cultural relations was enthusiastically backed by practitioners and is most promising. The Latin word *communicare* (to communicate) is tightly related to *communis*, which means to have something in common. The third approach – engaging in a common project – reflects this. Ideally, cultural exchange does not only happen through projects; instead, something is created by means of the project. This has two aspects to it: first, the practitioners observed that people change in the process of cultural exchange. Meaningful understanding takes place when people work together on something. Second, the project should ideally result in a product that can be enjoyed by domestic and foreign audiences alike. Thus, a shared experience can be created. As one participant put it: 'Don't just make projects happen. Make something happen through projects'.

Another participant shared an example of how this can take place. The Chinese International Publishing Group and Klett, a German family-owned publishing and education company, set out to publish German education books for the Chinese market. Negotiations were long and strenuous and eventually succeeded. One Chinese member of the negotiations reportedly said 'it had entirely changed his perception of the German people and their culture. Originally he thought Germans had such a demand on accuracy and standardization to the point of dogged stubbornness that when the initial round of talks for cooperation was falling apart, he was not surprised. As they worked together further on, he found that Germans were demanding but not stubborn'. As a result of the process of negotiation and increased understanding, the Chinese–German joint venture ended up building kindergartens in China and thus going way beyond their initial plan.

As can be seen, the interactive third approach also addresses the Achilles' heel of cultural relations: funding is hard to obtain when impact cannot be measured. According to one participant, the British Council reportedly made progress in this matter and found that cultural exchange indeed fosters trust. While this is to be welcomed, the interactive approach





could also help. Projects with an outcome indeed create a real-world product that can be presented along with the less visible results.

In the context of all three approaches, practitioners stressed the need to find a market for one's product in order to attract funding. The current 'Ming Exhibition' in Amsterdam, which showcases the finest Chinese cultural relics from 1368–1644, is administered by a British agency, which is naturally interested in earning a profit from the exhibition. Another example involved the giant rubber duck created by Dutch artist Florentijn Hofman. Amongst other places, it was installed in Beijing. While welcomed by the Dutch and Chinese sides as a quite original cultural exchange, funding for the installation was difficult, as the Chinese side only supplied the space needed for the exhibition.

## LESSONS FOR EURASIA

Deng Xiaoping once remarked: 'Europe and Asia are in fact on the same continent. You sit in the west, and we are by the east. There are far more things that connect us than we could ever imagine'. Nonetheless, Europe and China have been late in exploring and fostering their cultural relations. Deng Xiaoping, despite better knowledge, also did not do much to deepen European-Chinese relations. Since China began to open up in 1978, attention has lain on economic opportunities. Debates on the universality of human rights or imposed Western values have darkened the outlook for unbiased relations. Cultural relations, however, can be a means to hold the communication channels between Europe and China open.

As demonstrated above, this can be done in several ways, by a multitude of actors, and with different ends in mind. The conference participants did not shy away from formulating normative statements on how cultural relations could and should be improved. This section highlights some of them.

The Chinese participants repeatedly lamented a Chinese cultural deficit in European relations. Not only is European and Western culture seen as dominating, but some Chinese participants also noted a lack of new Chinese high-quality cultural goods. The Chinese government seeks to counter China's perceived Westernization by increasing its budget for soft power matters from 3 to 5 per cent of GDP in 2016. This would be the largest soft power investment in the world. It was, however, mentioned that money alone will not create the conditions for culture to flourish. While acknowledging that China sees itself as being in the midst of a transformation that limits policy options, greater freedom is needed if the creative



potential of the Chinese people is to be shared with the world. Europe can contribute to this freedom and foster cultural relations by easing visa regimes.

Another normative statement made during the final session of the conference concerned social media. The conference regrettably missed the opportunity to explore digital aspects of Chinese–European cultural relations. This is a major shortcoming that needs to be addressed in the forthcoming conference, especially by inviting significantly more young scholars and practitioners. President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy has approximately 3.3 million followers on Weibo, a Chinese equivalent to Twitter. European films are popular with Chinese netizens on Tudou and similar platforms. In other words, the digital dimension of Chinese–European cultural relations must not be ignored. The scholarly debate needs to move away from ‘the younger generation’ consuming ‘video games’. Digital natives are in their mid-20s and entering jobs.

Last but not least, a closer look at the people involved in cultural relations should be taken. The consumption of (high) culture takes time and attention, which is not available to everybody. It is arguably available to the middle and upper class. As several participants said, the cultural elite actively pursues cultural relations on its own and does not provide a vast potential for further improving Chinese–European ties. The middle class, on the other hand, is overrepresented in cultural relations. Moreover, it is also an audience served preferentially by domestic governments.

Especially in the Chinese context, with its unequally developed society, cultural initiatives for people in the rural areas are to be welcomed. Smaller programmes geared towards them hold the additional benefit that they can be approved on a shorter notice. Anyone who has travelled in China’s rural areas has likely experienced a different attitude towards one’s ‘foreignness’, and knows that this can enable genuine cultural understanding.

Considering the above, the upcoming conferences should pay close attention to the people on the ground who are actually involved in cultural relations. The rich debate in 2013, which could only be partly reflected upon here, holds the promise that this will be possible with these participants. All the more so, as we ourselves build trust and understanding over the years.

Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'

Clingendael 7

2597 VH The Hague

Phone number: +31 (0)70 3245384

Telefax: +31 (0)70 3282002

Email: [info@clingendael.nl](mailto:info@clingendael.nl)

Website: <http://www.clingendael.nl>

© Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael. All rights reserved. No part of this report may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright holders. Clingendael Institute, P.O. Box 93080, 2509 AB The Hague, The Netherlands.

## Colophon

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' is an independent institute for research, training and public information on international affairs. It publishes the results of its own research projects and the monthly *Internationale Spectator* and offers a broad range of courses and conferences covering a wide variety of international issues.



**Clingendael**

Netherlands Institute of International Relations