

WORKING PAPER

**Now is the best time for countries to work together and strengthen
multilateral mechanisms**

Zhang Min & Amílcar Celta Falcão

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Prof. Zhang Min

Senior Research Fellow at Institute of European Studies of CASS and Chinese executive director of the CASS-UC Centre for China Studies



Prof. Amílcar Celta Falcão

Rector of the University of Coimbra Portugal

I. Portugal's key to combating the pandemic: implementing scientific prevention and control measures and making concerted efforts

Zhang Min: Dear Rector Falcão! Before the new coronavirus pneumonia pandemic broke out, I had the pleasure to pay various visits to the University of Coimbra (UC) under your leadership. The University of Coimbra, which was historically established in the Royal Palace of Alcáçova, was named one of the world's top five heritage universities by UNESCO. The "Guangming International Forum Dialogue" provides us with an opportunity to develop mutual communication. It is a pleasure to discuss with you on the topics of fighting against the new coronavirus pneumonia pandemic and of the issues in the post-pandemic era. The current new

¹ The dialogue was published by Guangming Daily on 9 December 2020, Guangming Net, available at: https://share.gmw.cn/news/2020-12/09/content_34444441.htm. The China-CEE Institute is authorized to publish the English version.

coronavirus pneumonia pandemic is still spreading around the world. The worldwide number of confirmed new coronavirus pneumonia cases has exceeded 66 million, and the death toll has exceeded 1.5 million. Mankind is experiencing the most serious global public health emergency since the end of the Second World War. How do you view the impact of the pandemic on human society?

Falcão: Such transnational exchanges are of great importance. It is concerning that that European countries are currently experiencing the second wave of the new coronavirus pneumonia pandemic. The outbreak of the new coronavirus is bound to exert a profound impact on all aspects of human society, not only on the economic operation of countries, but also on international relations and social structures. I think the new coronavirus pneumonia pandemic will become a major historic turning point for human society. No matter what the considerations or reasons that lead to disagreements among some countries are, I sincerely hope that public policymakers can be united and work together to eliminate social inequality, famishment and poverty and to make efforts to achieve environmentally sustainable development.

Zhang Min: The website of the Presidency of Portuguese Republic issued a statement on 8 March 2020, saying that Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa decided to follow a two-week quarantine rule on his own initiative and cancelled all scheduled official activities due to the confirmed cases of new coronavirus pneumonia in the school of the students, with whom the president met. The Portuguese president insisted on wearing masks in public and set an example for the public in order to combat the pandemic. Thus, Portugal has also become one of the countries that achieved comparatively significant results in fighting against the pandemic.

Falcão: Portugal has performed relatively well in the fight against this global public health emergency. The series of anti-pandemic measures are in line with the guidelines of the World Health Organization and basically adopted the most appropriate diagnosis and treatment plan considered by the medical community. From government leaders to the general public, Portugal has demonstrated its consensus and determination of concerted efforts to combat the pandemic. These factors have helped Portugal achieve a phased victory in the fight against the pandemic. I hope we can keep up the good work until everything will gradually return to normal.

As you mentioned, you very much appreciated President De Souza's exemplary role in fighting the pandemic. Indeed, President De Souza is a leader with a sense of responsibility and mission. He has deep feelings for people and is very close to the public. He is a responsible leader, leading by example and sending a signal to the Portuguese people: when it comes to the new coronavirus pandemic, the whole society must not let their guard down and must take it

seriously. This will help the general public continue to deepen their understanding of the harmfulness of the new coronavirus, to raise awareness of prevention and to strengthen their anti-epidemic confidence.



A man wearing a mask is walking on the street of Lisbon, Portugal.

Xinhua News Agency

At the moment, like other European countries, Portugal is facing the second wave of the new coronavirus pneumonia pandemic. Considering that the usual severe weather in autumn and winter can cause epidemic diseases such as influenza, the impact of the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic may be worse. The more worrying thing is that under the combined effect of all these factors, the country may experience a run on the public health system or face management difficulties. In a response to these problems, we should do our best to prevent the outbreak. Generally speaking, unless absolutely necessary, our economic activities will be gradually normalized and cannot be suspended abruptly as in the first wave of the pandemic.

In the past few months, we have accumulated experience in the fight against the pandemic, and our understanding of the new coronavirus has been deepened. The public has adopted more responsible and cautious attitudes. These factors enable Portugal to actively respond to the sudden emergency situation of the new coronavirus pandemic in a more effective way.

Zhang Min: The new coronavirus pneumonia pandemic has brought unprecedented shocks to the medical and health systems of various countries. In order to prevent the spread of the virus, the governments urgently employed legal means and adopted various measures, such as quarantine, suspension of work and production, tracing the origin of the virus, timely diagnosis and active treatment and so forth, continuously accumulate experience in preventing and controlling the outbreak, adjust and optimize the public health governance systems.

Temporary closure of schools and suspension of classroom teaching are the necessary prevention and control measures, but they seriously affect the order of teaching and research activities and international cooperation. Nevertheless, the temporary closure of schools does not mean interruption of teaching. On the contrary, it just provides practical opportunities for countries to try and innovate modern educational methods. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, education departments in various countries have worked hard to adapt to the new situation and flexibly adjusted their teaching arrangements. Online teaching, online classrooms and online forums are becoming new teaching models. The University of Coimbra of Portugal is not only the oldest university in the Portuguese-speaking world, but also an important base for Portuguese history, law, literature, archaeology, technology and other subjects. During the pandemic, how did your University organize teaching and research activities?

Falcão: In order to deal with the outbreak, the University of Coimbra has made a number of major and innovative decisions. Our university is one of the first universities to rapidly shift traditional teaching to digital teaching and conduct online assessment. The university actively adjusted its teaching tools and teaching methods. In doing so, it aims to primarily protect the health of teachers and students. We have also estimated the impact of the new coronavirus outbreak during the entire semester and examination periods. Besides, the purpose of launching online teaching and remote classrooms is to equally treat domestic and international students, on-campus and off-campus students. This is because online education makes it possible for all the students to have fair learning opportunities. Without much doubt, it is a very difficult choice to adjust the teaching patterns and methods. However, after a while, it's found that the results of online teaching and relative activities during the epidemic was very good. All the teachers and students managed to both qualitatively and quantitatively complete their teaching and learning activities in a safe environment.



People at the 90th Lisbon Book Fair held in the Edward VII Park, Lisbon

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In the new semester, we mainly offer classroom teaching, which is the teaching tradition and the main teaching method. At the same time, we will continue to maintain remote teaching and set up online classrooms. This is especially important for foreign students who are in other countries and cannot return to the university on time. The purpose of having these considerations and practices is to be ready for dealing with possible new changes in the new coronavirus pneumonia pandemic.

II. To strengthen cooperation is the only way to fight off the global threat

Zhang Min: Since the outbreak of the pandemic, China and Portugal have maintained close high-level communications. The two countries work together under mutual encouragement, and this demonstrates the strength of cultural exchanges between China and Portugal under the background of fighting the pandemic. On the packing boxes of medical supplies that China offered to Porto, a Chinese poem was attached: “Haiguo Yichi Qi, Yuanzeng Yuanli Chun”. The verse signals a message that: while China and Portugal are far away from each other, mutual concern is unabated. A similar verse of the famous Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa is actually echoing the Chinese poem: “All is worthwhile if the soul is not small.” How do you view the ideas of humanitarianism, solidarity and mutual assistance, and friendly coexistence advocated by China in the global fight against the pandemic?

Falcão: In the fight against the pandemic, China has not hesitated to provide Portugal with strong support and share anti-pandemic experience. The University of Coimbra has also received generous donations from various Chinese institutions. In addition to expressing our gratitude, we will bear in mind: the support is very helpful to promote mutual cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries, to enhance the friendship between Portugal and China, and to promote academic exchanges between the University of Coimbra and Chinese universities. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Chinese Embassy in Portugal and the important academic partner of University of Coimbra—Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). At the most critical time of the outbreak, they generously donated masks and other pandemic prevention and control supplies. Our anti-pandemic cooperation and mutual support have reflected the importance of international humanitarianism and solidarity and friendship and have fully demonstrated that when humans are facing difficulties, countries can be united and develop mutual cooperation. Through overcoming difficulties together, countries will be able to tackle the crisis at the end of the day.



Medical staff taking care of coronavirus patients in a hospital in Lisbon

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When the coronavirus outbreak in China was still serious at the beginning of this year 2020, we also did our best to donate anti-pandemic supplies to China. This is to inherit and carry forward the values of unity and cooperation that the University of Coimbra has been upheld, which is also the foundation of this ancient university. This shows that we are attaching importance to cooperation with China and will continue to do so. In the fight against the pandemic, the Confucius Institute at the University of Coimbra has played an active role. The Confucius Institute and its partner Zhejiang University of Traditional Chinese Medicine worked together and made a lot of efforts to overcome all the difficulties, and they delivered a batch of urgently needed medical supplies to Portugal in time. This example of Sino-Portuguese cooperation has made us feel the selfless help and sincere friendship between the institutions and people of the two countries.

Zhang Min: The new coronavirus pneumonia pandemic broke out and spread all over the world. After experiencing the difficult moments of fighting the pandemic, people of all countries can better understand the profound connotation of cooperation, mutual assistance and overcoming the difficulties together. But the incomprehensible thing is that some US politicians have engaged in “political stigmatization” and attacked China. So far, the world top powers such as the United States are deeply mired in the coronavirus outbreak. In your opinion, what attitude should all the countries adopt in the face of global disasters? What kind of responsibility should a major country take? How will the coronavirus pandemic urge the reform of the global public health governance system?

Falcão: From the perspective of international politics, everyone must actively promote solutions to global problems, especially to strengthen multilateralism and the role of international organizations such as the World Health Organization. There is no other way.

From this sense, I even more firmly believe that only when all the countries strengthen cooperation can they eventually overcome the global threats. In any case, no country can consider issues only from the perspective of its own interests, but should perceive and think about issues from a transnational perspective. Obviously, the new coronavirus pneumonia pandemic is a major public health emergency worldwide. Countries should reach consensus on many aspects of politics, diplomacy, science, etc. Otherwise, it will take much longer to find effective treatments, or even unable to develop efficient and safe vaccines. This will cause unnecessary loss of life, affect economic recovery, restrict social development, and hinder the development of human society.



A worker wearing protective equipment preparing to disinfect subway cars in Lisbon

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Therefore, now is the best time for all the countries to work together and strengthen multilateral mechanisms. All the countries should advocate coordination and oppose divisions. The situation requires us to put aside the selfish motives of the countries. Countries, public or private parties and other stakeholders should share their best practices under multilateral mechanisms and strive to find the best possible solutions with a purpose of achieving more fairness and equality. The role of the United Nations, the World Health Organization and other international organizations should be brought into full play, and the role of regional organizations and institutions such as the European Union should also be strengthened in order to create a better future.

III. China and the EU as two important forces upholding multilateralism

Zhang Min: Viruses respect no borders. Nor are races relevant in face of diseases. Human beings are in face of a common destiny. During the pandemic, President Xi Jinping expressed his aspiration during his calls with EU leaders to strengthen China-Europe cooperation and jointly combat the pandemic.

Falcão: I always believe that we must unite the forces of the world and actively take measures to eliminate the threats that affect people all around the world. The more the political communities, business circles and universities actively participate in the fight against the current COVID-19 pandemic, the better it will be for the world economy to quickly stage a comeback and achieve sustainable economic growth. In the global village, unity, sincere cooperation and joint efforts are the only real solutions to problems.

Zhang Min: China and Europe are the two major forces in the world today. At present, countries in the world are not only severely impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, but also face many threats and challenges such as unilateralism, protectionism, the rise of Cold War mentality and so forth. What are your expectations for China and Europe to safeguard multilateralism and economic globalization?

Falcão: The new coronavirus pneumonia pandemic has made people more convinced that unity and cooperation rather than isolationism can bring prosperity and well-being for people all around the world. Against a backdrop of deepening the global digital process and the interdependence between economies, advocating cooperation and international order on a basis of multilateralism will be helpful to achieve the good wishes of people with different races, beliefs, genders and nationalities. China and the EU are two important world forces upholding multilateralism. They have maintained intensive communications and active dialogues during the pandemic period and have worked hand in hand to promote green recovery. Without doubt, China-EU cooperation will certainly do contributions to global unity, prosperity and development.

Zhang Min: China-Portugal bilateral cooperation is an integral part of China-EU cooperation. Portugal can be exemplarily viewed as a model of great diplomacy of a small country, playing a unique role in Europe and the world in a wider sense, especially in Portuguese-speaking countries. As the country's great poet Luís de Camões says, Portugal is the place where "the land ends and the sea begins". Portugal opened the era of great navigation in history and has been an important link connecting Portuguese-speaking countries. Portugal is a founding member of the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) and a

major member of the Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and Portuguese-Speaking Countries (also known as Forum Macao). Portugal has played an important role in promoting this cooperation mechanism.

Falcão: Since its establishment in 2003, the Forum Macao has played an active role in promoting economic and trade cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries. As a member of the forum, Portugal has participated in all the previous ministerial forums. In 2019, our university established The Sino-Lusophone Academy (Academia Sino-Lusófona) hoping to promote academic exchanges between think tanks from China and Portuguese-speaking countries. The Sino-Lusophone Academy also hopes to become a think tank partner under the mechanism of Forum Macao in the future and promote our university to become an important academic base for relations between China and Portuguese-speaking countries. The Confucius Institute of our university is characterized by the promotion of traditional Chinese medicine culture, and it is now becoming platform for the University of Coimbra to carry out cultural exchanges with China. Confucius Institute attracts a large number of Chinese culture lovers every year. They learn Chinese language as well as Chinese culture. During the pandemic, our Confucius Institute held a number of online forums, which played a positive role in promoting communications between Chinese and Portuguese people.

We look forward to deepening educational cooperation and exchanges with China. Our university is known as “the university with the strongest Brazilian features outside of Brazil”, and the number of Brazilian students who come to study at the University of Coimbra continues to grow every year. I hope that in the future we can also say: “We are the university that attracts Chinese students most in Portugal or Portuguese-speaking countries, and the Portuguese university that has the strongest cooperation with China and with the greatest academic influence.”

IV. Looking forward to further cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries under the framework of the “Belt and Road” Initiative

Zhang Min: Regarding the relationship between China and Portugal, President Xi Jinping once published a signed article “A friendship that transcends time and space, and a forward-looking partnership”. Portugal is not only the first EU country to formally establish a “Blue Partnership” with China, but also the first European country on the Atlantic coast to sign the

“Belt and Road” cooperation memorandum with China. In the post-pandemic era, the “Belt and Road” initiative will further highlight its public product attributes. China is committed to building the “Belt and Road” Initiative into a road to promote cooperation and solidarity in meeting challenges, a road to protect people's health and safety, a road to encourage economic and social recovery, and a road to unlock development. In doing so, China aims to make it a community of interests, a community of responsibility, and a community of shared future. The countries along the “Belt and Road” share the results and join hands to fight the pandemic under the principles of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits, which will further deepen the relationship between China and the countries along the “Belt and Road”, including Portugal.

Falcão: The key sectors of Portugal’s socio-economic development, such as energy, insurance, health, etc., have long attracted a large amount of Chinese direct investment. We expect other fields to become key areas of Chinese investment. Portugal and China have a long history of bilateral relations and supported each other. In particular, when Portugal suffered a debt crisis in the past years, China provided timely assistance. The relationship between Portugal and China will surely deepen via cooperation.

From a global perspective, the “Belt and Road” initiative has had a wide-ranging impact on the economic and social development of many countries. We look forward to other Portuguese-speaking countries, such as Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Sao Tome and Principe, Guinea-Bissau, East Timor, etc., to expand investment cooperation with China under the BRI initiative.

The Institute of China and Portuguese-speaking Countries of the University of Coimbra will make full use of the good opportunities for cooperation between Portugal and China, make Macao as a communication link to further intensify cooperation with other Chinese universities and research institutions, and play the role as a bridgehead in the cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries.

Zhang Min: During President Xi Jinping’s state visit to Portugal in December 2018, witnessed by the Presidents of China and Portugal, CASS-UC Centre of China Studies was officially established, which opened a new chapter in the cooperation and exchanges among think tanks from China and Portugal. As the Rector of your university, what will be your suggestions for Sino-Portuguese education cooperation in the post-pandemic era?

Falcão: Portugal and China have huge potential for cooperation in education, science, research and development and innovation. The Rector’s Office of the University of Coimbra,

either the current Office team or the previous one, regards long-term cooperation with China as one of our university's educational development strategies. We believe that China will play an increasingly important role in international geopolitics. The increasingly close cooperation between the University of Coimbra and China will help deepen the relations between Portugal and China and enhance the friendship between people of the two countries.

It is particularly worth mentioning that the establishment of CASS-UC Centre of China Studies is one of the important achievements of academic exchanges between Portugal and China. It is a major event in the history of academic exchanges between the two countries and an important node for deepening cooperation between the academic circles of China and Portuguese-speaking countries. Although the Centre has a short history, it has carried out a series of academic exchange activities, which has aroused positive responses in the academic community. We look forward to further cooperation between the two parties in the areas of corporate law, commercial law, international arbitration law and so forth. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has a large collection of talents, building up a strong academic atmosphere and promoting extensive foreign exchanges. CASS is a reliable academic partner of the University of Coimbra. We look forward to closer relations between China and Portuguese-speaking countries through collaborative research. We wholeheartedly welcome Chinese scholars to Portugal to promote bilateral cooperation in the fields of education, scientific research and knowledge innovation.

The University of Coimbra will continue to be committed to deepening and advancing academic exchanges with China and to pushing the relationship between Portugal and China towards a high-quality direction. Only in this way can we continue to maintain and enjoy the academic status as a world-renowned university and truly become an important bridge and link for deepening cooperation between China and the Portuguese-speaking countries. The University of Coimbra has a sacred and historical mission: to promote fairness and rule-based globalization and to build a peaceful and harmonious world.

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Translator:

Zeren LANGJIA, Assistant Research Fellow, Institute of European Studies, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.