



Opening speech of the 17th meeting of the EU China Round Table

10/07/2019



Luca Jahier, EESC President
Speaker
Honorable Chairman Dong and Chairman Du,

Dear Vice-chairman Zhou,

Dear Councillor,

Dear representatives of the EU Delegation to the People's Republic of China,

Dear Members of the China Economic and Social Council,

Dear Members of the European Economic and social Committee,

Ladies and gentlemen

Allow me to take you back in history. We will go back about 60 years – which is not nearly as far as the 5000 years of Chinese history, but still, it is quite a step back in time.

60 years ago, the EESC was created by the founding members of what is today the European Union, at a time when economic cooperation between states at European level was first taking shape.

At that time, leaders realised that economic integration would affect their citizens directly, in areas they care greatly about such as employment and social security. Therefore, employers, workers and other societal interest groups, we are used to call “ Europe at work” were to be given a say in this new joined-up decision-making between nations;

Today, the EESC influences the EU policy making, thanks to the expertise and input from 350 grass-roots representatives from all European Member States. Together, their say in shaping the policies of the future greatly enhances the democratic legitimacy and effectiveness of the decisions taken by the EU, including in its external relations policy;

Ladies and gentlemen, I see the input that will be provided at the EU-China Round Table in the context of the overall relationship between the EU and China, such as the EU-China Strategic Partnership and the recent joint statement adopted at the EU-China summit in April this year.

Our role is to enhance the effectiveness of the partnership and the statement by providing informed and effective recommendations to the political authorities on both sides.

However, I believe that the role also covers an extra dimension:: that as civil society and social partners, organisations' representative we following up on these recommendations on both sides and ensure they result in appropriate actions being taken.

Over the years, we have constructed a lively and productive annual dialogue. Through this dialogue we have exchanged experiences and learn from each other in areas that are of interest to both societies.

Such areas include trade, investment, social and economic rights, sustainable development, climate change, culture, tourism among many others. In other words, as the EU-China Strategic Partnership deepens and intensifies, so do our relations with the China ESC.

((But: with a little added bonus: as civil society institutions we have the opportunity of being able to go beyond the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation and explore domains that are not yet part of this Agenda – but should be, as far as we are concerned as civil society actors.)))

As one of your proverbs says: "Be not afraid of growing slowly, be afraid only of standing still". I look forward to expanding and deepening the cooperation between European and Chinese civil societies.

((One case in point is our plea for the European Union and China to seek to better cooperate and exchange experiences to reinforce their respective social security systems, a topic that was addressed during our last meeting in June 2018.

On the other hand, we also have the opportunity of re-addressing topics when we feel they are important enough to assess together a second or even third time, especially when expected results have not materialized.)))

When reflecting on this meeting and the topics on the agenda, I realized that sustainable development and climate change were the very first topics we discussed in the context of our first EU-China Round Table, back in 2007. And today, we choose to discuss the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development and the Paris Climate Agreement. This is because we still face many challenges in this area and both the EU and China see sustainable development as a priority.

The ever-increasing interdependence in this globally connected world will put demands on us in terms of closer cooperation to face common challenges. Especially in the area of the 2030 Agenda on sustainable development, whose goals we are all committed to reach as a matter of great urgency.

An alignment between China and the European Union concerning international solutions is nowhere more important than in leading the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement.

In this area, especially, I would like to see recommendations that will lead to results-oriented actions and follow-up on both sides.

We need to also look at expanding the existing common ground between us into other areas, and cooperate constructively together as partners – in particular on a question that will come up in our discussions today and tomorrow: technological advancement and its strong implications for society.

I believe that technological innovations are not good or bad. It is how we deal with the possibilities they offer that will have either beneficial or detrimental outcomes. How we manage big data has an invisible but very strong impact on society and this is not a matter we will be able to settle in one day. But I am glad we will talk about it in the frank, open and respectful manner which is the ultimate, underlying foundation of our cooperation.

In preparing for this meeting I was struck by the scale and impact of the 'renaissance' China has been experiencing over the last few decades, and which allows China to take up its historical place among the top leading countries. I do not know if China is a 'rival' or not; for us, China should be first and foremost a peaceful friend and where ever possible partner, and among friends, we share experiences.

Europe also had its renaissance, in the XVIth century. It decided to open up to the world, like China does today. Marco Polo and the initiators of the Belt & Road Initiative are indeed like-minded!

Four centuries ago, like today, circulation of goods led to free circulation of people and ideas. In order for the greatest number of people to benefit, both the EU and China must address existing inequalities due to the deep transformations we face. This is only possible if the Rule of Law, of which all human rights are part, are fully enforced as it is stated in the joint EU China Joint statement of last April 9th.

In continuing to conduct exchange on HR which are universal, indivisible interdependent and interrelated, on the basis of equality and mutual respect, in working together to complete the negotiations for an investment agreement, or geographical indications, and to reform the WTO, China and EU will demonstrate to the world that Renaissance is fully on its way.

Ladies and gentlemen, upon becoming the EESC President, I have reconfirmed my deep faith in the values of European integration and in the role played by organised civil society and our own institution. My priorities during my time in office are centred on sustainable development, the promotion of peace, strengthening the role of culture and giving young Europeans a voice.

Concretely advancing on two out of these four priorities are on our agenda today, I am therefore all the more looking forward to the discussions, and I fully trust that once again, we will be setting an example of forward-looking and constructive cooperation.

As Confucius said: "The superior man is modest in speech but exceeds in actions" – I will stop here and let it all start the work on our common project.

Thank you very much for your attention.