

China-EU relations and the future of European soft power: A strategy for a European cultural diplomacy

*What are the key areas in which the EU can engage with China in the diplomatic sphere? **Karine Lisbonne de Vergeron** writes that China's overall economic and strategic interests now seem to go hand in hand with a willingness to engage with Europe culturally. She argues that with Europe's culture forming its most fundamental comparative advantage in soft power, cultural industries should form the basis for strengthening relations between the EU and China.*



The creation, last year, of the [Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank](#), and the announcement of the \$40 billion [Silk Road Fund](#), has clearly revealed China's ambitions to achieve a leading global position through its dominance of the East and South East Asian region. There are, of course, many challenges involved in all this, but the momentum of current developments is undeniable, as is the fact that if China succeeds in implementing its present plans it will have transformed economic and social relationships over the whole of Eurasia.

But it will also have still wider implications, especially for Europe. China's overall economic and strategic interests now seem to go hand in hand with a willingness to engage with Europe culturally. During his historic first visit to the European Union in Brussels last year, President Xi Jinping's statement expressed the desire for a 'Partnership of Civilisation' with Europe, focusing on peace, prosperity and growth. The theme has, since then, been amplified in subsequent meetings of the bilateral EU-China Strategic Partnership and in this year's celebration of the 40th anniversary of EU-China diplomatic ties. At its heart lies the introduction of a new, third strategic pillar to add to the first two of economic and politics: the creation in 2012 of an EU-China high-level dialogue devoted to culture and people-to-people co-operation.

There are, of course, obvious differences of norms and values between Europe and China. Yet deep-seated differences should be a reason for increased engagement, rather than evasion. Many Chinese see Europe as the cultural centre of the West, one of the two poles, with them, of global culture. Though practical considerations determine that the US remains more attractive to China in several key areas, notably for education, what draws China's deep strategic interest in Europe is that both have experienced unbroken cultural continuity over a very long timescale and benefit from an immense accumulation of cultural heritage. This move beyond economics and normal diplomacy towards 'a meeting of minds and souls' is taking place at a time when China itself has entered a new phase of internal growth, one which has made the question of culture and soft power a core strategic priority for the country's future growth and prosperity.

The pace is indeed impressive. Cultural industries have grown more than sixty times over the last ten years to reach some 3.8 per cent of China's GDP in 2012, with an objective of 6 per cent in the long run. In the cinema industry alone, the country could outstrip the United States as the world's largest film market by 2020. Many other high-growth powers, such as India or Brazil, have been showing an increasing interest in culture as a means of economic growth and external strength. But China's focus on culture as a central driver for development is unique both in scope and scale.

This contrasts with the increasing budget restrictions for cultural action in many Western nations, and particularly in European countries. This is even more striking since cultural industries are a powerhouse of Europe's economy, totalling more than 4 per cent of the EU's GDP. They are also the third most labour-intensive sectors in the EU, well above the steel, food or automotive industries, notwithstanding the non-quantified benefits across a range of other economic sectors such as digital growth, education, tourism and trade. It is thus essential that Europeans should

now be fully aware of, and undertake the necessary policies to promote, what is widely regarded as their primary asset: their culture, which remains Europe's most fundamental comparative advantage in soft power globally.

This increasingly competitive international environment in cultural industries and China's willingness to engage across the Eurasian continent with a new geo-strategic urgency specifically in this field forces us to think in terms that can enhance European co-operation at all levels to fully maximise national strengths through a common effort. So far, such a sense of Europe's collective external cultural strength has remained very limited, and mainly on a case-by-case basis.

Yet it could clearly be widened within the framework of the EU, as a complement to national actions and as a potential facilitator of further joint initiatives. It could help provide a better reach in accessing China's local development, streamlining strategic approaches to issues, which have proved difficult to address at the individual country level. And in the long run, arrangements pioneered with China could infuse all European diplomacy. It is easy to see cultural opportunities in Europe's immediate neighbourhood in the Mediterranean region or in the Middle East. Europe's artists and cultural businesses deserve more recognition and support for their strategic value. China's ambitions should be matched by ours.

This article is based on a new strategic update from LSE IDEAS: "[China-EU Relations and the Future of European Soft Power](#)"

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