

Making the China-Europa Forum a sustainable and multi-stakeholders platform of exchanges and mutual enrichments on Chinese and European cities

1. Issues of the dialogue: enable cities to play a major role in the transition towards sustainable societies

Until recently China was mostly a rural country. Due to the breathtakingly fast economic development of the last thirty years, it is now involved in a speeded up urbanisation process and hence confronted with countless challenges of supervision of urban development, management of the society, social integration, preservation of fertile soils, financing and environment. To address these challenges, China wishes to benefit from the experiences of all the countries that preceded on the path of urbanisation. It is particularly interested in the solutions brought by the European countries, firstly because of the age of their urban developments, which gives the necessary perspective to assess both mistakes and successes; secondly because the European countries were able to maintain the diversity of their cities; thirdly because in many cases these countries tried to combine market efficiency, social justice and environmental preservation; finally because Europe is a densely populated continent with limited natural resources, a situation close to the Chinese one.

For their part, European cities are aware of having developed in the context of the first industrial revolution, in the 19th century, and then of the second one, in the 20th century, at a time when natural resources and energy still seemed limitless. The primacy given to cars after the Second World War, and more generally the living and consumption styles based on models of development that generalisation is inconsistent with preserving planet Earth forced them to fundamentally rethink their operating mode. This is also why it would be unreasonable for Chinese cities to start developing following the European or American model and discover too late that this model is not viable.

Thus, despite their difference in age and current pace of development, Chinese cities and European cities are facing together the challenge of a transition to sustainable societies: Chinese cities are not only in a position to draw lessons from the successes and failures of the European urbanisation, they are also, on an equal footing with European cities, their partners to explore new development models.

This exploration is all the more important since the recent international conferences showed that it was extremely difficult for States to cooperate together to lead this transition in the name of the common good. Thus, the text adopted by the International Community at the end of the Rio+20 conference is a statement of States' powerlessness to act together to serve the common good and underlines, page by page, the role cities are expected to play. More generally one can observe that States and large companies, which have been the major players in the organisation of the economy and the societies in the 20th century, are not in the best position to do it in the 21st century. There are good reasons to think that the best adapted players to the challenge of building sustainable societies — reconciling economic efficiency, social cohesion and harmonious integration of societies in their natural environment — will

be on one hand cities and territories and on the other hand global production chains. Indeed, both players combine these three dimensions.

Therefore it is an historical task that awaits Chinese and European cities. In these circumstances, one cannot but be glad to see the highest level of the Chinese and European public authorities — Chinese Premier, LI Keqiang and President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso — sign, in the spring of 2012, a strategic partnership making the issue of sustainable urbanisation the priority of their cooperation.

The challenge is immense. We know the four dimensions of the transition to be lead and each of them involves a genuine revolution to which cities can powerfully contribute.

It is, first of all, the necessity to *build a global community*, namely the awareness of a common destiny and the habit took by societies to take in hand together their problems. International networks of cities, less hampered than States by the habits and method of diplomacy, have a major role to play in the construction of such a global community. It is a genuine anthropological revolution, because for millennia we have been used to think of ourselves as different nations, maintaining towards each other resentments and distrust inherited from history, and whose interests are in competition.

The second revolution is a *revolution of ethics*. The extent of the interdependency between societies and between humankind and the biosphere makes the responsibility of our individual and collective actions the core of the ethic of the 21st century.

The third one is a *revolution of governance*. Our current modes of managing the society are inadequate to the management of a complex and interdependent world where the ability to connect issues, players and levels of governance becomes essential and where unity and diversity have to be combined.

The fourth one is a *revolution of our economy*. We have to invent new modes of production, exchange and consumption that ensure the well-being of all respecting the limits of the planet.

These four revolutions are the specification of cities' transition to sustainable societies. They involve an evolution of both thinking systems and institutional systems, the emergence of new players, a new capacity to think of the complexity locally and act globally, especially through international networks of cities.

The fact that the new strategic partnership signed by the European Union and China is dedicated to urbanisation has symbolic value and calls for synergies around these challenges. However, it would be paradoxical to expect all of these intergovernmental relations. If the official rallying of European and Chinese authorities is indispensable, since States continue to have the majority of the public resources; it remains that the transition will only be successful under the condition of the rallying of all the players: local and regional governments, companies, civil society organisations.

2. Many partnerships among Chinese and European players already provide evidence of the importance of cities and urbanisation in the relations between European and Chinese societies

All Chinese major cities and provinces have already one or several twinings with Europeans counterparts. If the intensity and the depth of relationships born from these partnerships are unequal, their number still shows the existence of exchange flows. The same applies to universities; many of which already have European-Chinese joint programmes where the urban dimension is seldom absent. European architects and engineers are often involved in

Chinese urbanisation. In the fields of water, sanitation, transportation, technology transfer, convergence of standards, joint ventures are frequent. In their effort to make the best possible use of the European experience, every year delegations of Chinese mayors or Chinese experts crisscross Europe and, within the framework of twinnings; many European local leaders discover China. The new partnership signed between China and Europe is not exploring uncharted territory. The first issue is therefore to enhance these pre-existing exchanges and ensure their mutual fertilisation.

3. A change of scale and depth of the exchanges is necessary

All existing exchanges are source of innovation on either side and there is nothing like the personal discovery of new realities, new thinking modes or new techniques to come home transformed. However the fact remains that this amount of occasional partnerships is not yet on the scale of the challenges China faces with its rapid urbanisation and even less on the scale of the great transition to be jointly designed and lead. Limits of the current state of the exchanges are all tracks to go further.

First limit, mayors, companies and, to a lesser extent, universities are looking for concrete answers. Faced with a problem of planning, building, equipment, network, water and waste treatment, one goes to others to see the responses that have been found and they are the ones one adapts or adopts. It is effective if the problem statement is itself correct; it is less effective when terms of the problem themselves should be modified or when current European responses are inadequate to the transition to be lead. Local authorities, compelled by urgency, are more readily willing to finance noticeable equipment than supporting reflections whose results are less immediate or less visible. Yet, when action models or responses brought to problems of which one tries to draw his inspiration from are themselves outdated, nothing is more urgent on the contrary than to explore new paths. We know the famous sentence of the economist John Maynard Keynes: “politicians are the slaves of long-dead economists and whose name they do not even know”.

Thus in the field of designing and managing cities, governance and economy, we are prisoners of false obviousness, of conceptions inherited from the past, responding to the reality of society at the moment they are born but which perpetuate despite their inadequacy to current and future challenges: mechanical model of urban planning, cities’ adaptation to cars, urban sprawl, spatial separation of different functions, juxtaposition of unrelated economic activities, inflexible division of competencies between the different levels of governance, public services segmentation, mode of management and pricing systems inadequate to energy and natural resources, overconfidence in the effectiveness of the market economy, separation of role between the different players, handling problems downstream rather than upstream, illusion that problems created by the introduction of new science and new technology will be solved by more science and more technology, uniform and normative conception of cities and districts cut off of their historical and cultural roots as well as their environment, mutual ignorance between neighbouring cities and rural areas, inadequacy of the political and administrative framework to the new scale of large urban areas, inadequate financing modalities preventing from integrating future operating costs, there is no end to the consequences of the reckless responses brought to new problems, in the illusion of then being more concrete.

Also the same remarks frequently apply to trainings, either because conformism of received ideas prevents from wondering about fundamental assumptions that underpin the subject, as seen in economics; or because engineering science, managing science and social science are too cut off from each other; or because trainings do not add enough value to the back and

forth between concrete case studies and conceptual reflection; or even because trainings, being too normative, are not sufficiently nourished from exchanges of international experiences.

A second limit derives from the current weakness, often observed, of exchanges of experiences. These exchanges are indeed omnipresent in the relationships that form between cities, universities, companies or professionals, but seldom shared. Yet everybody agrees that building an extensive database of case studies, of comparative experiments covering all fields of design and management of cities, would be a common good of immense value both for China and for Europe. It is well-known that discovering the responses brought to a same problem broadens the mind, helps to understand that there is a palette of solutions where we would consider bringing standardised responses. However building this case studies database is a long-term endeavour, given the diversity of angles of approach necessary to embrace cities, urbanisation and urban governance, and the juxtaposition of parallel exchanges do not act in its favour.

There is also a lack of reflection on the proper use of such a case studies database. Yet the procedure is easy to put in words: we start from a wide diversity of concrete experiments, thus constituting as many responses to a given problem, and their comparison allows to identify common principles, common conditions of success; this identification of common principles becomes specifications for future actions, which in turn enable to explore new response. However, behind its apparent simplicity it is seldom implemented because it implies a collective, international, long-term effort that the current juxtaposition of exchange does not permit.

The challenge is then for the cooperation between China and Europe in the field of urbanisation and transition towards sustainable societies to become a wide historical process of long-term mutual learning. It is *it* who would allow the gradual emergence of the political and administrative elites and the body of professional capable to lead the transition. For we know that the best ideas, if not underpinned by people and networks, remain a dead letter.

4. Potential contributions of the China-Europa Forum to the challenges of the transition

The China-Europa Forum (CEF) was born from the observation that the multitude of exchanges between various players of Chinese and European societies was not enough, because of its very dispersion, to lead these two societies, among the most influential in the world, to discuss together, to overcome resentments or prejudices born in ancient or in recent history, to sense a common destiny, to learn together to rise to the common future challenges. What has been said of the cooperation in the field of cities is only one of the points of application of this general observation. The China-Europa Forum is neither an institution nor a specialised tool of sectoral cooperation. Independent of public authorities, this does not mean that it is closed to them; they also have to find there a fertile working space. The Forum is a will, a state of mind, a collective think tank taking part to the invention of new forms of shared intelligence.

One of the characteristics of this new spirit is to get out of the teacher to student relationship that has prevailed for a century, since the Chinese world, after becoming aware of its delay during the 18th and 19th centuries, began to be interested in the Western schools of thought and of science and technology to make up for the lost time. This unequal relationship between partners marked and still marks too often cooperative relationship. Today it is no longer valid. First because the student, in many respects, has already ranked with the teacher, second because facing new challenges they both have to learn from each other. The Forum precisely

starts from the observation that today both partners find themselves at the same impasse, particularly intellectual ones. What matters today is to learn together to address common challenges: there is no recipe.

In the wake of World War 2, fratricide, among European States, it is not the repentance of executioners that established reconciliation and peace; on the contrary it is the construction of what would become the European Union which created conditions for repentance. Jean Monnet, sometimes called the father of Europe, was accustomed to say to former enemies: “*do not sit on opposite sides of the table, sit on the same side in order to face together your common challenges*”. At that time he had the construction of a lasting peace in mind, but this invitation to sit on the same side of the table also applies today for China and Europe, due to the urgent need to invent sustainable societies. This is the state of mind of the forum.

It is based on the principle of *subsidiarity*: where there is already existing and operating cooperation, there is no need to get involved running the risk of creating competition or duplication. The Forum is useful where there are lacks. Now we have just seen that, regarding the transition towards sustainable societies, there are many lacks. To face them, the Forum has many assets. First its *method* — leading a great number of decentralised and interactive reflection workshops — allows free speaking and getting out of the so frequent role-play “you, the Chinese”, “you, the European” by enabling all the stakeholders to discover that divergences of opinion within Europe or within China are often greater than the one between Europe and China.

The importance attached to methods can also be found in the will to include each workshop in a comprehensive approach by shuttling back and forth between workshops, each dedicated to specific issues, and plenary sessions where more general perspectives can be drawn by confronting conclusions of each of them.

The Forum, a state of mind and not an institution, is in competition with no one, contrary to, sometimes, different networks of cities, different academic cooperation, different joint ventures, which are in competition against each other in terms of identity and access to resources. It can even be observed that when the pooling of experience is desired by all, it is very difficult for one of the players to take the initiative without being suspected by the others of wanting to take the advantage of it. The Forum, a neutral space, may be free from such suspicions.

In the past, the Forum has organised a great number of workshops on urban issues, but many other workshops cover topics that are seemingly unrelated with it. It is an occasion for enrichment of the mind. Difficulties of technology transfer, democratic orientation of scientific research, corporate social responsibility, education reform, the shift towards a more participatory governance, to name but a few, do not deal on the surface with cities but nonetheless provide useful insights to plan the future of cities.

The effort on the occasion of the two major meetings of the Forum in 2007 and 2010 in order to identify in China and in Europe people and networks interested in discussing together, though far from being fully developed, nevertheless lead to come into contact with multiple networks and helped to build trust which is a promising basis from which we can help cities or networks of cities, in Europe and in China, to identify potential partnerships, interesting visits to be done, networks of experts to be called up and enlightening examples of failures or successes.

The Forum, though full of promise; however, remains in its childhood stage. Its work put in the service of the ambition of the strategic partnership between China and Europe on urbanisation would be an opportunity to go further, from a free exchange of ideas and experiences, an essential pre-requisite, to solving together concrete problems.

5. Structuring the field of a sustainable and fertile cooperation on cities through a diversity of complementary approaches

There are multiple angles of approach to urban issues. This diversity should not be frightening. It merely reflects the complexity of the urban phenomenon itself and the necessity to understand together all the different aspects. In other words, *the collective capacity that we will be able to show to interlink these different angles of approach, these different dimensions of the problems will be a good foreshadowing of what precisely constitutes the transition challenge : the new ability to manage the complexity of our societies.*

Assuming that this is indeed one special feature and an essential added-value of the Forum, dialogues within it could be structured from the following four entry points:

- The first one distinguishes *the different fields to which governance applies*: designing of cities or new districts, development and management of networks, transportation systems, ecosystems management, housing for all, economic development policy, cities' supply, health, education, culture, etc. Very often the organisation of competencies within local authorities is based on these different fields;
- A second angle of approach could be the one of the *means* adopted by local communities to manage themselves: norms and rules; planning; financing of new development; designing, pricing and managing public services; tax system; land policy; etc. ;
- A third approach consists in *starting from the main objectives of governance*, often summarised in China by the concept of harmonious society: social justice and cohesion (as illustrated by the major on-going debate in China about the integration of migrants and their access to public services), preservation of ecosystems, the possibility to bring well-being to all respecting the limits of natural resources;
- A fourth approach consists in making good use of the collective thinking already carried out to start from what appeared, through the exchange of experiences, as the prerequisite for a successful transition. Nine conditions have been identified: a good knowledge of the overall *metabolisms* of the urban system, metabolisms today hidden by the predominance of monetary exchanges; the ability to *involve all the stakeholders* in a shared strategy for change; designing a *multi-level governance*; *the co-production of the common good*; *the articulation between sustainable cities and production chains also sustainable*; seeking *governance systems* adapted to the diversity of goods and services; being aware that the chosen urban organisation creates *long-term irreversible changes*; the ability to design *long-term processes* that no longer have the mechanical rigidity of urban planning as we know it; a new way of thinking and a *new theory on the conception of cities.*

6. Establishment of an inspiring calendar

A collective dynamic without a centralised authority to pilot it requires the adoption of a common calendar from which the initiatives of everyone can be organised and combined. Echoing the strategic partnership agreed between China and the European Union, the most logical calendar appears to be the one of the annual China-EU Summits. Although it is not desirable that procedures, methods and topics of collective work are subjected to an official

agenda, it remains useful to use these official meetings as as many opportunities to progress and to evaluate improvements. This applies to the years 2013 and 2014

- *Autumn 2013*, in China, shortly before the official summit is held, we would organise a few-day long founding seminar where the intellectual and methodological bases of a long-term endeavour could be established. This seminar would bring together organisers of the workshops of the Forum which have already dealt with urban issues, but by broadening the spectrum because of the double impulse given by on the one hand the new strategic partnership and on the other hand the will to work together on the role of cities in the transition towards sustainable societies;
- *Autumn 2014*, in Europe, shortly before the official summit, which could thus be seized of the collective conclusions, we would organise according to the already well-established method of the Forum a series of workshops spread all over Europe and welcomed by European cities or regions interested in the specific topic that will be addressed, to enlarge to a greater audience and a greater number of networks the collective thinking launched in 2013, to multiply on-site visits, to bring together contributions made by cities twinnings, to start outlining possible solutions.

These two structuring elements should be complemented by more sectoral initiatives. Including for example:

- A meeting of universities and training centres dedicated to urban professionals, to lay the foundation of a cross-disciplinary common core for all the professions, based on the shuttling back and forth between the elaboration and analysis of case studies on one side and the formulation of general principles on the other. This common core would materialise the need to develop, over the years, a European-Chinese professional environment underpinning the transition. This common core would be extended by the joint construction of a series of teaching modules to allow on site or long-distance training;
- Setting-up an *information website* gathering the best of the knowledge and the experiences on cities and transition processes. A prototype is already available on Citego website (Cities, Territories, Governance) <http://www.citego.info>, and all the stakeholders of the Forum would commit themselves to feed, improve and use it;
- *Collective students' works* associating universities, training centres of civil servants, lifelong learning centres, who would jointly chose to deepen particular topics. In addition, experiences records made by each student on this topic would complement the common website. We can imagine an award for the best student teams, consisting of a visit in China and Europe to deepen their knowledge and discover new ones.
- The organisation of *European-Chinese workshops*, some prototypes already exist, consisting in, at the request of a city, gathering students or young professionals coming from multiple cultural and professional backgrounds and invite them to propose together a concrete response to a given problem.
- Setting-up an “*exchange market*” confronting demands and offers for field visits in China and in Europe.

This list can only be indicative: it will be realised and enhanced thanks to the initiatives of everyone.