



DISAGGREGATING CHINESE VIEWS OF THE EU AND THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS
(A research project co-funded under the European Union Framework Seven Programme)

SUMMARY REPORT/NEWS RELEASE ON THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS

GOODWILL IN CHINA TOWARDS EUROPE DESPITE DIFFERENCES, SURVEY RESULTS SHOW

Brussels, Nov 24 - The European Union can tap into a huge reservoir of goodwill in China to improve relations and boost its image despite differences over human rights and democracy, according to the results of a scientific research project led by the China Policy Institute of the University of Nottingham.

The project, based on a public survey of over 3,000 people and a series of surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions of various elite groups, highlighted the environment, the development of civil society and the internet as major opportunities for the EU to develop closer ties with China, as well as trade, education and culture.

The main controversial issues thwarting improved relations were human rights, Tibet and intellectual property rights (IPR), according to the surveys. But despite this more than 80% of 200 government officials surveyed had a good impression of the EU and its citizens, substantially better than their impressions of the US, Russia or Japan, and better than the impression of the EU held by the Chinese general public.

But over 70% over the officials surveyed said their knowledge of the EU was insufficient. Most government officials regarded the EU's concept of democracy as a good thing and said it was important for Chinese officials to improve their understanding of European democratic politics, for whatever reason. "These results show that there the EU has a huge reservoir of goodwill in China to tap into, despite past difficulties," said Dr Zhengxu WANG, deputy director of the China Policy Institute at Nottingham and coordinator of the project, which was supported by the EU Commission under its framework seven research programme for the humanities and social sciences. "The surveys show that the more people know about the EU and its complexities, the more positively they view it, and that elite groups in particular are keen to learn more. This means that the EU has a major opportunity to improve the relationship across the board."

"The EU has already done a lot of great work in terms of cooperation with China, but it is not clear how much of this is widely understood there. These survey results show that the EU has an opportunity to strengthen its public relations work there, not only to promote its culture, which is already well received, but to improve understanding of its political systems, emphasizing its role in preserving peace, promoting justice and protecting the environment," he added. "The EU can also build further on its valuable work in helping China to develop its civil society," Dr Wang said.

Relations between China and the EU reached a low point in December 2008, when China cancelled a planned EU-China summit due shortly after French President Nicholas Sarkozy met with the exiled Tibetan leader, the Dalai Lama, while holding the EU's rotating presidency. Earlier that year pro-Tibet demonstrations in Paris and other European capitals marred China's Olympic torch relay shortly before the 2008 Olympic Games began in Beijing.

The surveys, conducted by the two Chinese partner organisations in the six-member consortium, the Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and Renmin University, took place during 2009 and 2010. Perhaps as a result of the Olympic torch protests in Europe, in several focus groups discussions in five cities conducted as part of the project, participants criticized Europeans for being unfriendly, arrogant and prejudiced, accusing Europeans of having a superiority complex and being jealous of China for its rapid economic development. But despite this the surveys showed that 93% of respondents saw China and the EU as partners or friends, with only 7% seeing them as enemies or rivals. However a substantial minority, 46%, did not view China-EU relations as positive and only 34% saw relations as friendly.

Several elite groups, each of roughly 200 people, were surveyed as part of the project – government officials, scholars, civil society activists, business people and media practitioners.

Human rights and Tibet were the most controversial issues overall in the EU-China relationship, according to the elite surveys conducted. For government officials, human rights, different political systems and Tibet were the most controversial issues. For scholars, intellectual property, human rights and the environment were the most controversial. For media practitioners and civil society activists, human rights, Tibet and a different stance on international affairs were the most controversial issues.

Referring to human rights and Tibet and the Olympic torch protests in European cities in 2008, Professor DONG Lisheng of CASS said this research might prompt EU officials to want to reassess how their own understanding of these controversial issues differs from the way Chinese people see these issues, and to examine the policy implications. "The EU may wish to do further research on why these issues are so controversial in China," he wrote. Another member of the research team, Dr TANG Haihua of Renmin University, wrote that "The EU will find it more productive to adopt the role of friendly helper and partner rather than that of teacher bringing pressure to bear." Nottingham's Dr Wang said the EU might wish to take more specialist advice, for example from the Europe China Research and Advice Network (ECRAN), on how to engage China more productively and constructively on these controversial issues, without sacrificing the robustness of its own positions.

The other members of the research consortium were Leiden University of the Netherlands, Jacobs University of Bremen, Germany and the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House.

The surveys clearly showed that despite the differences on controversial issues, the attractiveness of European culture constituted a formidable component of the EU's soft power in China, according to Dr Wang. The EU could increase its soft power by further building trust and reducing perceptions of European aggressiveness, he said. The EU could also benefit from working to reduce the perceived distance in values between the EU and China, he added. By helping Chinese citizens to acquire more knowledge about Europe, the EU would at the same time boost its popularity, Dr Wang said.

The EU should therefore consider intensifying its public information policy in China in a targeted way, with clear measurable goals, prioritized actions and a suitable budget, according to Professor Henk Dekker of Leiden University. Dr Wang said the surveys showed the EU would benefit from emphasising its role in preserving peace, promoting justice, and in fighting poverty and international terrorism, as well as promoting its culture and understanding of its political systems. An integrated communications strategy to improve the EU's image should also include a cyberspace strategy to reach young people, he said. Different groups had different views in China and should be targeted separately, he said. The EU should promote the diversity and strength of its culture in China, especially through films, as well as promoting more exchanges between university students to build understanding and mutual trust.

The EU also needed to work harder on its image in the poorer western regions of China, where people were less familiar with Europe than in the richer coastal areas, the surveys showed. At the core of its information strategy, the EU should promote its role as an environmental actor and further strengthen environmental cooperation. European companies should be encouraged to adopt the same tough environmental standards in China as they had to back in Europe, with both sides emphasising corporate social responsibility, according to one of the researchers, Dr Li ZHANG of the University of Nottingham.

Dr Wang said the EU has a major opportunity to help China build its civil society, and it should further expand programmes in this field, taking into account the different nature of Chinese social organisations from European NGOs. European civil society should be encouraged to focus on China, taking into account its special conditions and the role of the state, and the interweaving of state and society, he said. EU NGOs could help Chinese civil society develop capacity in a non-politicised way and just because Chinese NGOs usually had to have a sponsoring state organisation, this did not mean they should be seen as part of the government. A series of EU-China pilot projects to help develop civil society could usefully be undertaken at regional level, Dr Wang said. More research could be undertaken on civil society development in China, involving European scholars and NGOs, and the EU could coordinate with member states to engage NGOs more effectively in China.

Culture and education were also areas with huge potential to further improve collaboration, for example in the field of school history textbooks and school curricula, where the EU and China could develop useful cooperation to improve mutual understanding between young people, he said. Joint history activities, such as history camps and heritage classes held at actual historical sites, could be used to bring Chinese and European students together on a practical and personal level, according to another project member, Professor Nicola Spakowski of Jacobs University in Bremen. Furthermore, joint textbook materials could be developed by educators and academics of China and Europe working together, she wrote in a report.

Dr Wang called on the EU to establish a China-EU Young Leaders Training Programme under which groups of young officials from China would attend intensive three-month summer courses in Europe on the history and origins of European thought, on climate change and the environment, on European civil society and its different models throughout the EU, and on European governance, the rule of law, democracy and anti-corruption methodologies.

(Questions about the project should be addressed to Dr Zhengxu Wang at the University of Nottingham, Tel: +44 115 8232117, email zhengxu.wang@nottingham.ac.uk) Research papers for the project are available on: <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/cpi/research/funded-projects/chinese-eu/research-outputs.aspx>.



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Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China



Jacobs University Bremen, Germany



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