# REPORT

**CHINA-EUROPE YOUTH DIALOGUE 2025**

# ENCOUNTERS WITH CHINA

*European Youth Reflections*
*on Dialogue and Discovery*

*A Collection of first-hand reflections*

**Editor-in-chief:**
**Chen Siyang**

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# Preface

It is a great honor for me to serve as the editor of this unique volume. Indeed, it might be more accurately described as a collection of reflections than a conventional proceeding. The content is derived entirely from the China-Europe Youth Dialogue, an event hosted by the Institute of European Studies (IES) at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in 2025. This was my first time participating in such a distinctive event. Typically, CASS primarily engages with senior, authoritative scholars who have dedicated many years to their fields. In contrast, this event focused on young people around the age of 20, allowing me to experience an unprecedented sense of vitality and energy. This collection comprises essays from 38 participants. I have deliberately eschewed categorization by nationality, opting instead to arrange the entries strictly by surname. In my view, they are all explorers from Europe with a shared interest in China; their specific countries of origin are of secondary importance. While the essays vary in form, length, and style, each is a genuine expression of the author's sentiments. Throughout the compilation process, I strove to preserve the original content with minimal intervention, aiming to present a collection in its authentic state. This allows readers to intuitively grasp the thoughts and evolution of these young Europeans. I believe this approach serves as a valuable aid to better understanding youth exchanges, and indeed, broader humanistic exchanges between China and Europe.

I would like to provide a brief overview of last year's event to offer readers some contextual background. In celebration of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and the EU, the Institute of European Studies at CASS hosted the "China-Europe Youth Dialogue" from November 12th to 17th, 2025. The program was divided into two parts, taking place in Hangzhou and Beijing. From November 12th to 15th, the IES organized visits for the participants in Hangzhou, including tours of DEEP Robotics, Westlake University, the Financial Museum, the ZJU-Hangzhou Global Scientific and Technological Innovation Center, Zhang Wu Village, the China National Silk Museum, West Lake, the Hangzhou Section of the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal,

and Hefang Street. During this period, we also organized a themed event titled "European Youth Embracing Zhejiang: A Rendezvous for a Shared Future." This event facilitated direct interaction between the European youths and local high school and university students from Zhejiang Province and included an on-site experience of the traditional Jiangnan tea ceremony. On November 16th, all participants took the high-speed train from Hangzhou to Beijing to experience the "Chinese speed." On November 17th, the forum portion of the China-Europe Youth Dialogue was held in Beijing. The morning opening ceremony featured speeches from Zhao Rui, Vice President of CASS; Grzegorz Witold Kołodko, former Deputy Prime Minister of Poland; Pablo Iglesias Turrión, former Deputy Prime Minister of Spain; Peter Drulák, former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic; and Zhang Yi, an academician of CASS. In the afternoon, the European youths engaged in in-depth dialogues with young researchers from CASS and students from the University of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences on four key themes: "Youth and the Future of China-Europe Relations," "Youth and the Future of China-Europe Economic Cooperation," "Youth and the Future of China-Europe Cultural Exchange and Mutual Learning," and "Youth and the Future of China-Europe Scientific and Technological Cooperation."

The dialogue invited 61 youth representatives, aged 18 to 30, from 30 European countries. The average age of the selected European youth representatives was approximately 25, with a nearly 1:1 male-to-female ratio, covering 60% of European member states. In terms of educational background, 50% of the representatives held or were pursuing a master's degree, while those with bachelor's and doctoral degrees (or currently pursuing them) each accounted for about one-third. Notably, the youngest participant was still in high school. Regarding employment status, about one-third of the representatives were employed, while two-thirds were students. Their academic backgrounds covered a wide range of fields, including international politics, international relations, history and culture, art, languages, and science and technology, with about a quarter having a research background in China-related studies. It is safe to say that the European youths participating in this event were highly representative.

I was involved in the entire process of this dialogue, from preparation and invitations to the visits, the conference itself, and the compilation of this volume. I had a very direct sense of the participants' sentiments and was moved on many occasions by their affection for China and the positive shift in their attitudes. In my view, three aspects of China left the deepest impression on them. The first was high technology. Many participants showed a keen interest in the high-tech products, high-speed trains, and innovative tech companies they encountered in China. When viewing the new robotic dogs at a Hangzhou tech company, many gathered around to experience them firsthand and were reluctant to leave. Some participants were even able to discuss Chinese history in considerable detail during the museum visits. he second was Chinese culture. "Chinese culture" was a high-frequency term in the youths' descriptions. While visiting cultural landmarks such as Hefang Street, West Lake, and various museums, the youths were deeply immersed in the atmosphere of Chinese culture and proactively requested to extend their visit times. Some individuals can even hold forth on Chinese history within the museum. The third, and most unexpected for me, was safety. Many young people remarked on the high level of safety in China, noting that it was almost possible to *" a society where lost property is left untouched and doors need not be locked at night."* This gave them a sense of security when going out at night. The participants came from diverse backgrounds—some from Chinese diaspora families, some with prior experience learning Chinese or China-related knowledge, and others with no prior knowledge of China at all. Yet, after their visit, they all updated their understanding of the country. Many mentioned that they had witnessed a China completely different from the narrative presented by Western media, which to some extent broke the information cocoons on both sides and dispelled some false information about China.

Overall, this dialogue can be considered a great success, with all participants expressing their desire to return to China given the opportunity. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all the leaders and colleagues from Institute of European Studies who have devoted tremendous efforts to this conference, including but not limited to

Director General Feng Zhongping, Deputy Director Zhao Lan, Deputy Director Zhao Jianglin, Deputy Director Yang Yuan, and Mrs. Fang Ruihua, Mr. Ju Weiwei, Mr. Zhao Chen, Mr. Kong Yuan, Mr. Zhao Jizhou, Mr. Zhang Chao, Mr. Han Meng, Mr. Zhong Chao, Mr. Langjia Zeren, Mr. Ma Linhe, Mr. Zhu Rui, Ms. Zhang Chenyang, Mrs. Zhang Ruiqing, Mrs. Shi Yun, Mrs. Cao Lihui and Ms. Hua Ju. I would like to express the special gratitude to the China–CEE Institute and its Research Director, Dr. Tian Huifang, for their contribution to this event. I hope that this dialogue can be held continuously in the future, allowing us to maintain an open channel of communication with European youth.

Chen Siyang

April 2026, Beijing

## Ana Skopljak: My Jourey To China*

The Silk Road is an ancient Chinese route that has now led me to China as well. Beijing is working—successfully, in fact—to revive the historic Silk Road through the Belt and Road Initiative, aiming once again to connect China and Europe as it once did in the past. This year, at the Youth Forum, China marked 50 years of good relations with Europe and welcomed many young people from various parts of the continent, so that together we could promote stronger China–Europe relations and overcome the long-standing stereotypes and narratives we hold about each other.

The starting maritime point of the Silk Road was the Chinese city of Hangzhou, which became the host of my first visit to China and, alongside Beijing, one of the host cities of the forum. Traveling through Vienna and Beijing, I arrived in this—at first sight—striking city, which Marco Polo once described during the Yuan dynasty as "the finest and most beautiful city in the world." From the serenity of West Lake to the buzzing energy of research universities and robotics labs, Hangzhou revealed itself as a place where history, culture, and innovation meet seamlessly. Nature and modernity coexist in Hangzhou in such a beautiful way that they together create a harmonious identity of this 12-million-people living city. Towering buildings rise beside peaceful rivers, tech-driven campuses sit at the edge of forests, and highways wind around green hills. The urban landscape never feels like it has conquered nature; instead, nature seems to shape the city.

When I first arrive, after meeting the volunteers and our beloved stuff, with a group of people that I meet I visited West Lake. It was like traveling into a fairytale. Walking paths through lush green nature, tall trees, pagodas, and a crystal-clear lake full of golden fish filled my whole being with an unusual sense of peace.

Hangzhou offered me a look into the future, with our visit to Deep Robotics. The company specializes in quadruped robots—machines that walk, run, climb stairs, and navigate uneven terrain with astonishing agility. Seeing the robots in action was surreal

* Ana Skopljak, Bosnian and Herzegovina, Journalist of Federalna TV.

Engineers explained the potential applications of these robots, from industrial inspections in hazardous environments to search-and-rescue missions after natural disasters. Standing there, I felt the pulse of Hangzhou's modern identity. Here was a company not only imagining the future, but actively building it. I filmed a short story about the company.

My journey then carried me into the academic and scientific pulse of the city. We visited Zhejiang University of finance and economics, where we had a nice time hearing about Europe- China relations, and about one, from may famous things from Hangzhou- Longjing tea. We also enjoyed tea making and listening to traditional Chinese music. Also during our visit we vent to West Lake University, a cutting-edge research institution founded by scientists determined to create a world-class environment for innovation. The campus itself perfectly embodies Hangzhou's blend of nature and modernity. Sleek, glass-walled laboratories stand beside ponds, gardens, and walking paths. Students and researchers moved between buildings with a sense of purpose that made the atmosphere feel charged with intellectual possibility. During my tour, I heard about ongoing projects in the life sciences, computer science, and engineering—fields where China is rapidly emerging as a global leader.

Regarding museums we visited the financial museum, food museum and my favorite the silk museum. At the China National Silk Museum, the largest silk museum in the world and a fitting gateway to Hangzhou's historical legacy. Silk has been central to the city's identity for thousands of years, dating back to the earliest days of the Silk Road. Inside the museum, I walked through exhibitions filled with shimmering tapestries, elegant robes from different dynasties, and ancient looms whose mechanisms seemed almost magical in their complexity.

What struck me most was the contrast between the delicate beauty of finished silk garments and the painstaking labor required to create them. Demonstrations by skilled artisans showed how silkworm cocoons are unwound into impossibly thin threads and then woven into patterns that require immense patience and precision. Watching these

traditional techniques preserved in a modern museum highlighted a theme I would encounter repeatedly in Hangzhou: the coexistence of heritage and innovation.

To help us to understand Hangzhou's social and political history, our hosts took us to visit a communist village, a preserved example of the collective living model that shaped many Chinese rural communities in the 20th century. The village was a quiet, humble place, with modest buildings, communal meeting areas, and agricultural spaces that once supported the residents' livelihoods.

Walking through the village, I reflected on the dramatic changes China has undergone in just a few decades. Exhibits described daily life under communal organization—the shared labor, the challenges, the ideals of equality and cooperation. It gave me valuable context for appreciating the contrast between China's rural past and its fast-paced technological present.

The world today faces rapid technological change, environmental threats, and shifting geopolitical landscapes. In this environment, the voices of young people matter more than ever, so in our last visit days we went to Bejing The 50th anniversary of the China–Europe relations on a Youth Forum. The forum was not only a celebration of what has been achieved, but also a reminder of the responsibility held by the next generation. Youth interactions can help reduce misunderstandings, promote dialogue, and build practical cooperation.

Beijing's role as host underscores China's commitment to long-term engagement with Europe and its belief in the value of youth-led diplomacy. Wonderful volunteers, a wonderful organization, wonderful discussions, and even more wonderful friendships are the memories I brought back home to Sarajevo from distant China. Perhaps the most valuable of all are the friendships I made during those few days, and the picture of all my impressions — my one-yuan banknote, signed with the names of people from all over the world instead of a postcard.

That so many different people from Europe in China hanging out meeting each other and getting to know each other that is the point-creating together trust and friendship.

Thank you, China.

Hope I see you again

# Anastasios Seferiadis: Bridging Divides: A European Perspective on Dialogue, Innovation, and the True China*

**EVALUATION LETTER**

To the Distinguished Secretary and Leadership of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences,

It was an honor to participate in the "China-Europe Youth Dialogue: Experience China" program, which took place in Hangzhou and Beijing from November 13 to November 18. In the context of this program, which I shared with 60 distinguished colleagues from across the whole of Europe, I was able not only to explore new horizons but also to broaden my personal perspectives. This unique experience confirmed my conviction that such depth of understanding can only be obtained through dialogue, friendship, and good faith.

By the end of the program, both my colleagues and I put our faith in dialogue again. Despite the recent geopolitical developments and the tendency of major nations to abstain from dialogue, often resorting to hard decisions and polarization, this program made me validate my belief that China is not an enemy. It became clear that China does not seek leadership through arms and conflicts but is extending its arm to Europe and is committed to long-lasting peace. We had the opportunity to visit universities, companies, museums, and villages, realizing that we have more similarities than differences. Most importantly, we observed that China is emphasizing these similarities rather than the differences, setting the stage for fruitful dialogue and cooperation.

During the program, we discussed political and geopolitical developments extensively. By sharing the same table, my colleagues and I had some very honest and interesting discussions, mainly about how we can take advantage of the opportunity presented by China for honest dialogue and cooperation. Unfortunately, in most European countries, China is often considered more of a threat than an ally. Thus, this

* Anastasios Seferiadis, Greek, Msc Graduate of National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.

program helped us realize the necessity to look at China directly and not through the European lens, which in most cases develops a rhetoric against Sino-European cooperation and friendship. We had the opportunity to spend a whole week in a very technologically advanced nation and a very clean environment. The Chinese people with whom we crossed paths were very friendly and happy to see us spend time in China. The students who were accompanying us were also gracious and keen to exchange experiences and opinions. We also felt grateful for the feeling of security throughout the duration of the whole program. It set the foundation for an untroubled week, helping us focus on the activities and the sightseeing.

Reflecting deeper on these experiences, particularly in an era increasingly defined by the prevalence of aggression in international politics, the promotion of sustained and constructive dialogue is not merely desirable, but exceptionally critical. This visit reinforced the idea that China, drawing upon four millennia of profound history and civilization, demonstrates the path toward international understanding through the virtues of dialogue and cooperation. It is my firm belief that Europe must liberate itself from the self - imposed silos and rigid frameworks it has created - alternatively known as the understanding of reality through the "European lens" mentioned above. It is imperative to shift focus toward genuine, substantive cooperation that originates from diplomacy and deep political understanding, rather than being confined solely to the narrow limits of short - term industrial or transactional partnerships.

This fundamental realization served as the intellectual cornerstone of our visit. Arriving in China, we were not merely observers of a foreign land, but participants in a necessary exercise of bridging divides. The warmth and meticulous organization provided by our hosts stood in contrast to the often cold and transactional nature of current geopolitical rhetoric. The hospitality we experienced was not just a matter of protocol; it was a manifestation of the very culture of harmony and respect that the local community demonstrates towards people, and especially students, coming from abroad, aspects that are indicative of a transparent and healthy society.

Our journey took us into the vibrant heart of China’s innovation and educational

landscape, specifically within Hangzhou and the Zhejiang province. A prime example of this was our visit to Deep Robotics. Standing in the presence of such advanced quadrupedal robotics and intelligent systems, one is forced to reconsider the outdated narratives often prevalent in the West regarding China's technological capacity. Deep Robotics did not just showcase machinery; it demonstrated a bold vision of the future where technology serves to elevate human productivity reflecting also the innovation and technological capabilities of the Chinese industry, alongside with the advancements in public infrastructure that lay the foundations for stable and coherent economic development. For us, the European delegation, this was a wake-up call. It highlighted that isolating ourselves from China's technological ecosystems would be a strategic error. If Europe wishes to remain competitive and relevant, it must engage with hubs of innovation like Deep Robotics, not as rivals, but as partners in solving global technical challenges.

However, technology without a philosophical and educational foundation is hollow. Our visits to Westlake University and Zhejiang Financial College provided the necessary counterweight, showcasing the depth of China's investment in its most valuable resource: its people. At Westlake University, we observed a model of higher education that rivals the best institutions globally, emphasizing research – oriented learning and interdisciplinary breakthroughs. The atmosphere of intellectual curiosity there was palpable, further cementing my belief that the "dialogue" we seek must be not only political but also scientific and academic. The Zhejiang Financial College offered us insight into the pragmatic aspect of Chinese development; the meticulous training of a workforce capable of managing a complex, modern economy. The dedication to high level research and innovation - the driving force behind both the West Lake University and the Zhejiang Financial College with the human factor at the epicentre of the scientific and academic research, provide a model of holistic approach to governance and development that Europe would do well to study closely. These institutions are not just schools; they are the engines of the "modernization" that China advocates.

Yet, one cannot understand modern China, or its future, without respecting its past. And especially without considering the fact that the four millennia of Chinese history, have occupied the modern Chinese society and leadership, with a very different conception of time. This continuity was most vividly brought to life during our immersive experience at the National Silk Museum. Walking through the exhibits, we were reminded that "globalization" is not a modern Western invention. The Silk Road, documented so beautifully within the museum, was the world's first major network of dialogue, trade, and cultural exchange. It was the physical manifestation of "cooperation" thousands of years ago. Seeing the artifacts of this ancient connectivity reinforced the argument that China's current diplomatic initiatives are not new strategies, but rather a continuation of a 4,000-year-old tradition of connecting East and West. The museum served as a reminder that our current efforts to foster dialogue are part of a much larger historical arc, and not just a new "trend". It grounded our modern political discussions in a deep cultural context, proving that the values of exchange and mutual benefit are woven into the very fabric of Chinese civilization.

It is within this rich context - spanning from the ancient corridors of the National Silk Museum to the futuristic labs of Deep Robotics - that my critique of the European stance becomes most relevant. The diversity of our itinerary proved that China is not a monolith to be feared or contained, but a complex, multi-layered civilization. As stated in my opening remarks, Europe is currently trapped in "self - imposed silos." During our travel and discussions in November, it became painfully clear that these silos prevent us from seeing the full picture of China's rise. We tend to view China through a purely economic lens or, conversely, through a rigid ideological framework that creates barriers rather than bridges. This educational visit challenged those "rigid frameworks" by showing us the human face of development. Whether we were speaking with university students or observing the daily life of citizens in the streets, we saw a society focused on stability, prosperity, and education. To "liberate" ourselves from our silos means to accept that there are alternative models of governance and development that are successful and valid.

This brings me to the crucial distinction between industrial cooperation and genuine political understanding. For too long, the Europe - China relationship has been dominated by trade statistics, industrial contracts, and supply chain logistics. While the innovations we saw at the educational visits are impressive and invite industrial collaboration, such ties are fragile if they stand alone. They are "short - term" and susceptible to the shifting winds of market forces and external political pressures. What is required, and what this visit successfully initiated for our delegation, is a shift toward deep diplomacy, and most importantly, deep understanding. Real cooperation is built on the meeting of minds, not just the exchange of goods. By sitting at the same table, sharing meals, and debating ideas with CASS scholars and fellow students, we engaged in the "diplomacy of the mind." This is the foundation upon which resilient relationships are built. If we only cooperate on industry, we are partners of convenience. If we cooperate on political and cultural understanding, we become partners of destiny.

Reflecting on the entirety of our visit, from the rigorous academic sessions to the immersive cultural experiences in Hangzhou and Beijing, I am convinced that institutions like the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences play a pivotal role in this transformation. You act as the interpreters of China to the world, and conversely, you provide the platform for the world to speak to, and to listen to China. The aggressive posturing we see in international politics nowadays is often a symptom of ignorance and fear. Educational visits such as ours act as the cure, replacing fear with familiarity and ignorance with insight. The feeling of security and friendliness we experienced throughout the week is the tangible proof that peace is not just a political goal, but a lived reality in China.

Moreover, as I mentioned in the round table discussion, seeking leadership through dialogue and not arms, paves the road to long lasting peace and cooperation rather than temporary "truce" among the global and peripheral powers. The wisdom, heritage from the rich Chinese history, that the Chinese leadership demonstrates in international politics by abstaining from actions of aggression and ignorance, opens a window of hope and projects a world with less tensions and distrust and one with more

opportunities and most importantly – patience.

In conclusion, our November visit was not merely an educational trip; it was a confirmation of the path we must take. We return to our home institutions with a renewed commitment to foster this dialogue. We carry with us not only the knowledge gained from your lectures and the impressive sights we spent time to, but also the message that cooperation is the only viable path forward. It is our hope that this evaluation letter serves as a testament to the value of our exchange and as a pledge to continue working towards a world where diplomacy triumphs over aggression, and where the wisdom of 4.000 years guides us into a future of shared prosperity. In the wake of the China – Europe Youth Dialogue programme, I should consider myself dedicated to keep the light of the dialogue on, and eager to share the pictures and experiences obtained during the educational visit to China. In the academic sector especially, we, the Europeans, need to make some brave steps against misinformation and isolation and towards to conciliation and collaboration. In this context, the European and national leaders will be then able to implement policies in the direction to mutual approach and not just transactional partnership. I would like to express my profound gratitude to the Institute of European Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the China – CEE Institute, and the Chinese Government, for this memorable and life changing – experience. It is my sincere hope that this educational visit serves as the foundation for a long – lasting friendship and partnership.

Sincerely yours,
Anastasios Seferiadis

## Anja Radonjic: A Reflection on the Shared Path of Development and Growth*

China has always been so far and unknown to me before. I knew stories of Song Dynasty, and studied a bit about their ancient philosophy, history and medicine during university. For the most part of my education, China was its own independent actor, credible decision-maker, yet its people, its culture and way of life remained unknown.

I am grateful my first encounter with China and the opportunity to experience Chinese people began in Hangzhou. One of the seven ancient capitals, the key port for the Silk Road, the city of Hangzhou can pride itself in its quiet power. As we left the airport, we immediately became aware of the sheer size of the city, yet its urbanization has happened in conjunction with, and in harmony with the nature surrounding it. West Lake remains the beating heart of the city, and the most notable area of Hangzhou to tourists and the rest of the country.

Jet-lagged and drowsy, one of the first things we had the opportunity to do was take a walk around the lake and observe the Leifeng Pagoda. Elderly people spent their afternoons strolling by, or taking a dance class by the lake. We witnessed a couple taking their wedding pictures on what, later on we found out, was called the Bridge of Love. The story of the Leifeng Pagoda I found out a few months before, while watching the animated adaptation of the "Green Snake" story. Being able to witness the Leifeng Pagoda in person felt a full circle moment. Chinese legends and myths do not tell the simple stories of right and wrong, good and evil, yet they ponder the difficult realities of its people of the time - they offer meditations on duty, honor, and truthfulness. I learned we universally shared an affinity to stories about love.

Beyond the symbiotic nature of Hangzhou's skyscrapers and parks, one of the most impressive aspects of the city is its innovation. Concepts like research, innovation, and startups have been the key markers of my professional career. However, what I have

* Anja Radonjic, Montenegrin, Communication, Dissemination and Outreach Specialist of Trust-It Services.

seen at the Deep Robotics Centre and HIC-ZJU brought the realization that Europe still has a lot to learn, and China could be an important mentor and partner in our innovation and research journey.

The humanoids and dog-like robots that were demonstrated at the Deep Robotics center were resilient, agile, could work without their batteries, and operated on open source software and hardware. An average timeline of the robot-dog production took around 3 weeks. The core principles of production and as the fundamental of creating customer value, the company relied on the principles of: integrity, progress, innovation, and cooperation. The use of the word integrity made me think. While the other words are some of the driving principles of European innovation, you could find the word trust (or trustworthiness) substituting that of integrity. Yet these two words are fairly distinct, and understanding their genealogy and proper term use would be a separate reflective report. Alongside the sheer speed and adaptability of Chinese technologies, It struck me how green-minded technological production was. During the visit of the HIC-ZJU, we learned the variety of material used was based on bio-materials. We could see the machines the size of humans handles something as delicate as strawberry picking.

Similarly to Deep Robotics, I was fascinated by the principle of innovation and company growth at HIC-ZJU. The innovation center focused on four key areas of its ecosystem, including integrated circuits, synthetic biology, instrumentation and equipment, and advanced materials. Through the model of One Platform, One Anchor Industry, One Enabling Community, I could witness an entirely different way of approaching innovation, business testing and market implementation. While Europe is still trying to find break the work in silos of its researchers and industry leads, in China they all work as a single unit - with everyone having their role to play for successful uptake of the latest innovative practices.

Before becoming researchers or industry leaders, Chinese education equips its youth with a range of quantitative and qualitative analytical capabilities. We had the opportunity to tour two universities, the Westlake University and Zhejiang Financial College during our time at Hangzhou. Although the two universities come from

different decades and exude the different style of built, both are centered on excelling youth education. As someone who has attended predominantly Western schooling systems, it was strange not to see wondering students between the lectures or breaks. I wondered whether the university had a reading week or a holiday, but it turned out to be just the hour of lecture while we were visiting.

There is this relentless dedication to work amongst the Chinese people. It's truly admirable. I have best witnessed this at the night visits to Hefang Street. While I might have been overwhelmed by the sheer lights, colors, smells and food being sold from different vendors, It was also a pleasure to get to speak to some of the shop owners. Although we had to rely on Alipay translate, I had a chance to learn many businesses owner have sold at their shop for 15 or 20 years. Their silk scarves being produced in the village nearby where their other family members were responsible for production or provision of goods, and their role to sell it to the crowds. One particular lady, in her early 40s, spoke about owning originally about 5 stores across Hangzhou, but that she had to close the shops one by one through the last few years, due to sickness. She still worked.

I have only had the chance to experience curiosity and gentleness by the Chinese people. They are excellent hosts, and their ability to host you is one of the highest honours for them. This pride in being hospitable and kind to your guest reminded me of my own culture, and how Montenegrins approach hosting in a similar fashion to the Chinese. I was often asked for pictures, or strangers would wave and giggle upon meeting our eyes. In a world where we are often scared of one another and interactions amongst strangers are pre-conditioned with a degree of cautiousness, it was something beautiful and innately human about getting to interact and meet strangers in China. There was nothing but utmost respect and curiosity for one another.

Last day and a half we've spent exploring Beijing, and concluding the China-Europe Youth Dialogues at the premises of CASS. I still cannot fathom the sheer vastness of Beijing. I felt hours could pass by to just come from beginning to end of a single street. Despite its size and population, Beijing felt safe and comfortable. With

the limited time we had, I am still in awe to being able to see the glimpses of the Forbidden City, Beipei Park, and the Temple of Heaven. And in all honesty, all I recall is the piercing cold of those days! During the final day of the China-Europe Youth Dialogue, it was a pleasure to reflect on the journey with the fellow delegates. There are rare opportunities to bring together representatives from across each European country, and to work together on how better and strengthen our intra-European cooperation, as well as between Europe and China.

In the end, the speeches may fade away from the memory, but it was our commitment to dialogue and curiosity for one another that could be the future foundation of growth and development. For me, one of the key areas where European and Chinese researchers could collaborate in involve green transition and technological practice exchanges.

Lastly, I came back from China with more questions than answers about how the Chinese people live and think. I hope the intricacies of their lives become a bit more clearer to me with each future visit. China is no longer unknown, but a new acquaintance. Something that could transpire into a friendship.

## Antonia Baumgartner: Beyond Protectionism: Navigating Economic Realities and Shared Futures in Europe-China Relations*

What comes to mind when you think about China? How should Sino–European relations evolve over the next decades, and what lessons from the past can guide us moving forward?

Throughout this year's Europe–China Youth Dialogue, 61 young Europeans from 30 different countries came together with Chinese scholars, experts, journalists and students to address these very questions. In times of uncertainty and geopolitical tension, it is more important than ever to gather and discuss the potential of cooperation between Europe and China, incorporating the perspectives of narrative frameworks, economic challenges, technology, and pathways for future engagement. Petr Drulák, former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, reminded participants of how different the relationship looked not so long ago: just 20 years ago, the EU and China described each other as "positive development partners," with cooperation framed as both strategically and ideologically desirable. Since then, he argued, globalization has shifted. What used to be a system primarily shaped by American-led globalization no longer functions as it once did. The old rules are failing, yet new rules for multilateral globalization have not fully emerged. For Drulák, the coming years must focus on redesigning globalization on the basis of multilateralism rather than dominance by a single actor.

China's growing global influence adds urgency to this agenda. The country's efforts have significant implications beyond its borders. These include exporting internal overcapacity to the detriment of other countries' industries, especially with products such as solar panels, wind turbines and EVs, potentially achieving global pre-eminence in key technologies and future-oriented industries, and developing military capabilities, among others. Many agreed during the conference that an anti-China strategy, refusing

* Antonia Baumgartner, Austrian, Freelance Project Assistant of Salzburg Global and Bruno Kreisky Forum.

cooperation and entering a new era of separation, is not only nearly impossible, but would also undermine the progress both sides are trying to achieve.

Of course, “mutual respect” is essential, as Chang Jian, Deputy Director-General of the Department of European Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, noted during his keynote. Without recognition of each other’s perspectives, values and red lines, cooperation quickly collapses into mistrust and zero-sum thinking, as it is already visible when examining parts of the current U.S.–Europe relationship. Many expressed the need to change perspectives in order to achieve well-functioning Sino–European relations in the future. Political scientist Eberhard Sandschneider, Emeritus Professor at Freie Universität Berlin, emphasized the need to be brave enough to change one’s viewpoint. He argued that many countries follow a certain protectionism and do not see the need to include relevant global actors in the conversation. “If you don’t let us sit at the table, we will create our own table,” he stated, meaning that cooperation cannot be achieved by shutting others out, because exclusion merely incentivizes countries to establish their own platforms where they can shape the rules themselves. Trust is the foundation: without trust, cooperation is not possible. As some countries feel they are being pushed into competition with China, whether they want it or not, Sand Schneider’s message was clear: “Competition with China is not the worst thing that can happen to you. It can be the foundation for change and development.”

Economist and former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance of Poland, Grzegorz Kołodko, echoed these reflections with a macro-geopolitical lens, observing that global soft power is shifting in China’s favor, particularly among younger generations, while the current U.S. administration appears less assertive. Russia and China, he argued, are not playing the same strategic game: Russia is losing ground due to the war in Ukraine, while China is steadily gaining influence. In the decades ahead, the world will likely be shaped by a strategic contest between the U.S. and China with Europe positioned between both poles. Kołodko suggested that Europe “belongs to China and Europe belongs to the U.S. — therefore Europe is part of both worlds,” which could result in a potential win-win scenario rather than ideological alignment

with only one side. He outlined two major global spheres: first, a Eurasian sphere gravitating toward China; and second, a Euro-Atlantic sphere aligned with the U.S. He argued that while inclusive globalization will be difficult, it remains possible. The next 50 years, he concluded, will determine whether global cooperation prevails over fragmentation. And since the younger generation, my generation, will shape the upcoming decades, it was so important that this conference happened and young people were able to gather, gain insights from experts and exchange viewpoints.

In a breakout session, we had the opportunity to examine youth and the future of economic cooperation between Europe and China in smaller groups, allowing us not only to share our own perspectives but also to engage directly with the viewpoints of other participants. What became particularly evident was that, at the core, both sides agreed on the same fundamental values: the need for partnership on an equal footing, long-term stability and mutual benefit. Yet, despite this common ground, the pathways to reach these goals diverged significantly. One of the most intense points of discussion concerned the question of how open and "free" economic cooperation should be, and whether the current economic environment truly reflects a free market.

European participants repeatedly underlined the pressure their industries face when competing with China, especially in sectors where Chinese companies are able to export goods at significantly lower prices, for example solar panels, electric vehicles or consumer electronics. Because many European producers cannot match these price levels without substantial losses, governments in Europe have increasingly adopted protective measures, often described as market-defensive strategies or economic safeguard policies. These policies do not necessarily reject cooperation with China; instead, they reflect the concern that without a certain degree of regulation, local industries might collapse under price competition. In other words, many European countries advocate for cooperation while simultaneously needing to protect their domestic markets from being overwhelmed.

Chinese participants challenged this reasoning, arguing that such measures contradict the principles of an open market and free trade, where goods should be able

to move freely across borders without tariff barriers, quotas or political intervention. From their perspective, European protectionist tendencies unfairly limit access to the European market and send the signal that cooperation is welcome only as long as China agrees to play by European rules. This debate became even more tangible during our visit to the company Deep Robotics in Hangzhou a few days before the conference. While the breakout session revealed how easily the conversation can get stuck at the level of trade barriers and market protection, the visit illustrated what Europe stands to gain from a more collaborative approach. China is investing heavily in technology and research, and the speed and scale of its innovation efforts are difficult to overlook. Deep Robotics, one of the country's leading developers of autonomous robotic systems, demonstrates how far China has advanced in translating research into competitive, market-ready products. In this context, it became evident that cooperation in innovation does not have to conflict with economic safeguards. Many participants pointed out that Europe could benefit immensely from knowledge exchange, skill transfer and joint technological development, especially in sectors where Chinese companies currently lead.

Moreover, our visits to Westlake University and the Zhejiang Financial College showed us which topics Chinese scholars are currently working on and how research is being approached through strong industry collaboration, application-oriented studies and large-scale innovation projects. Both Europe and China have significant research strengths: Europe is known for its deep foundations in fundamental science and theoretical research, while China stands out for its speed in translating research into large-scale technological applications. Rather than seeing these strengths in competition, many of us felt that they are complementary, and that cooperation would unlock far more potential than rivalry.

What struck me most throughout the week was how much perceptions of China and Europe are shaped by narratives rather than by direct experience. Before arriving, my picture of China was formed mainly through media reporting focused on political tensions, economic rivalry and questions of security. For the first time, we were not

comparing headlines, we were comparing lived realities. Conversations over shared meals, bus rides or informal discussion rounds revealed how similar young people's concerns are on both sides. The more we listened to individual experiences, the more obvious it became that cooperation begins long before political agreements.

I am very grateful to the Institute of European Studies, CASS, to the University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the China–CEE Institute, and to all staff members and volunteers for making this experience possible for me. It was my first time in China and definitely not the last. I really appreciated that we not only learned so much during the program, but also got to experience the country. We were able to get a real glimpse of Hangzhou and Beijing and discovering China beyond the workshop rooms.

What I take home from this program is a sense of responsibility and optimism: responsibility, because our generation must navigate a world that is becoming more complex, more polarized and more interconnected; optimism, because this week showed that dialogue, curiosity and the willingness to understand each other are not abstract ideals, but something young people actively practice when given the space to do so.

The future of Sino–European relations will not be shaped by slogans or competition alone, but by people who choose cooperation over fear, understanding over assumptions, and long-term partnership over short-term political convenience. If we manage to build trust, stay open to change and keep each other at the table, then the next decades do not have to be defined by fragmentation, they can be defined by progress, innovation and shared growth. And perhaps that is the real lesson of this dialogue: the future is not written yet, but we will be the ones who write it.

## Blanca Marabini San Martin: My Reflections from Hangzhou to Beijing*

My participation in the China-Europe Youth Dialogue 2025 was more than an academic or professional opportunity—it was an immersive journey into the complexities, aspirations, and future-oriented energy that define contemporary China-EU relations. As someone researching China's policymaking processes, climate governance, and evolving global role, I approached the Dialogue as both an observer and a participant: eager to listen, learn, and contribute. I am particularly grateful to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences for the kind invitation to participate. Their longstanding history of collaboration with my home institution made this opportunity especially meaningful, reinforcing the value of sustained academic exchange in strengthening mutual understanding.

The experience unfolded in two distinct yet complementary settings. First came Hangzhou, a city that seamlessly merges high-tech dynamism with cultural depth. Then Beijing, the political heart of China, where I had the privilege of moderating the subforum on "Youth and the Future of China-EU Relations." Together, these experiences offered a multidimensional perspective on how China and Europe—through their young people— may approach the next several decades of engagement, cooperation, and debate.

**Hangzhou: Innovation, Culture, and Candid Exchanges**

Our journey began in Hangzhou, a place known for both its natural landscape and its role in China's digital economy. Even before the Dialogue formally opened, the city offered an opportunity to observe how China presents its development priorities to international visitors.

Visits to local tech firms and innovation hubs provided insight into the country's strategic emphasis on digitalization, competitive technology sectors, and environmentally oriented development. These sites illustrated a model of innovation that links government, industry, and academia—an approach frequently discussed in

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policy literature but more fully appreciated when viewed on the ground. For someone studying China's green technology policies, this exposure was invaluable. Many of the themes we discuss academically—such as industrial upgrading, local experimentation, and the alignment between political objectives and technological development—were visible in concrete form. Hangzhou proved to be a living example of how cities play an active role in translating national ambitions into practical pathways.

Beyond the innovation centres, our walk through traditional cultural streets revealed another layer of the city's identity. These spaces were vibrant, filled with small shops, street food, artisans, and the aesthetic markers of classical Chinese architecture. They also reflected an intentional effort to maintain cultural heritage as part of contemporary urban life rather than as isolated historical sites. The juxtaposition of traditional aesthetics and modern infrastructure served as a reminder that China's urban development model continues to balance preservation with modernization, mirroring the broader themes of the Dialogue itself: the importance of appreciating difference, building mutual understanding, and fostering empathy across contexts.

Personally, I particularly enjoyed the visit to Anji and Zhangwu village, which offered a different perspective on rural development and local governance. Both locations, like Yucun—which I had visited previously—demonstrate how policy priorities are implemented at the village level and how experimentation in sustainable development and community initiatives takes shape outside urban centres. Comparing these visits, I was struck by both the continuity and variation in approaches: while Yucun is often cited as a model for environmental and economic innovation, Zhangwu and Anji illustrated how political and cultural heritage also shapes identities at local levels, highlighting the role of local conditions in shaping policy outcomes.

One of the most meaningful moments in Hangzhou was the dialogue with students at Zhejiang University. Unlike the more formal structure of the Beijing conference, this exchange felt open, curious, and unfiltered. We discussed our respective academic interests, our perceptions of each other's regions, and the challenges facing China-EU relations. What stood out was the sincerity with which the students approached the

conversation. Many expressed similar concerns to those that predominate among the students I teach back home, such as concerns over the possible impact of geopolitics on mobility opportunities, as well as a very similar curiosity about their counterparts on the other side of the world. They were candid about the misconceptions they felt Europeans had about China—and interested in hearing about the misconceptions we felt Chinese youth might have about Europe. For me, this dialogue reinforced the importance of person-to-person engagement. It also highlighted something that would reappear throughout the Dialogue: young people hold nuanced, reflective, and future-oriented positions that should be taken into account.

**Beijing: The Political Centre and the Stage for Diplomacy**

After a fascinating first experience with China's bullet train, arriving in Beijing marked an immediate shift in atmosphere. The city carries the weight of political history and modern statecraft. It was here that the Dialogue formally opened, bringing together over 100 youth representatives from China and 30 European countries, alongside scholars, diplomats, and former political leaders. There was a palpable sense that this was not merely a youth event, but a space intentionally designed to cultivate the next generation of China-EU interlocutors.

The opening ceremony set the intellectual and emotional tone for the Dialogue. Speakers from both Europe and China emphasized that the last fifty years of China-EU relations had been defined by cooperation despite differences—and that the next fifty would depend heavily on the ability of young people to maintain openness, curiosity, and trust. Speakers emphasized that although the past fifty years have included cooperation alongside disagreements, the next fifty will require renewed commitment to communication and critical thinking. Mr. Zhao Rui, vice president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, described young people as "envoys for overcoming cognitive barriers." While aspirational, the statement captured an important point: that perceptions—accurate or not—affect policymaking environments on both sides. Youth involvement may not resolve structural tensions, but it can contribute to more informed engagement.

Moderating the subforum on “Youth and the Future of China-EU Relations” was the most significant part of the entire Dialogue for me. The participants represented a wide spectrum of backgrounds: law students, young entrepreneurs, researchers, activists, and early-career professionals. The atmosphere was both serious and hopeful. Everyone seemed to share a sense that our generation stands at a crossroads—one defined by geopolitical tensions but also unprecedented interconnection. Moderating required balancing voices, keeping the dialogue constructive, and encouraging participants to move beyond surface-level statements—an exercise that highlighted the challenges of cross-cultural dialogue in a geopolitical context.

Despite the weight often placed on the current geopolitical and geoeconomic contexts when EU-China relations are addressed from the EU perspective, I was pleasantly surprised by how the discussion in the subforum focused largely on cultural exchange, people-to-people connections, and mutual understanding. EU participants note that China is seen as a very large and complex entity, that requires conscientious work in order to fully understand. This was echoed back by the Chinese participants, who noted that the variety of countries, cultures, and policy approaches encompassed by the EU also resulted in a perception of the bloc as highly complex. The importance of language as a vehicle for mutual understanding was also highlighted, with EU participants calling for more materials for learning and teaching Chinese from languages other than English, as well as for linguistic immersion from younger ages. A particularly interesting point that was raised, to my mind, is that no one in the room was a native English speaker, and yet It was English we were using as a vehicular tongue. Finally, the importance of exchanges such as these dialogues was highlighted and agreed upon by all participants, and then reiterated by Professor Kolodko, who has kindly joined us for the subforum. Thus, moderating this subforum also reinforced my belief that the future of China-EU relations depends heavily on micro-level interactions—conversations, misunderstandings resolved, friendships formed. These accumulated experiences create the social fabric within which larger political decisions are interpreted. These person-to-person exchanges illustrate Joseph Nye’s concept of

soft power in practice: influence is not just wielded through formal policies but also through everyday interactions that shape perceptions and mutual trust.

Outside the formal sessions, informal conversations proved equally valuable. Speaking with participants from across Europe added texture to the more structured discussions. These spontaneous exchanges—in hallways, over tea, or while walking through Beijing—highlighted how differently various national contexts interpret China's trajectory and approach China-EU relations. These interactions demonstrated that youth diplomacy often develops not through official statements but through the accumulation of smaller, interpersonal moments of clarification and curiosity. I am only sorry we did not have a few more days in Beijing, to further explore China's capital and to go deeper in our discussions.

**Reflections Beyond the Event: Looking Forward**

The China-Europe Youth Dialogue 2025 underscored that the future of China-EU relations is contingent, not predetermined. It will depend on choices made by individuals, institutions, and policymakers about whether to engage, challenge assumptions, and maintain dialogue even in periods of tension. Youth have a role to play not because they are inherently idealistic but because they are exposed to the consequences of geopolitical change and are often more willing to test new forms of communication and collaboration.

While my overall experience at the China-Europe Youth Dialogue 2025 was extremely rewarding, a few practical points could enhance future editions: More time in Beijing would have allowed for deeper exploration of the city and more informal conversations with fellow participants. During some site visits and guided tours, it was occasionally difficult to hear the guides, which made it harder to fully appreciate the insights being shared. Additional information in advance about expectations and best practices for moderators would have been helpful in preparing for the subforum, though the experience itself was still immensely valuable.

For me, the Dialogue was a meaningful moment in my broader research trajectory. It allowed me to observe China across multiple dimensions—economic, cultural,

political, and interpersonal. It also required me to confront complexity directly: China's achievements alongside its internal debates; Europe's aspirations for principled engagement alongside concerns about strategic dependencies; the potential for cooperation alongside persistent misunderstandings. As a European researcher preparing for fieldwork in Shanghai and Hangzhou, the experience reinforced the need to approach China with flexibility, methodological rigor, and attention to nuance.

For my future academic work, the Dialogue strengthened my commitment to studying China-EU relations not as a binary competition but as an evolving space where cooperation, disagreement, and mutual learning coexist. Ultimately, the Dialogue was a reminder that behind every policy discussion are individuals—curious, motivated, and willing to engage across difference. It is in these modest interactions that the groundwork for longer-term understanding is often laid.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks once again to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and all the organizers for this incredible opportunity. The Dialogue was not only an enriching professional and academic experience but also a deeply personal one, offering connections, perspectives, and memories that will shape my work for years to come. I look forward to returning in the future and participating in similar dialogues, continuing to contribute to the important work of fostering understanding and collaboration between China and Europe.

# Caroline Kuba: A European Youth Perspective on Sino-European Cooperation*

I arrived at this experience with what I can only describe as a severely limited and fragmented understanding of China. I possessed a basic sense of its long, intricate history—a vague awareness of dynasties, innovation, and cultural heritage—and an impression of its extraordinary economic growth. Yet, if I am honest, my view was profoundly shaped, and in many ways distorted, by the media narratives I had been exposed to over the years. These narratives, though not entirely unfounded, had nonetheless created a lens of distance, caution, and, at times, misunderstanding.

On the one hand, I imagined China as a country rich in traditions that appeared—at least in the films and cultural exports I had consumed—to permeate everyday life. Architecture, fashion, festivals, and philosophy seemed to be interwoven into the rhythm of ordinary existence. But I doubted how much of that imagery truly reflected lived reality. Coming from Austria, where cultural expressions tend to be tied to specific holidays or ceremonial occasions—and where, given our complicated history, these expressions often carry a faint and ambivalent aftertaste—I could not easily imagine a society in which tradition and modernity coexist naturally, without friction or self-consciousness.

At the same time, I understood China as a rapidly rising global superpower: an innovation hub, a geopolitical force, a country whose choices will shape the twenty-first century. But accompanying these ideas were the less flattering narratives: China as a heavy emitter of $CO_2$, China as a surveillance state, China as a political system fundamentally different from the governance structures I grew up with, steeped in Central European constitutionalism and the values of the European Union. In the Western public discourse, China often appears as the emerging disruptor of a global power arrangement that has been dominant for the past century—a source of uncertainty,

* Caroline Kuba, Austrian, Undergraduate of University of Oxford.

sometimes implicitly portrayed as a threat. I did not personally interpret this potential shift as necessarily negative, but change—and especially change one does not understand—tends to carry a strange aftertaste, tinged with apprehension.

Against this backdrop, my motivations for joining the program were rooted in two core beliefs. First, I consider it essential, both intellectually and ethically, to confront what feels uncertain rather than retreat from it. Uncertainty should be examined, not feared. Second, as someone engaged professionally in communication, culture, and elements of citizen diplomacy, I saw this program as a rare and invaluable opportunity: the chance to engage directly and meaningfully with young people from a country so vastly different from mine, yet one that holds immense influence over our shared global future.

We live in a time defined by international conflict, geopolitical fragmentation, and the accelerating crisis of climate change—a threat that grows more urgent with every passing year and demands action in the present, not the distant future. It felt not only valuable but necessary to participate in dialogue that might contribute, however modestly, to a vision of a just, equitable, and hopeful future—not only for Europe and China, but for the world as a whole.

The reality I encountered in China was nothing like what I had expected. In fact, I fell in love with the country almost instantly. As someone who values almost nothing more than culture and art, I found myself captivated from the very first hours. Hangzhou, in particular, mesmerized me with the effortless way it interwove tradition and modernity—and, equally impressively, modernity with nature. The city felt like a living tapestry. Beauty emerged in the architecture, in the spatial planning, in the gentle integration of green spaces, and in the subtle references to history everywhere one looked. This experience deeply influenced the way I perceived the entire trip. There was a sense of preservation, but not stagnation; functionality, but not at the cost of identity. Nothing felt imposed or overwrought. The new and the old conversed rather than competed.

A sense of calmness and respect for Chinese history was palpable even in places

where I least expected it—such as the showroom of Deep Robotics, where I witnessed technological advancements so cutting-edge that they almost felt like science fiction. The juxtaposition of ancient heritage and futuristic innovation was not jarring but harmonious. China's reputation for technological progress suddenly ceased to be an abstract concept and became a lived reality.

What struck me most was that technological sophistication was not limited to large institutions or academic centers—which we also had the privilege of visiting—but was entirely integrated into everyday life. Through just two apps, WeChat and Alipay, I navigated nearly every aspect of my daily routine: paying for meals, booking museum tickets, renting bicycles and ordering Didi rides. Everything worked smoothly, efficiently, and with remarkable user-friendliness. Even at the Great Wall, which I visited after the official program simply because I could not bring myself to leave China yet, every vendor was fully digitalized.

What impressed me most was that digital fluency extended across generations. Elderly citizens confidently managed smartphones and relied on digital systems with ease—something I can hardly imagine in my own country, where administrative processes are notoriously cumbersome, often requiring a confusing interplay of apps, emails, physical letters, and in-person appointments. China demonstrated a level of structural organization and efficiency that not only simplifies life for its citizens but also dramatically lowers barriers for tourists and visitors like me. Many obstacles I had expected to encounter simply dissolved.

Another aspect that left a profound impression on me was China's sustainability initiatives. From the moment we arrived, I was struck by the sheer number of electric vehicles on the roads. It was immediately clear that sustainability is not merely discussed in China—it is implemented on an enormous scale. This commitment, visible in infrastructure, transportation, and public policy, challenged many assumptions I had carried with me and revealed the country's complex and dynamic approach to environmental issues.

One of the most meaningful moments of the trip occurred during our visit to

Zhangwu Village, a more remote area that deeply moved me. The village's dedication to preserving its history—its stories, its traditions, its teachings—was extraordinary. The atmosphere invited reflection, and through the themes this place evoked, I found myself connecting genuinely with two of the Chinese students in our group. We compared how our respective societies commemorate their histories, how these histories shape our contemporary identities, and how they influence our political imaginations and expectations for the future. I appreciated the openness and honesty of these conversations; they offered me a glimpse into lived Chinese realities that no academic text or media narrative could ever provide.

This atmosphere of earnest engagement was echoed and expanded in the formal components of the program—the Symposium on the first day and, most notably, the Forum on the final day. The speeches delivered were both intellectually stimulating and emotionally resonant. One that particularly stayed with me was given by Chang Jian, Deputy Director-General of the Department of European Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. He emphasized the existing interconnectedness between China and Europe, arguing that the relationships we cultivate now will serve as the backbone of future cooperation. He reminded us that China–EU relations are not merely a matter of the last fifty years but stretch back across many centuries, beginning with the Silk Road—making our connection not a novelty but a tradition. What struck me most was his critique of the EU's categorization of China as a "competitor," a narrative I am indeed very familiar with from my home country. He argued that this framing is counterproductive and that we must collectively adapt to global changes by shifting this narrative from suspicion to opportunity. His insights deepened my understanding of how conflict often arises from uncertainty—and how the antidote to uncertainty is genuine dialogue, open exchange, and access to accurate information. Only through this can we create a future that is bright, fair, and built on mutual respect.

The second speech that resonated deeply with me—although I must say all of them expanded my horizon in meaningful ways—was delivered by Petr Drulák, former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. He described China–EU

relations through a simple but powerful image: “China is a giant next to us. That does not mean it must be a threat, but it means we must be mindful of this discrepancy.” His balanced, thoughtful approach reflected precisely the spirit that characterized many of the informal dialogues that followed.

Indeed, some of the most impactful conversations took place outside of the official sessions—during the breakout discussions, in spontaneous group dialogues, and in the long, captivating conversations that lasted well into the nights after the scheduled events had ended. Among my European cohort and the Chinese students, there was a remarkable eagerness to understand one another. We found shared ground not only in political topics—particularly those related to sustainability and climate action, which are central concerns for me—but also in literature, food, film, humor, and the small details of daily life. The ease and sincerity of these exchanges reaffirmed, again and again, why citizen diplomacy matters so deeply.

This trip taught me an extraordinary amount—so much, in fact, that I still feel as though my mind is expanding and reshaping itself as I write these reflections. My worldview has stretched in ways I did not anticipate. Yet beyond the intellectual insights, perhaps the most precious outcome of this journey lies in the connections I formed. Before arriving, I imagined I would delete WeChat as soon as my plane touched down back home. I assumed it would have served its purpose. But I could not have been more wrong. I now find myself in continuous conversation with many of the people I met—some European, but many Chinese. These are not fleeting acquaintances. They are real connections, grounded in shared experiences, curiosity, and hope. I genuinely believe they will last, and I hope we will spend our lives working—each in our own fields—toward the shared goals and ambitions we articulated together on this unforgettable trip.

# Niki Eirini Damiali: Harmony in Motion — Integrating Innovation, Heritage, and Sustainability in Modern China *

Participating in the China-Europe Youth Dialogue 2025 provided me a clear understanding of how China operates, addresses contemporary challenges and develops solutions to emerging issues.

As this was my first visit to the country, the observations outlined in this report presents my initial insights and thoughts as a young European encountering China through both program activities and independent experiences in Hangzhou and Beijing.

The report is organized into thematic sections, each highlighting the elements that shaped my personal understanding of China during the dialogue.

**Technological Development**

Technological advancement is one of the most distinctive aspects commonly associated with contemporary China. As technology becomes an indispensable part of everyday life, China has not only achieved significant progress but has also effectively integrated these developments into society. From widely used digital payment systems such as Alipay to the rapid evolution of robotics, the country positions itself as a leading global player in technological innovation.

The visit to the DEEP Robotics exhibition demonstrated how impactful advancements can be made within a short period of time. The exhibition highlighted how new technologies can support society on a practical level, offering solutions in areas such as natural disaster response, logistics, public safety and other everyday applications. These innovations reflect a vision of a technologically supported future that extends benefits not only to China but to the whole world.

This integration of technology was also evident during the visits to Westlake University and the ZJU-Hangzhou Global Scientific and Technological Innovation Center. Both institutions presented China's strong commitment to

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scientific research, interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation with global impact.

Even daily experiences reflected this technological orientation. Travelling by high-speed rail from Hangzhou to Beijing showcased a transportation system that combines convenience, efficiency and a highly futuristic experience.

It was also interesting to observe that discussions around Artificial Intelligence about its opportunities, challenges and ethical implications, are similarly presented both in China and Europe as they were presented both at the dialogue in the Zhejiang Financial College (ZFC) and the parallel forum of the 17th of November Dialogue.

Despite any concerns that might exist, China demonstrated the willingness to take confident steps forward, embracing innovation and integrating emerging technologies into society with the aim of improving quality of life.

**Cultural Heritage Preservation**

China's technological progress is more than impressive. Yet, what stood out just as strongly during the program was the country's conscious effort to preserve its cultural identity. The visit revealed a society that continues to value its traditions and heritage while recognizing that understanding the past is essential for moving confidently into the future.

The preservation of cultural heritage is a significant undertaking, and China demonstrates both commitment and respect in this area. The UNESCO World Heritage Sites of West Lake and the Hangzhou section of the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal are the perfect example of how history can be protected while remaining fully integrated into urban life. The China National Silk Museum also highlights the complexity of conserving such delicate materials. Maintaining a heritage like silk requires not only historical knowledge but also responsible technological support.

The cultural activities throughout the program reflected a strong connection to tradition. Experiences such as tasting traditional cuisine, participating in a matcha making workshop at the ZFC and attending performances of traditional music and dance offered a meaningful insight into the culture that continues to shape China

showing that it is not just merely preserved. It is lived, practiced and shared.

**Environmental Protection And Sustainability**

Environmental sustainability is one of the main global challenges right now, as preserving the planet and its natural resources is essential for a stable future.

China has taken meaningful steps to integrate sustainability into urban life. Hangzhou, for example, demonstrates how a modern city can combine development with environmental responsibility. With more than half of its vehicles being electric, trees and flowing water throughout the city, it provides not only effective environmental protection but also a quality life for its residents.

A worth mentioned initiative is the Ant Forest project. This innovative project encourages citizens to contribute to national ecological goals such as reforestation and ecological restoration without any important changes to what they usually used to do while using the Internet. It effectively combines technological engagements with environmental awareness.

Overall, China's commitment to sustainability can be seen in both policy and practice. The integration of ecological consciousness into urban planning, public initiatives and daily life reflects a broader understanding that environmental protection is essential for long term wellbeing and development.

**Urban Impressions**

Experiencing both the cities of Hangzhou and Beijing showed that China's identity is not defined by a single model and this exact diversity is what makes it truly unique.

Hangzhou, on one side, is a city that seamlessly combines technological innovation with nature while maintaining a deep connection to culture. Beijing, on the other hand, holds its status as the capital for a reason. The city reflects China's global presence, where historical depth and modern development coexist.

Each city has its own personality and style, and even though they are different, they complement one another, providing a clear image of contemporary China. Together they present a country dedicated to innovation, environmentally responsible and committed to preserving its heritage. A country which is evolving with intention

and balance.

**Thoughts On China – Europe Youth Dialogue**

The Dialogue on 17 November was the moment everything came together and truly made sense. Everyone's presentations were moving, helping us understand the current global situation more deeply and encouraging us to take responsibility and fostering the will to act for the future. The experiences and insights gained during the previous days allowed me to understand what real collaboration means. Many topics and concepts, such as technological innovation and culture, were explored in depth, both in the main presentations and in the Parallel Forums. Meaningful conversations were held, helping everyone to understand the essence of these issues from different viewpoints, while also highlighting the opportunities for action.

In a world like this, one we are part of, whether by chance or not, it becomes clear how important collaboration and cooperation are. We have so much to learn from each other.

**Conclusion**

Participating in the China-Europe Youth Dialogue 2025 was an extraordinary experience. Over the course of six days, I had the opportunity to better understand China and the way it moves towards the future with innovative approaches while maintaining its identity.

The program successfully brought together young European and Chinese participants, fostering meaningful discussions where not only future goals and aspirations there were shared, but also the challenges faced and plans to address them. Through this exchange, there was a clear realization that despite any differences that may exist between people around the world, there are remarkable similarities in how the younger generation perceives reality, how it shares the exact same concerns about the future and its commitment to improving it.

Most importantly, I experienced a genuine sense of mutual respect. All the discussions were held not out of obligation. Every opinion was heard because everyone truly cared and valued each other's perspectives. This spirit of collaboration, respect

and understanding is what I consider the most significant outcome of the program. It shows a lot about future cooperation.

# Dawid Linek: A European Youth's Journey from Hangzhou's Innovation to Beijing's Power*

In November 2025, I joined a group of 61 young people from 30 different countries on a journey to China. For me, this was not just a holiday. It was a special mission to build bridges between cultures. Organized by the Center for European Studies and various Chinese institutions, our trip took us to two very different cities: Hangzhou and Beijing. My goal was to understand modern China, discuss important global topics, and think deeply about the future of China-Europe relations.

For many of us, this was a chance to see China with our own eyes, moving beyond the headlines we see on the news. Over the course of the trip, I experienced a striking mix of ancient history, futuristic technology, and serious political discussions.

**Hangzhou – Innovation Amidst Heritage**

The journey started in Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang Province. Coming from Europe in November, I expected the usual autumn chill. However, Hangzhou welcomed me with a pleasant surprise: the temperature was over 20 degrees Celsius. It felt like a late summer holiday, and this warm weather perfectly matched the warm welcome we received from our local hosts.

Hangzhou is famous for its beauty, and I quickly understood why when we visited the famous West Lake (Xi Hu). This lake has been the subject of poems and paintings for hundreds of years. Walking along the water, surrounded by green willows and traditional boats, I felt a deep sense of peace. It was the perfect introduction to the traditional side of China. However, I soon learned that Hangzhou is not just about old history. It is also one of the most modern cities in China, often called a hub for the digital economy. I saw this firsthand during our visits to various technology centers. One of the most exciting moments was our visit to a company called Deep Robotics. There, I watched a show featuring robot dogs and humanoid robots. These machines

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could run, jump, and balance just like real animals. It was impressive, but it also made me reflect on how fast technology is changing our world.

We also visited Westlake University, a massive, modern campus that was built in just a few years. I learned that this university focuses intensely on hard sciences and research. Later, we visited the Hangzhou Innovation Center of Zhejiang University (HIC ZJU), where we saw how China is investing heavily in the future of science. These visits showed me that China is determined to be a global leader in innovation.

Despite all the robots and modern buildings, the organizers made sure we experienced local culture. A highlight for me was the Chinese Tea Art experience. We didn't just drink tea. We participated in a workshop. I learned how to brew tea in the traditional way and even tried painting using tea as ink.

We also visited the Financial Museum and the National Silk Museum, where I admired beautiful traditional clothes from different dynasties. In the evenings, we explored the city center. I tried the local food, which was very different from what I eat in Europe but absolutely delicious, and I witnessed the vibrant nightlife of the city.

Another unforgettable evening in Hangzhou was our visit to the Hangzhou Cuisine Museum. It wasn't just a museum tour. It was a culinary adventure where we learned about the history of local food before sitting down for an amazing dinner. We sat at large round tables with that allowed us to share everything, which made the meal feel like a family gathering. The food was a mix of art and flavor. I remember tasting delicate shrimp, rich braised meat, and beautiful green tea cakes that looked almost too good to eat. It was a wonderful way to bond with the other delegates, passing plates around, toasting with local beer, and enjoying the incredible hospitality.

**The Zhejiang Conference**

On November 13, I attended a major event at the Zhejiang Financial College. The theme was "European Youth Embracing Zhejiang – A Rendezvous for a Shared Future." This was a day of serious discussions and sharing ideas.

One of the most interesting sessions for me was about the environment. The topic was "What Green Changes Have You Noticed Around You?" A speaker named Ling Yi

presented a case study called "Ant Forest: Turning Deserts into Oases." This is a very popular digital project in China. It works like a game on a phone: when people do eco-friendly things—like walking instead of driving or paying bills online—they get "green energy" points. When they collect enough points, the company plants a real tree in a desert area. I was fascinated by how technology could motivate millions of people to actually protect the environment.

We also had discussions about the economy and technology. In a session about spending habits, we compared how Chinese and European youth spend their money. I realized that, even though we come from different continents, young people today have many similar habits, especially regarding online shopping.

Another important topic was Artificial Intelligence (AI). We discussed how AI is changing everyday life. After seeing the robots at Deep Robotics earlier in the week, this conversation felt very real to me. We talked about the benefits of AI, but also the risks and how we should manage them.

**Beijing – The Heart of the Nation**

After five wonderful days in Hangzhou, we flew north to Beijing. The change was dramatic. While Hangzhou was warm and green, Beijing was very cold. The biting winter wind was a reminder of how huge and diverse China's geography is.

Beijing is a massive city with over 20 million people, and you can feel that it is the political heart of the country. The architecture is a fascinating mix of Soviet-style buildings, ancient palaces, and towering modern skyscrapers.

Amidst the busy schedule, we found time to visit the Temple of Heaven. This iconic complex, with its magnificent circular buildings and deep blue tiled roofs, was breathtaking. I learned that this was where Emperors used to pray for good harvests, symbolizing the connection between heaven and earth. Standing there, surrounded by ancient trees and centuries of history, I felt a deep sense of peace compared to the busy city streets outside. It was a spiritual moment that highlighted the profound depth of Chinese civilization.

The dining experiences in Beijing were just as memorable as the sightseeing. We

often ate at large buffets that offered an incredible variety of dishes, showing us the fun side of Chinese cuisine. My plate was often a colorful mix of everything: traditional steamed dumplings and roasted duck sitting next to sushi and fresh greens. I was particularly charmed by the creativity of the food, we had buns shaped like oranges, cakes shaped like stars, and even potatoes shaped like smiley faces. Whether we were trying a new type of seafood or laughing over the cute desserts, every meal helped us bond and understand the local culture a little better.

The main purpose of our visit to Beijing was the China-Europe Youth Dialogue 2025. This event was hosted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), a very prestigious think-tank. The event took place in a grand Academic Lecture Hall, and the atmosphere was very professional.

The conference was high-level. It wasn't just for students, as it included famous politicians and scholars. The opening ceremony featured speeches from important figures, and I had the honor of listening to experienced leaders from Europe. Pablo Iglesias Turrión, the former Deputy Prime Minister of Spain, gave a speech, as did Grzegorz W. Kołodko, the former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance of Poland.

Professor Kołodko shared his knowledge about economics and globalization. He talked about how the world is changing and why Europe and China need to work together, even if they don't agree on everything. Hearing from these former ministers helped me understand the complex political reality of the world today. There were also speakers from the academic world, like professors from the University of Bonn and the Free University Berlin, which gave the conference a lot of academic weight.

After the main speeches, the conference split into smaller groups called "Parallel Forums." This allowed for more detailed discussions. I participated in Forum IV, which focused on science and technology cooperation. It was a true exchange of ideas, we weren't just listening to speeches, but talking with each other. We had deep discussions about intellectual rights protection and data protection regulations, which are crucial in the digital age. We also discussed demographics in the coming years, specifically

comparing the differences between the elderly populations in China and Europe and how our societies care for them.

**A New Perspective**

For me and the other 60 participants, this trip was an education that no textbook could provide. First, I learned that China is not just "one thing." Hangzhou represented the "Chinese Dream" of innovation, green living, and a relaxed lifestyle. It showed a society that is moving forward very fast, building universities and robots. Beijing, on the other hand, represented the history and the power of the state. It showed how the country is managed and how it engages with the world diplomatically. The discussions proved to me that young people in China and Europe worry about the same things:

● Climate Change: The "Ant Forest" presentation showed that everyone wants a greener planet.

● Technology: Everyone is trying to figure out how AI will change our jobs and lives.

● Understanding: We all agreed that there is often too much fear and misunderstanding between the West and the East.

The most important lesson I took from the trip was the value of face-to-face interaction. When you sit in a room with someone, drink tea with them, or eat dinner with them, they are no longer just a statistic or a stereotype. They become real people.

The speakers in Beijing emphasized that the world is facing difficult times and geopolitical tension. However, events like this give me hope. They show that my generation is willing to travel, to listen, and to cooperate. The 2025 trip to China was a success. It combined the soft beauty of West Lake with the hard reality of global politics, and the fun of robot dogs with the seriousness of economic theory.

As I left Beijing to return home, I took back more than just souvenirs. I took back a better understanding of a complex country. I realized that the future of China-Europe relations depends on open dialogue. Whether discussing how to plant trees in the desert or how to protect data across continents, the key is communication. This journey was a small but important step toward that shared future.

## Ena Porča: Reflections on China: A Story of Scale, History, and Dialogue*

Participating in the China–Europe Youth Dialogue and spending time in Hangzhou and Beijing was an experience that profoundly shaped and broadened my understanding of China, intercultural exchange, and the importance of dialogue in a rapidly changing global order. This journey was not merely geographic, it was deeply intellectual and emotional, challenging preconceived narratives while offering space for curiosity, reflection, and growth.

We began our journey in Hangzhou, the beginning of the Silk Road. My experience in Hangzhou was shaped, perhaps unexpectedly, by childhood memories rooted far from China. Having spent my summers in Korčula, a small island in Croatia, often referred to as the birthplace of Marco Polo, I grew up surrounded by stories of travel, exploration, and encounters between worlds. Marco Polo's journeys to China were part of the cultural imagination of my upbringing, symbolizing curiosity, courage, and the crossing of civilizational boundaries. Standing in Hangzhou, a city deeply embedded in Chinese history and frequently associated with Marco Polo's accounts, felt like witnessing one of those stories come to life. The city evoked a sense of continuity between past and present, between imagination and reality. The tranquility of West Lake exceeded even the most poetic descriptions I had heard. Its ethereal calm, harmony between nature and human presence, and almost unreal serenity stood in stark contrast to the expectations one often has of modern Chinese cities. The saying that "heaven above, Suzhou and Hangzhou below" suddenly felt tangible. Yet this tranquility made the rest of the city even more striking. Hangzhou's sheer size and dynamic were difficult to comprehend. When our guide Mary spoke about the city's population and scale, many of us initially struggled to believe it.

Despite spending several days in Hangzhou, I left with a strong sense that I had only scratched the surface. The city felt layered, complex, and alive in ways that require time to truly understand. I found myself wishing for more opportunities to explore its

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everyday pulse, to engage with residents beyond structured visits, and to observe the rhythms of daily life. Such interactions, I believe, would have offered deeper insights into how innovation, tradition, and social life coexist in contemporary China. The organized visits during our stay were particularly meaningful for me as a rising entrepreneur with a strong interest in innovation and technology. Visiting the Innovation Centre and universities provided a valuable glimpse into China's entrepreneurial ecosystem, research culture, and approach to technological development. Observing how startups operate, how innovation is supported institutionally, and how academia, business, and government appear interconnected offered new insights into how the country operates. Encounters with advanced technologies, including robotic applications such as the dog robots, were not merely impressive demonstrations but reflections of a broader societal commitment to technological progress.

Beijing, however, presented an entirely different experience. If Hangzhou felt poetic and fluid, Beijing felt monumental and intense. The cold alone was enough to ground us physically and emotionally, forcing us to slow down. Despite our eagerness to see as much as possible, the city's scale and the density of experiences meant that after visiting several locations in one day, exhaustion set in. Yet even in that fatigue, Beijing left a deep impression. Walking through one of the busiest streets, reminiscent of Hefang Street in Hangzhou but amplified in scale and energy, was a moment of quiet reflection. Being surrounded by thousands of people, unfamiliar scripts, sounds, and movements, I felt both small and deeply present. It was a reminder of how cities function as living organisms, shaped by history, politics, and everyday human interactions. We also encountered moments of disappointment that ended up having some comically nuance to them, temples closed just as we arrived, the Temple of Heaven not illuminated at night as we had hoped. Yet these moments, rather than detracting from the journey, humanized it. Travel is rarely about perfect images, it is about adaptation, patience, and accepting that not everything aligns with expectations. One of the most unexpectedly meaningful moments occurred during a simple taxi ride.

Through a translation app, we discovered that the driver recognized us as coming from Yugoslavia, a country that no longer exists but continues to live on as a shared memory and a complex, often painful legacy for the Balkan region. What followed was a surreal and heartfelt conversation about history, identity, and politics, including an unexpectedly humorous discussion about the Serbian president, Aleksandar Vučić, and even the meaning of his name. The improbability of such a conversation, occurring across continents, languages, and political systems, encapsulated the essence of intercultural dialogue, and after all the cold, this felt like the warmest memory we will have.

Equally important was the group with whom I shared this journey. Despite being a large and diverse group, each day offered new interactions, conversations, and perspectives. Spending time with participants from different countries highlighted how national histories, political contexts, and media narratives shape perceptions of China. For some, China represented opportunity and partnership, for others, concern and uncertainty. These differing viewpoints enriched discussions rather than dividing them, reminding me that understanding emerges not from consensus but from listening.

The trip culminated in the China–Europe Youth Dialogue conference, which provided a structured space to reflect on our experiences and exchange perspectives. The breakout sessions were particularly valuable, as they allowed for honest discussions about fears, hopes, and responsibilities of youth in an increasingly unstable global environment. These conversations underscored how narratives are formed, not in isolation, but through dialogue, context, and lived experience. Learning about China through the perspectives of peers from across Europe emphasized that no single narrative is sufficient; each is shaped by history, geopolitics, and personal encounters.

This experience reaffirmed my belief that narratives are challenged and reshaped by expanding our horizons. China, often portrayed as either a threat or an enigma, revealed itself to me as complex, multifaceted, and deeply human. It is a country that inspires unease in some, admiration in others, and curiosity in many. As someone who aspires to continue traveling, building, and engaging across cultures, I will cherish this

opportunity for the rest of my life. I hope that my path will once again lead me to the beginning of the Silk Road, not only as a geographic space, but as a symbol of exchange, connection, and shared futures. Understanding China is not about arriving at definitive conclusions, but about remaining open to questions. And it is precisely those questions that make dialogue not only necessary, but indispensable in our time.

## Florea Maria-Alexandra: Through the eyes of European youth: Exploring China and Europe's shared future through dialogue and cultural exchange*

The more you discover and learn about a country, the more clearly you see how its unique culture, values, and strategic interests shape the way it approaches the world, making international relations both fascinating and sometimes challenging.

Since international decisions and partnerships strongly influence our shared future, diplomats around the world carry the responsibility of developing the best ideas and effective agreements. But how can we, as young students, contribute to improving the future of relations between nations?

Successful diplomatic relations are built on more than just formal agreements and treaties, they rely on the ability to connect with people, understand different perspectives, and find common ground. Over time, the relation between the People's Republic of China and the European Union has evolved into a significant partnership, supported by growing economic connections and international cooperation.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two partners and also for me, it marked my very first trip to China. At a time of profound changes in the international order, this anniversary is a moment to reflect on past achievements and also an opportunity to reassess ongoing challenges and envision the future direction of China-EU cooperation.

Therefore, on the 11th of November 2025, as I began my journey from Bucharest to Hangzhou to participate as a delegate representing Romania in the "China-Europe Dialogue: Experience China'' program, I carried with me more questions than answers. What does China truly look like beyond news headlines and stereotypes? How do young people think, live, and dream on the other side of the world? And perhaps most importantly, what can young voices do to make a real difference?

This report reflects on the valuable opportunity, personal impressions, and

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meaningful insights I gained throughout this journey. During my experience, I had the chance to meet and engage with researchers, innovators, Chinese students and fellow European participants, each sharing a different perspective based on their expertise and cultural background. Through these encounters, I was able to observe how dialogue, education, and cultural exchange actively build trust, encourage cooperation and strengthen mutual understanding between people from different parts of the world.

**Hangzhou, a city where technology meets tradition.**

After a whole day of travelling, I could not have imagined then that my arrival in Hangzhou would challenge many of my assumptions and offer me one of the most intense and meaningful international experiences of my life. Everything felt new to me, pushing me to step outside my comfort zone from the very beginning.

My first impression was genuinely positive, from the warm welcome of the volunteer students waiting for us at the airport to the hospitality and careful organization of this event.

The program began with our visit to DEEPRobotics, a company specializing in high-tech robotics. We were introduced to advanced robotic systems designed for industrial inspections, security operations and emergency response missions. Some of their latest models are built to operate in extreme conditions, including off road and high-risk areas. What impressed me the most was their vision of embodied AI, the idea of integrating artificial intelligence into physical robots capable of interacting with the real world, not just with digital simulations.

Later that day, we visited Westlake University, where we attended a seminar focused on DNA and genetics research. The research presentations demonstrated the advanced level of scientific development in China and emphasized the importance of international cooperation in science. Topics such as genetics are global by nature, and the exchange of knowledge between researchers is very important for progress.

One of the most interactive parts of the day took place at Zhejiang Financial College, where we participated together with Chinese students in a youth dialogue event focusing on sustainability, economic behavior, and artificial intelligence. What struck

me was how similar our perspectives were, despite our different cultural backgrounds. Both European and Chinese students shared ideas and concerns about subjects such as climate change, spending habits and artificial intelligence. The visit also included a Tea Art Appreciation Workshop, where we learned about traditional tea preparation and actively participated in making matcha tea. After the event, I realized that it was not just a cultural activity, but also a reminder of the importance of preserving heritage.

We also explored the Financial Museum within the College, which provided a historical overview of China's financial development. This helped me better understand the rapid economic transformation the country has experienced over the decades.

The following day, we visited the Global Scientific and Technological Innovation Center associated with Zhejiang University where I was particularly impressed by how strongly innovation is supported through collaboration between universities, start-ups, and government structures. China's speed of implementation appeared much faster, ideas move rapidly from the research stage to practical application, which creates a highly competitive and dynamic environment.

Next, our visit to Zhangwu Village offered a completely different yet equally meaningful perspective, focused on rural development. Walking through the village streets, I could clearly feel the balance between tradition and gradual modern change. The experience reminded me that China's development is not only about megacities and high-tech, but also about how rural communities adapt and transform.

The days full of activities passed so fast, and soon we found ourselves on our last day in Hangzhou, visiting the China National Silk Museum. There, we explored the historical significance of silk production and the role of the Silk Road in shaping global commerce. The exhibits emphasized how China and Europe has been historically connected through trade, long before modern diplomacy existed.

Our visit to West Lake was without doubt one of the most visually impressive moments of the entire program. The harmony between water, surrounding hills, temples and the urban space beautifully reflected traditional Chinese ideas of balance between humanity and nature. The visit to the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal further deepened

this impression. As one of the oldest and longest man-made waterways in the world, it stands as a powerful symbol of China's historical capacity for large-scale engineering projects and long-term strategic vision. Walking along the canal, I strongly felt the continuity between China's ancient past and its present development.

On 16 November, we departed from Hangzhou to Beijing by high-speed train, which was an unforgettable experience. Traveling hundreds of kilometers in just a few hours with such comfort and efficiency made me see the advanced level of Chinese transportation infrastructure. This journey also represents the transition from the cultural and technological exploration phase of our program toward its central academic and diplomatic event: the China-Europe Youth Dialogue Forum.

**The China-Europe Youth Dialogue in Beijing**

On 17 November, the China-Europe Youth Dialogue officially took place in Beijing, hosted by the Institute of European Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The forum brought together young participants and experts from both China and Europe for in-depth discussions on the evolution of bilateral relations.

The opening session featured several speakers who addressed topics such as the strategic importance of China-Europe cooperation, economic interdependence, cultural diplomacy and the role of youth in shaping future international relations. What stood out throughout the discussions was the shared understanding that, despite political tensions and global uncertainty, dialogue, mutual respect and cooperation remain essential for maintaining stability and trust.

Beyond the formal sessions, the forum also created valuable opportunities for informal interaction between participants. During coffee breaks and amazing shared meals, conversations continued naturally, allowing us to exchange personal perspectives on education, career paths, and the realities of growing up in different political and cultural systems. These moments, outside the official sessions, were just as important as the formal discussions, as they helped transform academic dialogue into genuine human connection.

After the main speeches, we were divided into four working groups for the parallel

forums. My group focused on the topic “Youth and the Future of China-Europe Cultural Exchange and Mutual Learning among Civilizations.” This session was one of the most meaningful parts of the entire program for me. Together with Chinese students and fellow European participants, we discussed our experience in China, the role of youth in diplomacy, the importance of intercultural education, the main challenges in China-Europe relations, stereotypes and media influence and the future of academic and cultural exchanges.

What made this discussion truly special was the openness and sincerity of the participants. We did not avoid sensitive topics, but addressed them with respect and a genuine desire to understand each other. Even when perspectives differed, the atmosphere remained constructive, allowing trust to grow and real dialogue to take place. In the end, we shared a common desire to strengthen trust and to continue building closer cooperation in the future.

Another important aspect of the discussions was the emphasis placed on practical cooperation. We were encouraged not only to exchange ideas, but also to think about concrete ways in which young people can contribute to long-term cooperation between China and Europe. Topics such as student mobility, joint research projects, youth entrepreneurship, and cultural initiatives were mentioned as areas with strong potential for future collaboration.

At the same time, we also discussed the role of the media in shaping public perceptions, addressing how narratives, stereotypes, and information flows influence people’s opinion and sometimes create misunderstandings on both sides. This is why many of us felt that young people have an important role in seeking balanced information and encouraging more open and honest dialogue.

**Conclusion**

The China-Europe Youth Dialogue offered me both a meaningful academic experience and a firsthand lesson in real-world diplomacy, representing an important early step in my professional path. For the first time, I was able to directly observe how dialogue between different cultures is built, how disagreements are managed through

communication, and how trust can gradually grow through open exchange. Before this program, much of my understanding of China came from media sources and academic texts. Being physically present there changed everything. Throughout this journey, I encountered a China that went far beyond stereotypes, a country where tradition, creativity and technology are perfectly balanced.

One of the most interesting aspects of the forum was observing the different styles of communication between European and Chinese participants. While approaches sometimes differed in terms of directness, expression, or priorities, these differences did not create distance. On the contrary, they opened space for learning, adaptation and building trust. Through dialogue, we learned about each other's viewpoints and the cultural values behind them.

The forum certainly demonstrated that cooperation between China and Europe is not only discussed at a high diplomatic level but it is also actively shaped by young generations. Through education, mobility, dialogue, and cooperation, young people can strengthen connections between societies and help reduce mistrust created by distance, stereotypes, or political tension.

What I will carry forward from this experience is a deeper understanding of China-Europe relations and a strong belief that dialogue remains one of the most powerful tools in diplomacy. Even in times of uncertainty, genuine conversation can open doors, challenge assumptions, and build connections that extend far beyond the duration of a single forum.

Just as stepping outside my comfort zone allowed me to discover new perspectives and build meaningful connections, the same openness may be exactly what the relationship between China and Europe needs in order to continue growing. Looking ahead, this experience has left me with a renewed sense of responsibility and motivation. If this journey has proved one thing, it is that even the simplest conversations can plant the seeds for lasting cooperation and mutual understanding.

## Fridolin Kollmar: My Unforgettable Exchange Experience in China*

My journey to Hangzhou began on a Tuesday morning at 10 a.m. in Karlsruhe, where I boarded a train to Frankfurt Airport. While I encountered a minor hiccup with AirChina's online check-in system, everything else unfolded smoothly. Even at this early stage, the trip already proved enriching, as I had the chance to meet two fellow passengers who, like me, were planning to attend the Dialogue in Beijing. Our shared anticipation sparked engaging conversations about the upcoming event and our impressions of China.

Upon arrival in Hangzhou, the efficiency and organization at the airport immediately struck me. After a seamless border control process, we were warmly welcomed by a group of Chinese students, who introduced us to other participants of this exchange program. The atmosphere was lively, positive, and full of enthusiasm, setting the tone for what promised to be an exciting experience. During our drive to the hotel, the conversations continued, covering expectations, past experiences in China, and cultural impressions. The bus tour through the city offered a first glimpse of Hangzhou's impressive scale and evident prosperity, hinting at the rich experiences that awaited us.

Arriving at our hotel, any lingering fatigue or frustration quickly vanished. Our room was exceptionally spacious, featuring two large beds and a stunning view of the lake. The staff were remarkably attentive, and every detail appeared perfectly organized, creating a sense of comfort and welcome. After a brief lunch, we decided to explore the city, consciously resisting the pull of jet lag. Our first stop was the famous shopping square, where we sampled a local delicacy: shrimp cooked in tea leaves—a uniquely Hangzhou experience that left a memorable first impression.

As tall, Western-looking visitors, we attracted attention from several locals. One elderly gentleman, impressively fluent in both English and German, engaged us in a

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fascinating conversation, sharing his insights and experiences. The friendliness and curiosity of everyone we encountered were truly remarkable. In a local park, older residents were singing and dancing, and we were even invited to join in, creating a moment of spontaneous cultural connection that felt genuinely unforgettable.

As the day drew to a close, we returned to the hotel and took a peaceful stroll along the lake, admiring the reflection of lights on the water and the historic architecture that framed it. Reflecting on the first day, a few impressions stand out: China is remarkably clean and vast, and its people are extraordinarily hospitable and inquisitive. Having already met so many like-minded and impressive individuals from across Europe and China, I am confident that the upcoming conference will be an inspiring and memorable experience.

Day two of our trip began with a visit to Deep Robotics, a company specializing in the development of robotic dogs. From the moment we arrived, it was clear that we were entering a hub of innovation and creativity. The staff warmly welcomed us and provided detailed explanations of their technology, demonstrating not only the functionality of their robots but also the sophisticated engineering and programming behind them. The conversations with the engineers and researchers were particularly engaging, allowing us to ask questions, explore applications, and gain insight into the company's vision. It was fascinating to see how robotics in China is not merely a technical endeavor but is increasingly integrated into practical applications, reflecting a broader national focus on technology and innovation. By the end of the visit, the combination of technical mastery and forward-thinking ambition had made the experience truly memorable, leaving a lasting impression of China's rapidly evolving tech landscape.

Next, we visited the campus of Westlake University, which proved to be equally striking. The campus itself was a remarkable blend of modern architecture and lush greenery, designed to foster both innovation and collaboration. What impressed me most was the speed with which the university had been established, achieving world-class facilities in a remarkably short period of time. During our visit, we attended a

lecture on genetics and its applications, which was both enlightening and inspiring. The presentation highlighted cutting-edge research and potential future developments, sparking my own interest in pursuing further investigation in this field. It was particularly motivating to witness firsthand the kind of academic environment that encourages curiosity, interdisciplinary work, and international collaboration. Westlake University clearly embodies the forward-looking spirit of modern Chinese education and research, emphasizing both rigor and creativity.

In the afternoon of Thursday, our trip featured a highly engaging discussion on the concept of “common prosperity” with relevant Chinese departments and student representatives. The session brought together participants from diverse backgrounds, fostering an open exchange of perspectives on sustainability and the role of different countries and generations in shaping a fair and sustainable future.

During the discussion, we explored how China balances economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection. Chinese students shared insights on local initiatives aimed at reducing inequality while promoting innovation, while we contributed

European perspectives on sustainability, regulatory frameworks, and youth engagement. The dialogue went beyond abstract theory, addressing practical challenges and opportunities for young people to actively contribute to societal progress.

What struck me most was the depth of curiosity, openness, and mutual respect in the room. Hearing firsthand how sustainability is approached in another cultural and policy context was enlightening, and the discussions sparked reflection on our own responsibilities as young professionals in a globalized world.

Overall, the session highlighted that achieving common prosperity requires collaboration, dialogue, and the active participation of future generations. It was a meaningful and insightful experience, leaving me inspired by the dedication of the students involved.

The day concluded with a delightful evening spent in conversation over dinner. It was a perfect opportunity to reflect on the experiences of the day, share insights with

fellow participants, and discuss both cultural impressions and professional aspirations. The discussions were stimulating, and I found myself learning just as much from my peers as from the formal presentations we had attended.

Reflecting on the day as a whole, one impression stands out above all: China is a nation that innovates with remarkable speed and ambition. A company like Deep Robotics, founded only in 2017, is already producing world-class technology, illustrating the country's strong commitment to technological advancement. From robotics to genetics research, it is clear that innovation and technology play a central role in shaping the future of China. Day two has deepened my admiration for the country's capabilities and has further fueled my own curiosity to explore, research, and engage with these cutting-edge developments.

Friday began with a visit to the Hangzhou Innovation Center, an experience that left a profound impression on me. From the moment we arrived, the sheer scale and modernity of the facility were striking. The center is a hub for cutting-edge research and technological development, and walking through its halls, one could feel the energy and ambition driving innovation in China. The number of Nobel Prize-winning projects and groundbreaking inventions that have emerged from this center is truly remarkable. Among the many impressive technologies on display, two stood out for me in particular: a robot designed for picking strawberries, demonstrating advanced agricultural automation, and a wall-climbing device capable of navigating vertical surfaces. Both inventions showcased not only technical ingenuity but also practical applications that could have significant societal impact. The visit reinforced the notion that China is rapidly positioning itself at the forefront of technological innovation.

After an inspiring morning, we had lunch and then embarked on a bus ride to a nearby local village. This visit offered a starkly different, yet equally fascinating, perspective on Chinese life and culture. The village was adorned with political slogans and featured loudspeakers broadcasting patriotic and revolutionary songs that promoted the party's ideals. Walking through the streets, it was clear that the village embodied a blend of tradition, community life, and contemporary political messaging. The

experience provided a unique, immersive glimpse into China's social and political fabric, even though the language barrier made it challenging to fully grasp the historical and cultural context as explained by our tour guide. Nevertheless, observing daily life, local customs, and the integration of ideological messaging offered a meaningful window into the diverse ways in which Chinese society functions and conveys its values.

Reflecting on the day as a whole, I was struck by the contrasts and connections between innovation and tradition. On one hand, Hangzhou demonstrates China's extraordinary technological achievements, while on the other, the village visit reminded me of the country's rich cultural heritage and complex societal structures. Together, these experiences highlighted the multifaceted nature of China—where rapid modernization and deep-rooted traditions coexist, shaping a society that is both dynamic and historically grounded.

Saturday began with an early start, as we set out on our own to visit a local tea farm nestled in the hills surrounding Hangzhou. The moment we arrived, the pace of life seemed to shift. Instead of laboratories and innovation hubs, we found ourselves among terraced fields and long-standing family traditions. Several local farmers welcomed us warmly and were eager to share the craft that their families had practiced for generations. They explained the delicate balance required in cultivating high-quality tea: the conditions of the soil, the timing of the harvest, and the subtle distinctions between the varieties. Their pride in their work was unmistakable, and the conversations felt genuine and grounded. The visit concluded with a traditional tea ceremony, where we were able to taste freshly brewed green and black Hangzhou chá—fragrant, smooth, and richer in nuance than anything we had tried before. It was a peaceful, almost meditative experience that contrasted beautifully with the intensity of our previous days.

Later that weekend, we visited the Silk Museum, West Lake, and the historic canal area. The Silk Museum was a highlight in itself. Our guide animated centuries of history with a clarity that made the ancient Silk Road feel surprisingly contemporary. It was fascinating to learn how deeply intertwined Europe's early prosperity was with Chinese

silk production and trade networks. Afterward, we spent time by West Lake, taking in its calm water and the soft reflections of the bridge, a landscape that felt almost painted. The canal district provided a lively counterbalance, offering narrow streets filled with small shops where we bought souvenirs and traditional goods for friends and family back home.

Sunday brought a new kind of wonder: the high-speed train journey to Beijing. Watching the landscape glide past at immense speed—smooth, silent, and precisely on schedule—made us quietly aware of how far rail travel could be pushed. It was difficult not to compare it with the delays and unpredictability we often experience in Germany.

In Beijing, we had a free afternoon, which we used to visit the Temple of Heaven. The vast complex, with its deep blues and circular geometry, carried a quiet sense of ceremony and cosmology. Later, we made our way to the Pearl Market, where bargaining for souvenirs became an energetic sport of its own. Between the friendly chaos of the market and the sense of finally arriving at the next chapter of our exchange, the day felt rich and complete.

The final day of our journey—Monday—stood out as the most memorable and meaningful highlight of the entire trip. The program curated for us was exceptional in both structure and substance, reflecting an impressive level of preparation and care. From the moment the day began, there was a sense of anticipation in the air, as if the week's many experiences were building toward this culminating moment.

The agenda brought together an inspiring mix of perspectives. We listened to speeches by the former Polish and Spanish deputy prime ministers, each offering thoughtful reflections on international cooperation, youth responsibility, and the shifting global landscape. Their insights felt remarkably timely, and they added an important political and historical depth to our week in China.

Yet the part of the program that resonated with me most deeply was the dialogue between Chinese and European students. These discussions were not only intellectually stimulating but personally meaningful—an honest exchange between young people who share similar ambitions yet come from different cultural contexts. Being selected

to moderate this talk-show-style roundtable was a true honor. Guiding the conversation, ensuring everyone had a voice, and seeing the mutual curiosity and respect unfold made the experience unforgettable. It felt like a small but genuine contribution to the bridge-building spirit that defined the entire program.

The day also offered numerous opportunities to connect with participants from both China and Europe. Conversations that had started earlier in the week deepened; new contacts turned into friendships; and many of us found ourselves already thinking about future collaborations. It was remarkable how much connection could grow in such a short time.

Looking back on the entire week, I can say without hesitation that it was an enriching and successful experience—professionally, academically, and personally. The mix of cultural immersion, intellectual exchange, and technological insight offered a perspective on China that was multifaceted and far more nuanced than anything I could have gained from afar.

If there is one wish I would express for future programs, it would be to have more time with the Chinese students. A deeper exchange—lingering conversations, shared meals, more informal moments—would allow us to understand each other even better and strengthen the bonds formed during this unforgettable week.

## Gearóid Fahy: My First Impressions of China*

On Wednesday the 13th of November, the European youth delegation arrived at Hangzhou, the capital city in the province of Zhejiang. All participants checked into the event with the hosts, before checking in to the hotel. After initial introductions, lunch was generously provided for all participants in the hotel. When lunch was concluded, participants had the opportunity to explore Hangzhou which was great as it allowed the members in the group to get to know each other better. Some members of the delegation and I travelled to the West Lake to explore the local restaurants and natural area. After spending some time listening to local musical traditions, we decided to walk around the full lake which was a very enjoyable experience. In closer to the commercial area we spent time at the markets, buying gifts to bring home and getting a great sense of the area.

Once finished up at the lake, we travelled back to the hotel to join the rest of the delegation for dinner. This was enjoyable as it allowed everyone to meet with each other after resting from travelling. We also learned more about what activities would be scheduled over the coming days. Everyone was extremely excited for the coming days, as many people had not been to China before so many of the experiences would be brand new to them.

The following day started with breakfast in the hotel before travelling to Deep robotics in the center of the city. This was interesting as we were able to witness some products produced by Deep robotics such as their four – legged robot. This robot is designed to transport supplies in all terrains such as sand or uneven ground like a forest. Demonstrations were conducted like the robot climbing a set of stairs with ease. This was an exciting display of what was possible by using the power of robotics to help people in need. I was also intrigued by the humanoid robot on display in the main lobby. I had never seen this kind of technology in person before so I spent a considerable amount of time looking at the information cards and videos in the main reception area.

* Gearóid Fahy, Irish, Master Student of University of Galway.

We were very grateful to have been given this great demonstration of high-tech innovations in the Hangzhou region.

When this visit ended, the group was transferred to Zhejiang financial college. Here, the university dialogue took place. This involved a Matcha tea art workshop, a range of speakers and a musical performance which I am very proud to say I have been a part of. Many young people presented their ideas and opinions on topics such as technology advancement and sustainable development of Europe and China. This meeting was very enjoyable, as it marked the beginning of a week of new experiences, new culture and new friends.

The following day, the delegation travelled to Anji, which is a rural area known for its natural landscapes and green development initiatives. Here, the participants experienced the local villages which are considered models for villages in the country. The local revitalization project was also presented. This is a kindergarten in Anji that is intended to increase the number of new residents in the local area. These villages demonstrate how sustainable design tourism and community building efforts can transform rural areas into thriving environments. In the evening time, dinner was provided at the hotel for the delegation, after which we had the opportunity to further connect with each other and explore the Hangzhou area.

On Saturday, the group travelled to the national silk museum in Hangzhou. We were informed this was the only silk museum in the country and were impressed with the amount of artifacts on display at the museum. After spending time at the museum, the group was allocated time to explore the West Lake. This began with an introduction from the guides which was very well presented. Many members of the delegation spent time walking through the paths and purchasing food in the restaurants.

After the visit to the West Lake, lunch was scheduled at the food museum in Hangzhou. This was a nice experience, as the individual groups were divided into tables for a more intimate setting for dinner. We were able to enjoy some local food to Hangzhou.

On Sunday, the delegation departed from Hangzhou and started travelling to

Beijing in preparation of the conference. This was an interesting experience as the high-speed train was used as means of transport. Originally, most of the individuals in the group travelled from Beijing to Hangzhou via airplane, so it was a nice addition to take the high-speed rail for this trip. The journey took roughly four hours, and after arriving at the railway station a bus was prepared to collect the group. We were transferred to the hotel, where we checked in our belonging into our rooms before meeting downstairs for lunch. When lunch had concluded, we explored various areas in Bejing such as the Forbidden city, the Temple of Heaven. These heritage sites are very valuable and highly are recommended for tourists to visit during a trip to China.

The China – Europe dialogue was scheduled to take place on Monday – the final day of the trip. At this conference, many European and Chinese delegates were asked to present areas of their research which were very interesting to listen to. After the presentations, we were allocated a tea break time where we could talk with the other members at the conference, exchanging thoughts on the previous material. During the next section of the event, a student from the university performed a traditional dance for the audience. This was very enjoyable as many had not witnessed dancing like this before. After this, I was fortunate enough to be allowed to perform an Irish traditional musical piece at the conference. I enjoyed this as I was happy to offer something from my country, which I am very proud of.

After lunch, we had an opportunity to take a group picture outside the conference venue. This was well organized as every member of the delegation graciously received this picture to bring home in a storage container. After this, the conference was split into groups based on areas of research, and asked to discuss the topic in a forum. This was very interesting, as ideas were exchanged between European and Chinese young people. It was great to have communication in such a free, non-judgmental environment. The topic I was involved in was in relation to Machine learning and Ai, how the development of this technology will impact the future of our countries. We discussed issues in Europe such as older people finding evolving technology hard to keep up with, and compared how this was tackled in China. This was very insightful and a very

enjoyable forum to be a part of.

In conclusion, I am very grateful to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) for organizing this cultural exchange, and I look forward to my next trip to China where I hope to bring along some more friends! I would like to say a special thank you to all the kind hosts who helped us throughout the trip. I really enjoyed getting to know everyone on the trip, and I hope our paths cross one day in the future. As the old Irish proverb goes; 'Ní neart go cur le Chéile' – There is no strength without unity.

## Iva Naskova: Reflections on an Unforgettable Experience*

When I first received the news that I had been selected to take part in the China–Europe Youth Dialogue, I knew it would be an important, but mainly different opportunity, from the ones I had before. What I did not expect was that it would become that much meaningful, very much inspiring indeed, and personally transformative experiences. Looking back on the Forum now, I can only describe it as a rare convergence of rich, let's say, cultural exchange, and as well a substantive political dialogue, and genuine human connection, which is exactly a combination that is difficult to find, and even more difficult to forget.

From the very beginning, the Forum exceeded every expectation I had, in fact, I had expectations, but pretty much reserved. On that note, I must add that the organizers were thoughtful, supportive, and meticulous in making sure that each participant felt welcomed, informed, and included. On that note, those efforts created one such environment in which meaningful dialogue did flourish naturally. But I'd say that the true essence of the program, at least for me, lay in the people I met. I found myself surrounded by an extraordinary group of young people, some of them leaders already, but individuals representing various countries, academic fields, and professional paths, who were yet bonded by a collective curiosity about the (evolving) relationship between China and Europe.

It is rare to be part of a group where every single person brings depth, knowledge, empathy, and passion. Perhaps only once before in my life have, I experienced a group dynamic so intellectually stimulating and at the same time so warm, open, and supportive. Everyone brought something different: expertise in international relations or economics, experience in youth activism, knowledge in cultural diplomacy, environmental policy, security studies, digital technology, or engineering. And yet, we also shared something fundamentally the same, which was the curiosity mentioned

* Iva Naskova, North Macedonian, Assistant Director of the Education Department, Institute of Parliamentary Studies, Republic of North Macedonia; European Youth Ambassador; Master Student, Cyrillic and Medodius University

above, and one genuine desire to learn from one another and to better understand some complexities of the world we live in.

I must add that, what struck me most was how the participants approached discussions, not as ideological debates or competitions of expertise, but as opportunities to bridge some perspectives. Despite coming from different political, ideological, cultural, and even complex historical backgrounds, we engaged in conversations marked by respect, curiosity (again), and a shared ambition to create some sort of connection that is meaningful between our regions. This spirit, I believe, reflects the real potential of China–EU relations, which is ultimately, in my opinion the ability to grow not because we think alike, but because we are willing to understand one another.

Beyond the Forum discussions, China itself provided a rich and unforgettable backdrop. I had always known China as a country with a long history, deep traditions, and a rapidly growing modern identity. But being physically present brought these observations to life in ways that no textbook, documentary, or article that I've ever read or watched, ever could.

One of the first impressions I had was the remarkable balance between preserved traditional values and a modern, forward-looking approach. Walking through different parts of the city in Hangzhou, It kind a felt like a journey through time, because on one street, ancient architecture and symbolic cultural elements reminded us of millennia-old heritage, but on the next, you see towering skyscrapers illuminated with massive displays which projected the energy of one rapidly evolving future. On that note, the visible commitment to the green transition, and the country's impressive infrastructure all left me speechless (probably because I would like to see it in my country too). Another thing that was clear is that China's economic and technological advancement is progressing at a speed that defies many European stereotypes. What is commonly referred to as "the East" in traditional geopolitical narratives felt far more developed, future-oriented, and technologically advanced than what many European capitals currently offer.

Equally fascinating was the coexistence of all these elements, and, I must say, not

as competing identities, but more as complementary layers of the same story. China has developed a model where heritage is not overshadowed by innovation but instead, it stands proudly beside it, which was also fascinating, and this, for me, was one of the most powerful lessons of the trip, meaning that modernization does not have to come at the cost of cultural identity, but rather the identity can be, some sort of a guiding force for development.

As for the formal sessions of the Forum, to me they were just as enriching as everything we experienced outside the conference halls. The expert speakers, and each of them, brought their own way of looking at China–Europe relations, naturally, shaped by their backgrounds, experiences, and personal stories. Some of their perspectives aligned closely with my own, while other perspectives I didn't fully agree with. But it was a good mix, it's always good to hear different opinions, not just the ones that confirm what you already think.

A particular highlight for me personally was the opportunity to speak and moderate during the Forum, focusing on, firstly to me, a very important topic of youth and the future of China–EU relations. I am deeply grateful to the organizers for trusting me with this opportunity. Speaking in front of peers from across Europe and China, and moderating a discussion on a topic I care about, felt good. On that, our discussion centred on the evolving role of youth in bridging continental dialogues, and I was struck by the thoughtful, forward-looking contributions from the participants. We explored how young people can shape a more collaborative future by promoting dialogue, resisting stereotypes, and investing in shared priorities such as sustainability, education, and digital innovation. Finally, instead of focusing on what divides China and Europe, we focused on understanding why those differences exist and how they shape each side's worldview.

I must return again to what was aforementioned. So, despite the significance of the topics we discussed, what made the Forum special were the human connections formed along the way. The informal conversations after sessions, the shared meals, the cultural visits, the long bus rides, and even the random exchanges while walking

through the city, created moments of genuine bonding with some of the participants, and I was constantly impressed by the intellectual humility of the group. No matter how knowledgeable someone was, they approached every conversation with openness and respect, and differences in political views or cultural backgrounds were embraced rather than avoided. These human connections are, in my opinion, the most valuable outcome of this forum.

Another dimension that made the experience so enriching was the opportunity to explore China beyond the forum. Each cultural and historical site we visited offered insights into the country's identity and development. Observing everyday life, and how people move, work, interact, and relate to their surroundings was equally enlightening to me. China's approach to public spaces, community life, and technological integration offered lessons that we could learn from. The emphasis on collective wellbeing, environmental responsibility, and future-oriented planning was visible not only in policy presentations but in the way the cities functioned. These observations broadened my understanding of China beyond the geopolitical narratives often seen in the media, and experiencing the country firsthand allowed me to appreciate its complexity, its ambitions, and the social fabric that holds it together, which was amazing.

Finally, if there is one message I take away from the China–Europe Youth Dialogue, it is that youth is the bridge through which the future of our relations will be built, and that is also what I've mentioned during my session. This mindset is perhaps the greatest asset we have. In a world often divided by misunderstanding, mistrust, or political tensions, the willingness of young people to learn from one another becomes a powerful diplomatic tool indeed.

As I reflect on this experience, what I feel most strongly is gratitude. I am grateful to the organizers for their kindness, their professionalism, and their commitment to youth empowerment. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak, moderate, and actively contribute to discussions of such relevance. I am grateful for the chance to explore China and witness a society that is constantly evolving, innovating, and redefining itself. But above all, I am grateful for the people, the friends, the colleagues, the peers who

turned this Forum into something that I will hold onto. This Forum reminded me why international cooperation matters and why youth must be at the centre of it. It strengthened my belief that the future of China–EU relations can be built on mutual understanding, cultural exchange, and innovative cooperation. I return home not only with memories, but with a renewed sense of purpose, opinions, and mindedness as well. For that, I am profoundly grateful.

# Ivo Walinga: From Tech Hubs to Diplomatic Bridges: A Journey Through China's Development and Global Role*

From 12 to 17 November 2025, I took part in the China–Europe Youth Dialogue together with sixty young Europeans from across the continent. The program, organized by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to mark fifty years of EU–China relations, offered a broad look at China's socio-economic and technological development and the areas where Europe and China can work more closely. We explored innovation, higher education, rural revitalization, the preservation of traditional culture, and opportunities for scientific exchanges.

**Hangzhou: a city blending planning, heritage, and high-tech growth**

The first four days focused on Hangzhou, one of China's most advanced cities, yet still relatively unfamiliar to many Europeans. Known for its cultural landmarks around West Lake, the Grand Canal, its Southern Song legacy, and its tea traditions, the city has in recent years also become a showcase of China's fast-growing tech sector and effective local governance.

Our visits to DEEP Robotics and to several leading universities and colleges — West Lake University, Zhejiang University, and Zhejiang Financial College — highlighted how Hangzhou has built a dynamic innovation ecosystem combining private enterprise, strong talent development, and committed government backing. Once seen as a "second-tier" city behind Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, Hangzhou is increasingly seen as a model of forward-looking urban management those other cities in China, and even across Asia, are paying close attention to.

This "Hangzhou model" came through strongly in the insights from our visits:

A government that tests ideas rather than only regulating. Local authorities create room for pilots in cashless services, smart mobility, digital IDs, and data platforms. Examples we saw during our first day tour included the roll-out of local IDs, the early

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push for large public bike systems, and the use of facial recognition to speed up basic services. Policies are practical, tested at small scale, and shaped jointly with companies and universities, which strengthens both impact and public support.

Growth focused on quality rather than pure speed. Hangzhou combines digital services, green mobility, cultural tourism, and advanced manufacturing. This mix works well for both residents and visitors who want modern conveniences without losing access to cultural heritage. The city's priorities are clear: productivity, clean and accessible public spaces, and strong public services. Protecting the West Lake area, keeping parks free, and directing tourist flows into specific commercial zones allow tea villages and traditional communities to stay active and benefit from tourism and broader urban development. Our accommodation and site visits, including the Silk Museum, showed how well-preserved heritage sits alongside affordable accommodation, an expanding metro system, and newly built districts, creating a high standard of living and a solid base for green development.

"City Brain" as a sign of data-guided governance. Traffic, emergency response, and public services are integrated into a single data system, with an emphasis on solving daily problems rather than promoting technology for its own sake. Travelling across the city to various universities and institutions, we saw how this works in practice: efficient highways and bridges, coordinated traffic light systems, designated lanes for buses, pedestrians, cyclists, and cars, and the licence-plate rotation system that keeps congestion under control.

A cultural identity that remains visible as the city grows. West Lake, nearby tea villages, and the legacy of the Song dynasty are actively protected and showcased. This gives Hangzhou a softer, more livable character than many other tech-driven cities. Visits to the Silk Museum and the Great Canal underscored how heritage protection can coexist with a cityscape filled with new office towers, research hubs, and rapidly expanding educational institutions.

Urban prosperity that supports rural revitalization. The flow of investment, skills, and opportunities from Hangzhou into surrounding counties helps narrow the urban–

rural divide and strengthens the regional economy. Anji County is an example for how this can work in practice: local authorities invest in eco-tourism, tea culture, and high-value agriculture, keeping incomes and jobs in the countryside instead of pulling young people into the city. Environmental protection — captured in the expression “clear waters and green mountains are as valuable as gold and silver” — sits at the heart of this rural revitalization effort and the broader rural–urban connectivity strategy.

Strong university–industry collaboration. Zhejiang University works closely with tech companies on engineering, AI, and applied sciences, giving Hangzhou a constant flow of talent and innovation. The city also attracts graduates from other parts of China who come for the professional opportunities and overall quality of life. New STEM-focused institutions, such as West Lake University, collaborate closely with technology companies and investors while also aiming to internationalize Hangzhou’s education system and attract top talent from abroad at all levels—from undergraduates to graduate students and faculty. Vocational institutions such as Zhejiang Financial College complement this by providing high-level technical training in fields needed for a modern economy shaped by digital firms, green technologies, advanced manufacturing, and new materials.

Entrepreneurship supported by relatively low barriers. Compared to Beijing or Shanghai, living costs are lower, administrative procedures tend to be simpler, and digital tools are widely used for business registration, tax payment, and daily management. DEEP Robotics illustrates what this environment allows: founded less than a decade ago and employing only a few hundred staff, it has already become a national leader in robotics and automation.

Urban development that values both aesthetics and functionality In Hangzhou, green spaces, waterways, and cycling paths are treated as essential infrastructure. Our group saw firsthand how highways, local roads, waterways, and major bridges over the Qiantang River are effectively integrated, while the expanding and affordable metro and bus networks keep the city accessible and attractive to skilled workers. Urban development also responds to the city’s tech momentum: entire districts such as Xixi

and Yuhang grew around the ecosystem that formed after Alibaba set up its headquarters in Hangzhou, drawing engineers, product managers, and start-ups and creating a self-sustaining innovation cluster.

**Beijing: The Role of Youth in Strengthening EU-China Cooperation**

Following our exploration of practical examples of China's development and innovation in Hangzhou — including companies, city initiatives, and universities — we moved to a higher-level political discussion in Beijing, focusing on opportunities to strengthen Sino-European dialogue and exchanges, and particularly on the role of young people in this process.

The one-day conference, hosted by China's Academy of Social Sciences, brought together senior representatives from academia and politics in both China and Europe. Participants included former politicians such as Pablo Iglesias Turrión (Spain) and Grzegorz Kołodko (Poland), renowned scholars including Wolfgang Kubin and Eberhard Sandschneider, as well as key CASS figures, including Vice-President Zhao Rui and Associate Research Fellow Kong Yuan. In a political climate where Sino-European exchange is not always at the forefront of agendas, the conference highlighted that stakeholders across generations in both regions continue to see potential in deepened exchanges — contributing to global development, technological and societal innovation, social well-being, and peaceful coexistence.

Key insights from the discussions included:

a) Changing attitudes among young people

Surveys indicate that Generation Z in Europe tends to view China more positively than previous generations, seeing it as an attractive destination for tourism, study, business, and broader engagement. This shift may stem from increased exposure to contemporary Chinese cultural products — from social media platforms like TikTok to popular consumer goods such as Labubu — or from growing up in a changing world where power and influence are distributed across multiple regions rather than dominated by a single culture or system. Young Europeans increasingly recognize Asia, and China in particular, as central to the global social, political, and economic landscape,

and see opportunities for Europe to engage on a more equal and mutually beneficial footing.

b) Cooperation and exchanges in a changing geopolitical context

Discussions also examined how European youth can engage with China amid broader geopolitical and economic challenges, including the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, and China's growing leadership in sectors such as automotive and clean energy. While these factors complicate engagement today, participants emphasized that prevailing assumptions — such as the idea that Europe-China exchanges are unnecessary or inadvisable — are not absolute truths. Across society, there are individuals and institutions open to deeper engagement, and young people in particular can influence perceptions through their work, joint research, people-to-people exchanges, and professional or educational experiences. Change is possible, and narratives around engagement can evolve rapidly.

c) The strategic role of knowledge and innovation networks

Beyond personal attitudes and direct engagement, the discussions highlighted that deeper Sino-European cooperation can be driven through structured knowledge-sharing and innovation networks. Young people, universities, and startups can act as bridges, translating ideas, technologies, and best practices between regions. These networks not only foster mutual understanding but also create tangible economic and societal value — ranging from joint research in clean energy and digital innovation to collaborative urban development projects. By connecting expertise across borders, Europe and China can address shared global challenges, build resilience in critical sectors, and ensure that cooperation is not limited to government-level dialogue but embedded in society and the economy.

d) Cultural literacy as a lever for meaningful engagement

Participants emphasized that successful cooperation requires more than technical or economic knowledge; it depends on a nuanced understanding of each other's social and cultural contexts. Young Europeans who are able to interpret Chinese societal norms, policy approaches, and innovation ecosystems can navigate partnerships more

effectively and avoid miscommunication or superficial collaboration. Likewise, young Chinese participants benefit from understanding European institutional frameworks and policy priorities. This kind of cultural literacy transforms exchanges from transactional interactions into sustained, trust-based relationships, laying the groundwork for collaboration that is both resilient and strategically impactful.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the week of exchanges provided a unique and timely opportunity for students — many of whom had limited prior exposure to China or held preconceived notions — to engage directly with stakeholders across education, technology, governance, research, and culture. Participants were able to examine the "China model" through concrete and practical examples, understand its differences from European approaches, and explore how the two systems can coexist and complement each other. The dialogue highlighted concrete pathways for collaboration, identifying areas where mutually beneficial, pragmatic engagement can advance technological innovation, societal development, and shared global challenges. By grounding engagement in knowledge, direct experience, and critical reflection, such exchanges demonstrate that constructive Sino-European interaction is not only possible but essential for fostering cooperation, addressing complex global issues, and promoting stability and progress on a broader international scale.

# Ivona Leskur: A First-Timer's Journey from Concrete Jungles to Human Urbanization*

It is November 12 and I arrive in a city that was completely unknown to me before I decided to come to China. I am in Hangzhou, a place considered a megacity due to its 13 million inhabitants – at least that's what Wikipedia says. Of course, I googled it before departing to prepare a bit more for the upcoming trip. However, what Wikipedia or any website couldn't convey were the contrasts that immediately struck me upon arriving in this still unfamiliar environment. Even though I am exhausted after three flights and almost 24 hours spent in the sky and at airports, I force myself to keep my eyes open while we drive to the hotel. I push my eyelids up, afraid to miss the scenery in front of me. I'm in that stage of thinking that I am probably dreaming, that none of this is real. But it is real. The insanely tall skyscrapers, the wide streets, and the electric car brands I'm seeing for the first time are all real. I am mesmerized by the combination of massive infrastructure mixed with trees and canopies intertwined with concrete posts. The streets bustle with cars, scooters, bikes, and pedestrians, yet everything is quiet. I feel calm in the middle of a megacity. How is that even possible? How can a population the size of two of my countries live here without the city being polluted or trashed? We keep driving, and the tall buildings keep lining the road. I suddenly think how overrated American cities are. If someone asked me to imagine a typical big city, I would probably picture the skyline of some US metropolis. But after this journey, this is the symbol of urbanization for me. And even more – humane urbanization, adapted to human life and to nature.

Upon arriving at the hotel, I decide to take my first walk around the city. I need to stay awake to prevent jet lag. Without any plan or map, I stroll through parks. I can't see the sky because of the tree crowns. Wherever I look, there is greenery. I am in a megacity, yet it feels like I am wandering through a forest. I end up by a huge lake

* Ivona Leskur, Serbian, Junior Researcher of Institute of European Studies.

crossed with small arched bridges and narrow stone paths. A red-lit pagoda stands in the hills above the water. That is the moment I finally realize – I am in China. Those traditional buildings that were always my association with China are now right in front of me, perfectly blended with modern infrastructure. Rows of bikes line the pedestrian paths. Everything is lively, yet peaceful and safe.

The next day begins very productively. Our first stop is DEEP Robotics, a high-tech company specializing in robot production. Here I learn that this company is the world leader in developing quadrupedal robots. A guide explains the purposes for which these robots are usually purchased: assistance in educational environments such as schools, carrying, pushing, and pulling heavy loads, and accessing terrains that are difficult or inaccessible for humans. Before this visit, these dog-like robots seemed to me like a new toy, but only after seeing them in practice did I realize the importance of this innovation. I have never seen a robot in Serbia before, and I hope this company will have the ambition to enter the Serbian market and offer products that would surely be useful in industries such as factory work, construction, and engineering.

Our next stop is Westlake University, a very young institution only seven years old, but already a groundbreaking center for innovation. What impressed me most was the combination of state and private funding that made this university possible. A guide explained that the city government provided land and infrastructure for the university, while private donations fund research and programs. However, these donations are accumulated and used as a general budget for scientific development, scholarships, and student accommodation, and no donor can require their contribution to serve a specific purpose. In this way, they safeguard independent and objective scientific exploration. I am amazed by the size of the campus, which looks like an entire district dedicated solely to the university. We had a chance to step into the shoes of Westlake students and listen to a lecture in a huge, well-equipped auditorium. Since the university specializes in STEM fields, a professor shared the questions he and his colleagues investigate in their laboratory.

After this visit we head to another educational institution, Zhejiang Financial

College. Here we take part in a round table, “European Youth Embracing Zhejiang – A Rendezvous for a Shared Future.” It was an honor to be addressed by distinguished speakers such as Zhang Haiyan, dean of the School of International Business, Jin Yanghua, secretary of the Party Committee, and Zhao Lan, secretary of the Party Committee of the Institute of European Studies at CASS. This event was a blend of productive discussions and cultural exhibitions. It was my first time hearing traditional Chinese instruments live, and I felt genuinely honored to experience the performance personally and to see the instruments with my own eyes.

My favorite part was the group work, where we discussed topics prepared for us. I especially enjoyed the environmental and technological themes. The environmental topic, “What green changes have you noticed around you?” sparked a discussion about the app “Ant Forest.” I had never heard of it before, and I talked with my group about how this app encourages users to adopt environmentally friendly habits and, through small steps, contributes to growing a forest in the harsh natural environment of Inner Mongolia. I'm not sure how much students at Zhejiang Financial College use this app (it would be interesting to conduct a survey!), but I noticed many parked bikes and e-scooters when entering the campus building, which tells me that environmental awareness is not just a buzzword for Chinese youth here, but an important, everyday concern.

The technological theme sparked a lively debate about AI, its ethical issues, the contexts in which it can be helpful, and the situations in which it diminishes human creativity and brings risks of job losses. The end of this event was the highlight, as we had a short crash course in traditional Chinese tea making. We learned about the complex and delicate process of preparing tea in the traditional way and even practiced it ourselves, which was a completely new experience for me. If I hadn’t tried it, I wouldn’t have known how challenging it is. True Chinese traits of patience, diligence, gentleness, and grace are interwoven in this practice, and I was honored to learn it firsthand. Later, we visited the Financial Museum, where we saw not only Chinese banknotes throughout history but also money from other countries. What fascinated me

most was seeing credit cards as museum artifacts — which proved fully justified when I later tried to buy a souvenir on Hefang Street.

Payments here are completely digitalized; not only is cash becoming obsolete, but even credit cards are slowly turning into history, replaced by payment apps.

The next day we visited the ZJU-Hangzhou Global Scientific and Technological Center. Although Zhejiang University is an institution with a long history dating back to 1897, this center is new, established in 2019. I was shocked when the guide showed us on the campus model how many buildings were constructed in 2020, during the global lockdown. We saw the latest and most advanced achievements of the institution's researchers, and I was amazed by how many industries benefit from these scientific explorations. That was the most impressive part to me – seeing how science and industry meet, how knowledge finds practical application in improving human life and the environment. Some of these inventions include a robot that picks strawberries, nutritional improvements in pet food, advancements in cosmetics and beauty products, and innovations in battery manufacturing, drones, and AI.

In the afternoon, we traveled to Zhanwu Village, where I learned about state policies during Mao's era that helped the village rejuvenate and grow. These policies brought many young, educated people to settle in rural areas, start families, and help villagers improve farming methods. These settlers remained in the village, formed families, and as the population grew, the village built a school and other facilities for community activities. Even though this is considered a rural area in China, to me it looked quite developed and well-preserved.

The last day of our study visit in Hangzhou began with a visit to the China National Silk Museum. We learned about the ancient Silk Road and the importance of silk in Chinese society. We learned about the process of making silk, from raising silkworms to the final product. We saw four major regional styles of Chinese embroidery, each with unique characteristics and symbolic meanings passed down through generations. We also learned about the five colors in clothing influenced by yin-yang philosophy and the Five Elements, once again showing me how Chinese people preserve and care

for all aspects of their culture and how nothing is arbitrary, but has its own role and place in their symbolic system.

After the museum visit, we enjoyed a beautiful sunny day by West Lake. It was Saturday, and it was wonderful to see how locals spend their weekends. I couldn't imagine a better way to spend a day off than by the lake, while still being in the middle of the city. Even though it was crowded, everyone was polite, nobody pushed, children fed fish in the ponds, people cruised in dragon boats, and women in colorful traditional dresses posed for photos.

Since we got hungry after the walk, the next destination was perfect. We had lunch at the Hangzhou Cuisine Museum. Besides trying traditional Chinese dishes for the first time, I found it especially interesting to sit at a round table with a rotating glass. It reminded me of the importance of family values in China and the tradition of sharing meals together, where the circle symbolizes equality and unity.

After lunch, it was time for another walk, this time along the historic Grand Canal, the oldest and longest man-made canal in human history. There I had the opportunity to cross the Gongchen Bridge and sip tea while watching the sunset over the canal. This visit reminded me that China is not only a leader in today's infrastructure projects, but that it achieved similar feats more than 2,500 years ago.

That wrapped up our study visit to Hangzhou. Early in the morning, we boarded a high-speed train to Beijing. It was my first time traveling by train at 342 km/h. We covered around 1,200 km in 4 hours and 33 minutes. In Serbia, in that time, I cover roughly 205 km.

The reason for coming to Beijing was the "China-Europe Youth Dialogue 2025." I had the privilege of celebrating and reflecting on the very important milestone, and that is 50 years since establishing diplomatic relations between China and the European Union. But what was even more important to me, I had the chance to discuss the fifty years that lie ahead. For me, that was the most valuable part of the experience: sitting with peers from thirty European countries, alongside our Chinese counterparts, and imagining the decades to come.

This forum brought together high-level speakers such as former deputy prime ministers and renowned scholars, but what I valued the most was the exchange among young participants. Talking openly about cooperation, mutual understanding, and the challenges we face as a generation inheriting a rapidly changing world made this dialogue far more than a diplomatic event. In a time of rising tensions and shifting global power, I see it as our responsibility to build paths of cooperation instead of division and to shape the kind of world we will want to live in fifty years from now.

## Javier Sánchez Insua: Youth, Innovation, and Dialogue: My Journey from the West Lake to the CASS Forum*

First of all, I would like to thank the China-CEE Institute and Chinese Academy of Social Science for choosing me for this incredible opportunity to attend this forum, to exchange really interesting ideas in leading fields, and to discover some of China's natural beauty and its fascinating ancient history.

In order to highlight every part of this visit, I will organize the report by day and by the activities carried out on each of them. Day 13th of November, the first day of activities, we started by visiting the company "DEEP Robotics" a National High-Tech Enterprise Headquartered in Hangzhou. I was personally amazed by the level of technology we saw in the demonstration they gave us. Although we were not able to see the humanoid robot in action, which would certainly have been amazing, we were able to see the "Jueying Lite 3" a tiny robotic dog capable of standing on two legs, keeping its balance, doing flips backwards and forwards, walking in its characteristic "tipsy" way and, of course, giving a paw. According to the data sheet, the professional version its able to carry 4 kg over a distance of 3.4 km, which I found pretty impressive due to the robot itself weighs only 12.9 kg.

The second robot they showed us was the "Jueying X30", a larger version of the previous one, able to carry up to 80 kg, more than a normal human's weight, and able to go up and down stairs. A particularly interesting feature is that the batteries are easily removable, which allows them to be quickly replaced with fully charged ones once the other have run out. The Third robot we saw was the "Shanmao M20", very similar to the second robot but with the particularity that this robot has wheels at the end of the legs, which allows it to move faster on flat terrain and from what we saw at the demonstration, it goes upstairs in the same ways as the other one, but downstairs it is pretty fast, because it is able to rush down on its wheels almost like sliding. The

* Javier Sánchez Insua, Spanish, Master'S Student of University Of LeóN.

employees told us they are quite easy to control, with just with a few buttons and a screen, they are able to fully display its skills. This kind of robots will be very useful in the future, for carrying packages in cities, helping elderly people, even playing with children, and many more opportunities yet to be discovered.

Afterwards, we were headed to attend a lecture at the Westlake University. The lecture was given by a professor specialized in genetics, it was fascinating to understand the effects of genetics in our lives and so it was the professor's brilliant latest work on myopia and how scientists can manipulate the human genome in order to prevent such a common condition.

Later in the afternoon, we went to Zhejiang Financial College (ZFC). The Opening Address was moderated by Zhang Haiyan, Professor, Director of Center for European Economics and Finance, Dean of School of International Business, Zhejiang Financial College. The speakers in the opening address were Jin Yanghua, Secretary of the Party Committee, Zhejiang Financial College and Zhao Lan, Secretary of the Part Committee, Institute of European Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Afterwards, there was an Exchange and Discussion moderated by Liu Yuqing, Zhejiang Sci-Tech University, on such interesting topics as: noticeable Green Changes in our surroundings, Spending Habits and Consumption Patterns in Europe and China and Artificial Intelligence and how influences our daily live. Lastly, we were introduced to the Chinese Tea Art, particularly to the Song-Dynasty tea preparation "点茶" (dian cha), we were offered the utensils to prepared it ourselves, which was a truly immersive experience, also during the event, we were delighted by traditional Chinese music played with traditional instruments.

At the end of the day, we visited the Financial Museum, where we saw a really extensive collection of currencies, many nationalities where represented, together with a wide range of exhibits on financial instruments from different Chinese historical periods. Day 14th of November, the second day of activities, we were headed to the ZJU-Hangzhou Global Scientific and Technological Innovation Center, where we were given an overview of the latest innovations developed by the center. They underlie their

innovation on a four-pillar ecosystem: Integrated Circuits, Synthetic Biology, Advanced Materials and Instrumentation Equipment. They showed us their quantum superconductors Chips “Mogan I” and “Tianmu I”, a graphene film, the astonishing Straw-to-Graphene Conversion Technology, Large Capacity Transistors, a Negative-Pressure Wall-Climbing Robot, a Quadruped dog similar to the ones we saw at the “DEEP Robotics” exhibition, an Automated Strawberry-Picking Robot and a new material, TGS fiber, a flame retardant fiber. I was also amazed by the humongous size of the entire complex.

Later in the afternoon we were headed to the Zhang Wu Village, during the coach journey we were able to see the beautiful and picturesque countryside of Zhejiang Province. Once we arrived, we went to the Educated Youth Courtyard, during our walk we saw many beautiful and inspiring mural paintings encouraging the revolution and glory of the nation. Afterwards, we went to visit the Former Residence, whose plain courtyard has seen many talents, including the art master Wu Changshuo.

Day 15th of November, the third day of activities, we were headed to the China National Silk Museum, the largest silk museum in the world, there we learned about the ancient techniques of this millenary art and the different Silks Road to the West. For me, the most impressive part was seeing all of the Qing-Dynasty emperor’s suits, the high-ranking officials’ suits and the Song-Dynasty Empress Liu E.’s phoenix crown. We also saw the vast and complex wooden machinery required to produce the final silk products, we were able to see a little demonstration, made by an employee of the museum, about how to make the different patterns and the sense of how long does it take to have a full piece due to the fineness of the silk.

Once we finished the visit of the museum, we went to one of the most breathtaking and charming places I have been in my entire life, the West Lake. I perfectly understand why it is a “National AAAAA Tourist Attraction” and part of the UNESCO World Heritage List. Being there, one can understand why so many poets throughout history have fallen in love with this place, its calmness and relaxing views would leave anyone speechless. After these magnificent views, we went to have lunch at the Hangzhou

Cuisine Museum, where we could taste many different traditional dishes, I would particularly highlight the squirrel fish and the kong bak pau.

Subsequently after eating, we went to see the Hangzhou Section of the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal, another pictorial place to be. The construction of this marvelous canal started in the 6th century and it was used to connect Hangzhou with Beijing, becoming a very important commercial route for many centuries.

Day 16th of November, we left Hangzhou for Beijing, it was a wonderful experience to try the High-speed rail in which we covered a distance of 1280 kilometers in just 4 hours and 33 minutes, a really impressive achievement of development by the new High-speed rail of China.

Day 17th of November, the fifth and last day of the program, we started the day arriving to the great institution of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), where we were welcome by Feng Zhongping, Director of the Institute of European Studies, who was the moderator of the Opening Ceremony. In the Opening Speech, we listened to the interesting voices of Zhao Rui, Vice President of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Pablo Iglesias Turrión, Former Deputy Prime Minister of Spain, Grzegorz W. Kołodko, Former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance of Poland and Chang Jian, Deputy Director-General of the Department of European Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. After the Opening Speech we listen to Kong Yuan, Associate Research Fellow of the Institute of European Studies and Jonathan Schwestka, European Director of the Europe-Asia Center. Following the tea break, the Keynote Speech took place with Feng Zhongping serving as moderator, we get to listen to Petr Drulák, Former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Zhang Yi, Academician of CASS, Wolfgang Kubin, Emeritus Professor of University of Bonn, Eberhard Sandschneider, Emeritus Professor of Freie Universität Berlin and Andrew Kristoffer Dean, Professor of University of Sunderland.

Subsequent to the Keynote Speech, the Interactive Session started, in which Zhang Chao, Associate Research Fellow of the Institute of European Studies, CASS and Krzysztof Jaworski, Director of Polish Institute for International Security and

Development where some questions were displayed to both, Chinese and European, youth to answer.

Following lunch, the Parallel Forums took place, I was assigned to the Parallel Forum I: Youth and the Future of China-Europe Relations moderated by Han Meng, Associate Research Fellow of the Institute of European Studies, CASS and Ma Shuangzhi, PhD Candidate of Autonomous University of Madrid, in this discussion, we talked about how to bring both cultures closer together in order to improve or future relations, through more Chinese language learning content in European languages, dubbing films and series from Mandarin into European languages and vice versa, and more exchange programs to enrich our cultures and have a better mutual understanding. I was really pleasured to participate in this exchange of opinions.

After the last tea break, the Closing Ceremony took place moderated by Yang Yuan, Deputy Director of the Institute of European Studies, CASS. We listened to Zhao Chen, Research Fellow of the Institute of European Studies, CASS, Samuli Autti, Chairman of Young Academy of Finland, Edward Knight, Senior Analyst of Blair Institute for Global Change, Oliver Jan Meyer, Founder and CEO of Storable Group Ag, Zhang Jiarui, PhD Candidate of University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Ma Linhe, Assistant Research Fellow of the Institute of European Studies, CASS. This marked the end of the forum and the program.

I would like to once again to express my sincere gratitude to the Chinese Academy of Social Science and China-CEE Institute for accepting me into the program and for giving me the opportunity to take part in it. Thank you very much.

## João Ramos Assunção: Rabban Olopen and Taizong: A Historical Example of Mutual Understanding*

On my first visit to China, I had the opportunity to discover the magnificent city of Xi'an. There, beyond the well-preserved walls of the ancient imperial capital, the coexistence of diverse religious communities, its remarkable cuisine, and the historical relic that is the Terracotta Army, I learned about the first Christian mission, sent from the Byzantine Empire, to the Chinese Empire. This episode is recorded on a stone stele, which tells us that in the year 635, a Byzantine monk named Rabban Olopen arrived in China via the Silk Road with the purpose of sharing the civilizational values of eastern Eurasia. He was welcomed by Emperor Taizong, the second emperor of the Tang dynasty, who recognized the fortunate encounter between two distant civilizations.

In a fragmented and distrustful world, Taizong greeted Olopen with the following words: "Fair principles do not have a single, unchanging name; teachings arise from the customs of their own regions and exist to benefit people in general. The virtuous Olopen has brought his sacred books and images from faraway lands and presented them in our main capital. Having examined the principles of this religion, we find them thoroughly excellent and natural; investigating their origins, we discover that they are grounded in important truths; its rituals are free from excessive complexity, and its principles will endure even when their original context is forgotten; it benefits all living beings; it is advantageous to humanity. Let it be proclaimed throughout the empire, and let the competent authorities build, in the capital, a church to be administered by twenty-one priests."

This episode of tolerance and mutual respect between Olopen and Taizong, carved into that ancient stele, stands as a historical example of how relations between nations and peoples — even in an unregulated, insecure, and conflict-prone world — are not destined to rest on submission, moral superiority, or hostility toward difference.

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* João Ramos Assunção, Portuguese, Senior Legal & Policy Advisor of Startup Portugal.

Olopen might well have expected a different reception. The emperor could have dismissed the new ideas he carried as heretical or threatening, rejecting them outright. Such an attitude would not have been unfamiliar to Olopen, because his previous experience with rulers who were often averse to difference and staunch defenders of the universality of their own values. Today we maybe can imagine his surprise when, instead of suspicion, he encountered genuine interest — interest through which he could share his principles, his history, and his religious and economic traditions.

The exchange initiated by Olopen, who carried a culturally distinct worldview, and the openness shown by Taizong, who accepted that dialogue and recognized its merits, remains — especially when contrasted with today's polarized readings of the world — a striking historical moment. Would the contemporary West, of which I am a product, be open to recognizing as legitimate a set of principles different from its own, provided they were "advantageous to humanity"? Would the current climate of international distrust condemn such an encounter to immediate failure, leaving both parties unable to listen to one another or accept that common ground might be found within their differences, acknowledging that "just principles do not have an unchanging name"?

The implications of these questions — arising from the contrast between the historical meeting of Rabban Olopen and Emperor Taizong, and the twenty-first-century world of rigid geopolitical blocs — were among the main motivations that led me to participate in the China-Europe Youth Dialogue 2025, organized by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).

I was born in a small Western European country historically accustomed to contact between cultures and to building intercontinental platforms of cooperation. Although I am highly critical of those who idealize the period of Portuguese maritime expansion as a heroic golden age, the truth is that the history of Portugal is deeply intertwined with that first wave of globalization. Portugal was among the pioneers of oceanic navigation and, through it, became a nation that connected geographies, peoples, and identities that had never met or had long forgotten one another. Through these technological and exploratory advances, Europe finally established maritime contact with China, and

Portugal became the first European country to build sustained economic, political, and cultural relations with the Chinese Empire in the sixteenth century.

It was also this small Western country that, after an unacceptably delayed process of African decolonization, redefined itself on the international stage as a strong promoter of multilateralism and of broad dialogue among nations. We built bridges and cultivated new relationships grounded in solidarity, cooperation, and mutual assistance. The creation and development of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP) is a clear example of this national transformation.

This same country later reached a cooperative and friendly agreement with the People's Republic of China for the transfer of administrative authority over Macau in 1999. After more than four centuries of Portuguese administration, the territory today represents a successful melding of both cultures and stands as an institutional symbol of the enduring friendship and cooperation between my country and the Chinese people.

This is the international reality through which I learned to see and interpret the world. Nations, united in their diversity, participated in multilateral processes of decision-making and action with the ultimate goal of improving human life, repairing past injustices, addressing present challenges, and safeguarding the future. The previously belligerent and confrontational international arena had been replaced by what some envisioned as a "Parliament of Man": cooperative, respectful of differences, inclusive, and protective of universal goods.

Unfortunately, I cannot avoid the feeling that in recent years a profound shift has occurred in the international paradigm in which I grew up and which, I believe, best serves humanity as a whole. Suddenly, the multilateral, dialogue-driven system — capable of resolving disputes through internationally recognized institutions — appears to be weakening. This was the system that helped rebuild humanity after a brutal global war; that expanded well-being to long-neglected regions; that mitigated hostility between long-standing adversaries; and that enabled the self-determination of dozens of peoples once oppressed by European colonialism. The collapse of this system, should it occur, would be one of the greatest losses humanity could face.

This sense of loss — accompanied by a climate of uncertainty and distrust — has pushed Europe, its peoples, and its leaders to act reluctantly and to direct their frustrations toward the very multilateral international order that Europe helped create and from which it benefited enormously through peace, cooperation, and intercultural exchange. Caught between the unpredictability of the United States and the desire to develop autonomous economic and military capabilities, the leaders of the European Union have been trying to identify a common platform for its twenty-seven Member States: one that allows the European project to continue to develop and that preserves the constitutional principles established by its founding Fathers in the face of a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape.

I believe this effort must rest on two fundamental pillars. First, the European Union must reaffirm its commitment to defending multilateralism and the international institutions established after the Second World War, working closely with the rest of the world to reform them in light of the profound changes of recent decades and the legitimate expectations of post-war nations. Second, the EU must embrace its condition as a Eurasian bloc — faithful to its historical principles, yet conscious of the reality shaped by its Atlantic identity and its longstanding cultural and geographic ties to the East.

Within these two pillars, strengthening relations with China is absolutely essential because, on one hand, multilateral institutions can only endure with China's active and committed participation and, on other hand, given China's leader role in Asia.

As noted earlier, the European Union faces uncertainty about its future, a reality that has increasingly strained its political and economic relationship with the People's Republic of China, obstructing traditional diplomatic channels that once ensured communication, cooperation, and dialogue. It is therefore essential to begin rebuilding trust between nations. An effort in which both parties — like Olopen and Taizong before — recognize their differences, accept them, and reinforce mechanisms to pursue common goals.

The China-Europe Youth Dialogue 2025, in my view, was an excellent example of

this effort. Through the event, I witnessed that relations between Europe and China can still be grounded in friendship, meaningful cultural exchange, and mutually beneficial multilateral cooperation. As part of a delegation of around sixty young Europeans who visited the cities of Hangzhou and Beijing — sharing experiences, knowledge, and culture — I encountered a different world and met young Chinese students who represented their country's millennia-old values and history, while also expressing pride in the technological and economic achievements of twenty-first-century China. I also witnessed the country's environmental awareness and its efforts to restore ecosystems, which now underpin China's economic and political development. Finally, it became clear how much China has invested in recent decades to become a leader in scientific research, knowledge production, and innovation with its universities and research centers working actively to address global challenges and to provide better living conditions for a growing number of individuals around the world.

Before taking part in the China-Europe Youth Dialogue 2025, I was already convinced that a renewed paradigm for relations between our countries was both possible and beneficial. The cultural, technological, and scientific examples presented to the European delegation, alongside the genuine hospitality of the Chinese people, now stand as undeniable evidence that we must strengthen our cooperation and rebuild trust.

We are fully aware of what separates us. China should neither expect nor wish for Europeans to adopt its political, economic, or social principles. The same is true in reverse. Yet within these distinct spheres of thought, there remains ample space for a platform of cooperation. This is the historical lesson that Emperor Taizong offered in 635 when he met the unknown and chose to recognize its positive potential: he chose to cooperate, building trust and common ground between peoples.

Centuries later, I could not agree more with Taizong. Let us now rebuild trust between our nations and work to restore a system grounded in cooperation, recognition of differences, and the pursuit of human well-being.

## Jovana Marjanovic: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step"*

It was early morning, 3 AM to be precise, when I made the first step of what came to be an incredible journey. After a long twenty-nine-hour flight, I was welcomed by two warm smiles and a sign that read my name and 'Dialogue for a shared Future'. I felt safe. I felt taken care of. After parting ways with the plane and the pilot, I turned on my autopilot and surrendered my trust and a good part of my brain (well, what was left from it after crossing half of the world) to my warm hosts. And so it began. What seemed 'too good to be true' turned out to be 'too good and true'.

My first impression of China, just after stepping off the plane, was how peaceful the airport was. I have never experienced such tranquility at a normally hectic place. I approached the passport control and heard Portuguese. I thought to myself, 'Wow, does the policeman at the border in Beijing really speak Portuguese?' When my turn came, a voice spoke to me in Serbian, my native language. It wasn't the policeman; it was a machine that addressed every traveler in their native language based on their passport country. I was amazed, yet it felt completely normal. As the days went by, my amazement at technological development did not cease. Instead, I got used to the automation very quickly. One day in the hotel, I shared the elevator with a robot. It called the elevator by itself, or rather informed the elevator which floor it wanted to go to, in ways unknown to me, since it didn't have fingers to press the button. I briefly felt like I was in a dystopian movie, but after a while, even the cleaning robots began to feel normal. The accessibility of everything felt unreal. My friend ordered coffee every morning via the app, and it was delivered to our hotel lobby. He was like a superstar, having his coffee appear every day out of thin air. These omnipotent apps are like little pocket-size universes of opportunities – you can pay, play, watch videos, shop, order food, coffee, and power banks (we were all in desperate need of), translate, and even

* Jovana Marjanovic, Seribian, Master's Student of University Of Turin.

invest. You can even plant trees through the Ant Forest app. Incredible! All in one app. I can't lie, it was at times tricky to set everything up in these apps, but there was always someone around to help.

At every step, we encountered a crossover between the new and the old - traditional and modern, in this poetic symbiosis. As we strolled through the city on our bus from the 70s, I admired an endless number of skyscrapers and roads lined with beautiful, trailing creepers. I thought to myself, 'the whole population of my country could fit in those buildings'…. One thing that left a significant impression on me was how clean Hangzhou and Beijing were. I was not expecting that, and I am so happy to have been pleasantly surprised. The feeling of longing for the greenery of Hangzhou, to exist in my beloved Belgrade, traveled with me every day. No matter the evidently tangible and visible differences, nothing I saw in China felt strange or unusual. Rather, at many instances, I had a feeling that the places I saw should be a paragon – every place should be as green, every town should be as clean, every step should be a picturesque scene. Alas…

My 60 European colleagues and I had a lot to learn. If it weren't for them, my experience would have been significantly different. Every day, I woke up inspired to talk to these phenomenal people from 30 different cultures. We all had one thing in common – we wanted to debunk our preconceived misconceptions of China and its people. I believe this is precisely what happened and what should be an aim of future encounters such as this, for many more generations to come. In light of the visit and two conferences we attended, we explored what Chinese–European relations may look like over the next 50 years. If the future of our relations is reflected through this visit, it's looking bright. Our hosts and colleagues from CASS were great ambassadors of their country, showing us how impressive the development they have achieved over the last half-century.

Unfortunately, these microcosmic cultural encounters and dialogues are not a guarantee of another 50 years of mutual development and prosperity on a grand scale. The present is stained by mistrust, tangible differences, and skepticism, which is not

easy to overlook or overcome. Still, encounters like these give us a glimpse of what the future can hold if we open ourselves to learning from and with each other. No matter how digitally connected we are, a brighter future still begins with intercultural encounters, with exposing ourselves to different contexts and developing a deeper understanding and communication. In an increasingly multipolar world, interdependence is not a choice but a necessity—not a threat, but an opportunity for shared prosperity.

During the China-Europe Relations in the Next 50 Years conference on November 17th, speakers reflected on the trajectory of Sino-European relations, which have deteriorated since 2003, when the EU-China strategic partnership was concluded, to the present day, especially after 2019. when China was described as 'partner, economic competitor and systemic rival'. Professor Eberhard Sandschneider highlighted that such a description should not be regarded as a driving force of Europe's foreign policy. Several other high-level speakers, including former deputy prime ministers and leading academics, emphasized that China's development path is highly influential and that we need to explain it to Europeans better, especially where Western-centric narratives distort understanding.

An opportunity was given to us to come close together in our differences. To bridge the gulf of misapprehension. To tread the Silk Road of connection. Journeys like ours expand empathy through encounters. What we came across was hospitality at every footstep, from cabs to universities. I am very grateful to have been accepted to represent my country at such an important event. I am thankful for the opportunity to see things I have never seen, like quadruped robots at DEEP Robotics, to discover new tastes at every corner, eat excellent food every day, and receive so many precious gifts. From learning how to make traditional matcha to attending a lecture in genetics, to visiting a secluded village and the most advanced kindergarten I have ever set foot in. There is not enough xièxiè-s ( "thanks" in Chinese) to express my gratitude.

We were able to experience the rich cultural Heritage of China – walking around West Lake, gazing at the rooftops of the Forbidden City, enjoying the sunset along the

Grand Canal, and visiting traditional houses. Every time a free moment presented itself, I used it to explore different temples. The intoxicating smell of incense from diverse Buddhist and Taoist temples compelled me to return. As all shall return to the Tao, I hope I shall return to this land. It is not only stepping into the future, but returning, that shows the paths of what's to come. Returning to the old days to remember when Sino-European relations started to bloom. Returning to the lived experiences away from the screens of our phones. Returning to youth dialogues that spark social change. (Re)turning to each other, for dependency does not erase autonomy, but fosters growth. And finally, each of us returning to our own countries, enlightened by new experiences and endowed with the duty to spread the word about our findings.

"When going abroad, behave as though meeting an important guest."

It's an understatement to say that I met an important guest – I met so many. These wise words from Confucius' Analects capture the impression my trip to China left on me. I am thankful to all the organizers, volunteers, and students. A very special thank you to the media team who made this experience memorable and went above and beyond to immortalize every moment. I only hope to welcome all of you to my country as very important guests, and of course- to return.

## Jovana Nikolić: Unity in Difference: Bridging Cultures from Hangzhou to Beijing*

*"Because when we speak of others, we must never lose sight of the fact that, whoever and wherever we may be, we are also 'others' for the rest of the world. Of course, no one can know all they would like or ought to know about others. There are so many peoples, cultures, languages, and visual, musical, choreographic, theatrical, artisanal and culinary traditions. But if everyone were encouraged to become passionate from childhood and remain so throughout their life about a culture other than their own, for a language freely chosen through personal affinity – and if they studied it more intensively even than they studied the indispensable English language – the result would be a closely woven cultural web covering the whole planet, encouraging threatened identities, reducing hatred, gradually reinforcing belief in the unity of the human adventure and as a result making possible the step change that might save us. I can see no more crucial objective for this century and it is clear that, in order to achieve it, we must give culture and education the prime place which is their due."*

— Amin Maalouf, Disordered World (2011)

Following six days in China within the framework of the "China-Europe Youth Dialogue 2025" program, I encountered, while reading during my return flight from Beijing, the above-quoted words of Amin Maalouf, the Lebanese writer and sociologist. The selected passage perhaps best encapsulates my main impressions of the activities undertaken by the sixty young Europeans in the preceding days, and it accurately reflects the discussion that a number of us had with our Chinese colleagues during the forum held on November 17 in Beijing. During the interactive parallel sessions included in the forum agenda, one group of Chinese and European participants addressed the theme Youth and the Future of China–Europe Relations. The broad topic and the two-

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hour timeframe allowed the conversation and exchange of ideas to develop freely in any direction. Setting aside considerations of politics and economics, which had been explored during the forum's introductory and plenary sessions, the group I was part of focused primarily on cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and practical avenues for cooperation.

Participants emphasized the importance of education and language learning as foundations for deeper connectivity. Several European representatives highlighted the value of introducing Chinese language courses in secondary schools as an optional subject. In many countries, especially smaller European states such as those in the Baltic region, the availability of teaching materials and resources for Chinese language education remains insufficient. Addressing this gap was seen as essential for nurturing long-term linguistic and cultural competence. The conversation also pointed to broader issues within education systems, particularly the tendency for history curricula in Europe to remain heavily Western- or Euro-centric. Participants noted that this limits students' exposure to Chinese/Asian history and contemporary developments, reinforcing misconceptions and leaving young Europeans with a partial understanding of China.

Beyond language and curriculum, the group discussed pathways to expand academic exchanges and mobility program – not only at the university level, but also among primary and secondary schools. Exchanges at earlier ages were regarded as especially beneficial in developing familiarity and interpersonal trust. Media representation emerged as another important theme, with the group noting that language barriers and translation challenges often distort mutual perceptions.

The session also addressed integration experiences of Chinese communities living in Europe. Some participants observed that integration into local societies remains uneven, suggesting the need for stronger community-level initiatives and more spaces for cross-cultural interaction.

Interestingly, participants highlighted the potential of video games and digital culture, including globally popular titles such as Genshin Impact, as emerging platforms

for informal cultural exchange. These digital environments provide shared experiences that can help bridge cultural gaps and spark curiosity among young people.

A reflective element of the discussion involved asking Chinese participants what associations or thoughts arise when they hear the term “Europe”. The responses included diversity, complexity, multiple languages and political systems, developed and wealthy societies. These observations highlighted both the complexity and the opportunities involved in comprehending Europe as a multifaceted entity. One participant described Sino-European relations as marked by “unity in difference”, capturing the idea that cooperation is possible, and even strengthened, by mutual diversity. Building on this, I would emphasize the importance of “cooperation despite differences”, framing diversity not as an obstacle but as a condition for meaningful engagement.

Overall, the session demonstrated strong enthusiasm among young people to deepen dialogue, expand cultural and educational cooperation, and support the development of more authentic and balanced perceptions between China and Europe.

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Returning to the opening sessions of the “China–Europe Youth Dialogue 2025: China-Europe Relations in the Next 50 Years”, senior officials, former policymakers, and academics from both regions offered a wide range of perspectives on political, economic, and societal context of contemporary Sino-European relations. They emphasized a common understanding that constructive engagement between China and Europe remains both necessary and possible, provided it is grounded in mutual understanding, strategic autonomy, and the active involvement of younger generations.

Setting the tone for the discussions, Mr. Zhao Rui, Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, stressed that “youth is the core of future global governance” and that young people are essential for deepening mutual comprehension between China and Europe and shaping the world of tomorrow. Mr. Zhao encouraged participants to “melt the glacier of prejudice” that still influences perceptions on both sides. Although China and Europe possess distinct historical trajectories and political

systems, their long-standing cooperation across numerous fields demonstrates the potential for building a "community of a shared future for mankind". The "China-Europe Youth Dialogue", he underlined, is one such platform that strengthens societal foundations for the future.

A longer historical lens was provided by Pablo Iglesias Turrión, former Deputy Prime Minister of Spain. Drawing on Gramsci, he described the profound transformation in global power structures during the second half of the 20th century, culminating in the rapid development of Asia and China's growing leadership role. In this transformed environment, he presented the EU's challenge clearly: it must approach China not with reactive measures but through a long-term strategy.

Echoing Europe's need for a coherent strategy in its engagement with China, Prof. Grzegorz W. Kołodko, former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance of Poland, examined how shifting geopolitical dynamics – economic competition, technological rivalry, and the growing importance of soft power – shape current relations. He drew attention to young people's increasingly favorable views of China – supported by data from the Economist–GlobeScan survey – and suggested that perceptions among the younger generation may be fundamental to the long-term trajectory of China-Europe relations. Prof. Kołodko also proposed viewing the global landscape not through the lens of competing blocs but as two large "mega-spheres": the West, led by the United States, and Eurasia, led by China. Europe, positioned between them, belongs to both and can benefit economically from this dual positioning.

The economic dimension of this relationship was further explored by Mr. Chang Jian, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. Emphasizing that (the terms) "East and West are relative, not absolute", he challenged spatial and ideological binaries often used to frame global politics. While acknowledging areas of competition, Mr. Chang underscored the depth of economic ties: in 2023, more than 23,000 European companies operated in China, while numerous Chinese investments continue to generate success stories across Europe. These examples, he suggested, demonstrate that despite political differences, the economic relations remain robust and mutually

beneficial.

Youth representatives added a forward-looking dimension to the conversation. Kong Yuan of CASS highlighted that young people in both regions "share the same aspirations for better lives". He argued that future cooperation should be rooted in an understanding of each other's historical narratives – not only in presenting one's own story. He advocated pragmatic cooperation, joint research initiatives, and long-term partnerships, describing China and Europe as "long-term companions". Similarly, Jonathan Schwestka of the Europe-Asia Center drew on the experiences of youth delegates' visits to Hangzhou and Beijing to argue that young people today have both the responsibility and the opportunity to help shape a more sustainable and multipolar world.

A more critical viewpoint was offered by Petr Drulák, former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. Reviewing the last twenty years of China-Europe relations –from initial optimism to the EU's more recent "partner, competitor, rival" framing – he argued that the current state of relations is weaker than it once was. While acknowledging Europe's concerns about trade deficits and market access, he contended that deeper conceptual misunderstandings lie at the heart of the problem. In a world where China now accounts for 18.8% of global GDP – exceeding both the EU and the United States – Europe must base its China policy on reality rather than expectations that China should emulate European institutions.

Several speakers emphasized the need for self-reflection as a prerequisite for international understanding. In the context of Sino-European relations, as it was highlighted, meaningful cooperation requires that each side understands its own motivations and limitations before expecting to understand the other. Prof. Eberhard Sandschneider extended this point by urging participants to "learn to change perspectives". Citing Gramsci's notion of an interregnum – an era where "the old world is dying and the new struggles to be born" – he argued that dialogue is both more difficult and more necessary than ever. Dismissing the EU's "partner–competitor–rival" triad as "just words", Prof. Sandschneider insisted that the underlying reality is mutual

interdependence, and that rebuilding trust must therefore be a priority.

Taken together, the speeches delivered at the Forum on November 17 portrayed Sino-European relations as complex, evolving, and deeply significant for the global order. Historically rooted in long-standing economic and cultural ties, the relationship today faces both new challenges – geopolitical tension, declining trust, differing political values – and unprecedented opportunities for cooperation in areas such as climate action, digital innovation, and sustainable development. Above all, the growing engagement of informed, curious, pragmatic, and globally minded young people was highlighted as a key factor in shaping the next fifty years of China-Europe relations.

## Jovana Žujović: My impression of China*

The opportunity to witness China – its prosperity, urban life as well as the cultural heritage organically merged with it – which the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has provided us with, has proved to be an invaluable experience for me as a student of Chinese language and literature. What I have seen at Hangzhou and Beijing has left me with stories to retell after my return. Since my perspective is burdened by my inexperienced view of international relations and economy on one hand, and, on the other, my field of interest, which is the language and culture, therefore my insight on less concrete topics shall prevail in this report.

However, firstly, it was the variety of activities in which I have had the honour to participate in Hangzhou which have inspired me to view China not only from the angle of language and culture, which was the only lens through which I viewed the Chinese world when first arriving, but also from the standpoint of the country's growing influence in many a field on the international scene, above anything science and economy. The patents of Hangzhou's DEEP Robotics raised questions on their advanced mobility and functionality, and also conveyed the message that China's is making independent and groundbreaking progress in this area. Such was also the case with our visit to the Global Scientific and Technological Innovation Centre of Zhejiang University, and in fact, while the group was only on its way to the Zhejiang University, I was already able to see in the city's imposing infrastructure the innovation brought about by the investment into academia behind the country's technological development. It might be redundant to add, yet is nevertheless unforgettable to me that, upon arriving at Beijing airport, at its enormous Terminal 3, I feared that I might not be able to transfer in time for my linked flight to Hangzhou, yet it turned out that the organization of the grandiose international airport of the city with a population of three times my entire country's population was as effective and clear as to allow me to finish all procedures on time and without stress.

* Jovana Žujović, Serbian, Undergraduate of University of Belgrade.

Secondly, the organization of all of the visits during our stay in Hangzhou was very well paced, allowing me to explore the cultural landmarks around the hotel, which was situated near the West Lake, surrounded by trees, parks and mountains. With the help of the volunteers from Zhejiang Financial College, who I feel have truly put their hearts into making our stay and activities possible, I was able to make the most of my free time in Hangzhou, go see the Leifeng Pagoda and walk along the coast of the famed West Lake. There, I saw Chinese locals enjoying themselves, but also so many Chinese tourists visiting their own country's natural and historic landmarks. No matter was it on workdays or the weekend, early morning or evening, there were always people admiring the lake's scenery. The last evening of my stay in Hangzhou, I was invited by some Chinese people I had met to go out to a private outing to a Chinese teahouse, where they treated me to my first ever cup of Chinese tea and some “dianxin” in a teahouse, which was truly the most heartwarming experience of them all. In Beijing, I was fascinated with how efficient it was to explore the city using the metro system, where locals helped me buy return tickets to the station near Heaven's Temple. To summarize, this kind of interaction with Chinese people – no matter the shopkeepers selling pearls in Hangzhou or busy Beijing people taking the time to help me – put the entire experience of my stay in China into the frame of a new desire that is to connect with the people again, through my study of Chinese language, and to perhaps contribute to my country and people connecting with the Chinese. In Serbia, I have taken the first high-speed train built by a Chinese company in Europe, and in China, I have taken a high-speed train which even reached the speed of 350km/h. After this journey, my wish is to see more collaboration of the two countries, but more importantly my people learning from the Chinese: for example, on one hand, there is the love for one's own country and cultural heritage, and on the other, there is the investment into and respect for the education, not only by the institutions, but also by the society as a whole, which naturally fosters the development in all areas.

Thirdly and relating to this, being a student myself, the visits to the Westlake University, Zhejiang Financial College, the Global Scientific and Technological

Innovation Centre of Zhejiang University and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, left a great impact on my perception of Chinese higher education. Seeing both astounding facilities and the diligent students with their books open, especially hearing the words and witnessing the presence and energy of the Academy's PhD candidate Zhang Jiarui on the day of the main event on November 17 in Beijing, has all made my wish to come to study in China even stronger. However, the sight of the campuses came second to the meaningful interaction I have had with the volunteers from Zhejiang Financial College and the students of the CASS. The volunteers from the Zhejiang Financial College have made me realize that even though our cultures pertained to two entirely different civilizations, making our way of thinking to differ, the new generation has been brough up on the universal heritage of the era of globalization, facing the same new standards for the way of life. It has come to my realization that we faced similar worries, yet strived driven by similar hopes. Some of the volunteers which I have met majored in business English, and later on, in Beijing, on the panel discussion which I have had the honour to participate at the central event of the dialogue at CASS, one of the participants pointed out that the European youth was communicating their ideas with Chinese youth, yet none of us was speaking a language of our own, but instead used English. My point of view is biased, but after this visit to China, I have become sure of my wish to see people majoring in Mandarin for the same purposes that some of the volunteers in China were majoring in English for, and for the Mandarin to become more widely studied in my country in general. For now, it might come of as wishful thinking, but given its incredible plasticity and potential to create new words (in contrast with my native language, which often uses loanwords to express new concepts, especially in the area of science and technology) I hope that someday Mandarin will become the most influential language in the world. Moreover, I dare presume the process has already commenced, since I have had the pleasure to communicate with some of the guests from other European countries using Mandarin instead of English – even though my Chinese was far from fluent, we could understand each other, it worked, and it worked out a feeling of a new world being created for myself and for my country,

a world in which my country does not have to brace for coercion by greater powers with its exploitation in mind, but embrace a principle of cooperation with both end's interest protected, which is how China's global initiative is represented to my people. All in all, I hope that Mandarin will one day be viewed as not only hard and distant, but rather indispensable knowledge and maybe a standard for one's level of education.

Lastly, it was the greatest honor for me to be invited to step into the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Such motivating it was to hear every single one of the speeches given by Chinese and foreign experts and scholars. Unfortunately, I am not only young and inexperienced, but also uneducated in terms of politics and economy, however, the words of our hosts from the Academy, professor Zhao Rui and Chang Jian, as well as invaluable insights of Mr. Iglesias Turrión, professor Kołodko, professor Kubin, and all of the others, including the extraordinary young people from other European countries whom I have had the pleasure to meet during my stay in China, indeed left me with a feeling of “to hear a wise man's one word, is as if having read books for ten years”.

From the Republic of Serbia, there was as many as five participants. I felt proud that my country was honored with such numerous representation.

In conclusion, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude the organizers for this joyful and remarkable experience and opportunity. All of which I have seen in China, together with what I see in my country in regard with the presence of China and its people, is a testimony to the China's influence in the modern world.

## Jūlija Ivanova: My Journey to Seeing China as a Living Nation*

I was a bit apprehensive about my first trip to China, but I also looked forward to it. I developed a lot of opinions about China after three years of learning the language, history, and culture. Some of them were realistic, some romanticized, and occasionally even somewhat contradictory since they were entirely based on my theoretical understanding. As I would later find, China was a country where old traditions and technology coexisted. Huge cities live their fast-paced lives, but you can also find temples or pagodas that don't seem to fit in with the environment only a few steps away. I frequently questioned how a single nation could contain all of this. How can China maintain its cultural identity while still being a global leader in innovation?

I had my first opportunity to witness everything with my own eyes during the trip to the "China–Europe Youth Dialogue 2025" conference. Despite anticipating that the trip will be full of happenings, I could not have imagined how powerful the impression from each day and each place we visited would be. I was fortunate to meet people from other countries and get a taste of China's culture and daily life. Nations that have a similar outlook, placing faith in collaboration and a shared future between China and Europe.

It took nearly a full day for the trip to complete. Flights of this duration are often tiresome, causing you to continuously monitor the time and calculate the minutes until you arrive. However, as soon as we arrived in Beijing for our transfer, the exhaustion seemed to disappear. I was so struck by the Beijing airport that I caught myself simply standing there and looking around for a few minutes. With trains connecting the terminals, big open areas, and a wide variety of eateries and businesses, the airport resembled a city within a city. It seemed like a blend of numerous shopping malls, crowded with people from all over the world. The airport was only the beginning of my exposure to this level of technological sophistication. It was my first, albeit little, and extremely vivid experience.

* Jūlija Ivanova, Latvian, Internship of Confucius Institute of Latvia.

The first genuine Chinese city I ever saw was Hangzhou's nighttime scene, which I saw with my own eyes rather than in images or textbooks. Enormous skyscrapers illuminated with lights of every color seemed almost deliberately designed to impress anyone arriving for the first time. I came from a small country, where skyscrapers are rare and decorative lighting is more of a holiday feature than an everyday part of the urban landscape. Therefore, Hangzhou's nighttime scene was nearly magical, like entering the future. The trip through the city lasted over an hour, during which I was constantly looking around at the bustling streets, bridges, skyscrapers, and interchanges that spanned numerous floors. And nearly all of it without any black patches. I had the impression that the city never went to sleep.

The following day, I experienced another surprise to see Hangzhou in daylight for the first time. I was now able to comprehend the light installations and skyscrapers from the previous night in their context: the city turned out to be not only modern but also surprisingly green. Nature encircled it, with trees, beaches, parks, and canals inside. What impressed me most was the contrast: a multi-million-person metropolis standing side by side with mountains, and canals running right through the streets, lined with dense greenery. This contrast didn’t feel strange. On the contrary, it made the city feel alive, dynamic, and multilayered. I realized for the first time that China is a complete system in which technology and tradition interact rather than conflict.

The first place we visited as part of the program was the DEEPRobotics building. Even though I was aware that China had been actively integrating robots for a long time, seeing an actual robot demonstration was quite different. When I heard the word “robots,” I imagined something that belonged to a distant future, but all of a sudden, that future was right in front of us. I realized that only a few years prior, I would have considered this to be science fiction, but now I was in a place where such technologies were being developed. The integration of robots into society seemed to me to be the most impressive aspect. Close to historic buildings, laboratories were hard at work developing artificial intelligence, training algorithms, and robots. Previously, this contrast once seemed impossible, but now appeared completely natural.

The second location on our itinerary for the first day was Westlake University. To learn more about how the learning process is structured, we visited the campus and sat in on one of the professor's lectures. The campus's well considered layout was the first thing that caught my attention. Everything was bright, roomy, and contemporary. Every classroom, corridor, and structure seemed to have been designed to provide a comfortable environment for students to learn in and for professors to teach in.

The first day concluded with a conference where we shared our initial thoughts with other members of the program. It was a chance for me to learn diverse opinions, share my experiences, and see things from a different angle. Every participant was given the opportunity to express their unique background and opinions on subjects related to their lives and prospects. We were talking about topics related to artificial intelligence and technologies that have an impact on our everyday lives. Since we will be making decisions in the future, it was both fascinating and useful to hear different viewpoints. This portion of the conference served as a nice warm-up, highlighting our primary goal: establishing a common language between cultures that are so different and bridging cultural gaps.

The second day began with a visit to ZJU-Hangzhou Global Scientific and Technological Innovation Center. The next stop was a small village, and the journey there took about two hours. I still couldn't believe we were in the same province, even though the environment around us had changed so much in such a short period of time. It served as a crucial reminder to me that China cannot be summed up in a single word. The nation is made up of several worlds existing side by side.

On the last day of our trip to Hangzhou, we concentrated on history and culture. We started our trip at the China National Silk Museum. We then went to West Lake, one of China's most well-known landmarks. The lake was shown in pictures I had seen numerous times, but it was even more beautiful in person. I felt like I had entered an ancient Chinese painting because of the stunning scenery. Seeing young women snapping photos by the lake while wearing traditional hanfu was particularly amazing. This gave the impression that traditional culture was alive and well among modern

people, rather than in a museum. Young women in traditional hanfu demonstrated how culture is still alive in everyday life. Our last stop in Hangzhou was the Grand Canal, which links Beijing with Hangzhou. The canal was really amazing to see, it appeared to bridge several ages, illustrating how much China achieved in ancient times in order to become the nation it is now.

The following day, we traveled to Beijing I had previously only seen via television, particularly in films and the news. The capital gave the impression of being more formal and majestic right away, in contrast to Hangzhou. Based on my stay in Beijing, I could write a full other report about my experiences there as it was so eventful.

A concluding conference marked the end of the program. All of the attendees shared their thoughts on the trip throughout the conference. It was a good conclusion for our visit. It made us process our experiences, highlighting the most memorable moments. The main topic of discussion was our perspectives on cooperation between China and Europe. Each participant had an opportunity to share their thoughts, which could potentially influence the established connections. It was also interesting to hear the opinions of more authoritative figures, including professors and CEOs. Every voice was heard, and every distinctive viewpoint had the power to influence the relationship between the nations' mutual comprehension and cooperation. In my opinion, the group discussions were the most fascinating aspect since they gave more people the opportunity to share their thoughts.

Looking back at the entire trip to China, I can honestly state that it turned out to be a far more profound experience than I had expected. I was able to both see China with my own eyes and appreciate its complexity, energy, and dynamism thanks to the "China–Europe Youth Dialogue 2025" initiative. My impression was greatly influenced by the people I encountered, especially the organizers, volunteers, and participants who were with us the whole time. Their openness and willingness to assist made it possible. We were able to get to know China and genuinely experience it. In many cases, a person's overall impression of a nation is influenced by the initial encounters and the environment fostered by the locals, and in our situation, that impression was

overwhelmingly good. As a result of this journey, I was able to view China as a genuine nation that I want to associate my future with, rather than as an abstract idea. The chance to engage with participants from different nations was also vital. Their views, thoughts, and experiences helped me to better comprehend the events and value the importance of international conversation. The conversations and the whole journey gained special significance from the realization that our generation will have a major impact on the future relationship between China and Europe. I came to the conclusion that this journey had been a turning point in my academic and personal growth. This trip marked the start of a more reflective course towards our shared future.

## Katrine Hald: Report of China-Europe Youth Dialogue 2025*

Before coming to China, everything I knew about the country came from news channels in Denmark, the rest of Europe, and the United States. Most of these stories focused on political systems that seemed quite different from what I was used to at home. At the same time, there were frequent reports about China's strong emphasis on the green transition and its impressive technological advances—developments that many in Europe believed we could learn from. Still, despite this knowledge, my view of China remained shaped by the general opinions that surrounded me: China was "another world," distant and unfamiliar. As I had never been to China before, i had no arguments against these that surrounded me.

This changed on the 12th of November 2025, when I arrived in Hangzhou and was greeted by a group of Chinese business school students. They welcomed us with wide smiles and genuine anticipation. They reminded me of myself only a few years ago—curious, excited, eager to meet someone from a different culture. Seeing this direct reflection of myself in them immediately dissolved some of the biases I had unconsciously carried with me from Europe. China is not just a country with policies; it's also just a country with human beings that are like myself.

As our bus drove from the airport to the hotel by West Lake, I spent the entire ride looking out the window. Towering modern buildings, wide and organized highways lined with flowers, and—most surprising to me—vast green areas! For a city the size of Hangzhou, I had expected noise, traffic, and dense construction, but definitely not these many trees and vegetation. It made me think about where I live in Denmark and the importance we place on green living spaces in Denmark. Already from this first bus ride, I could see the shared values of a greener world that China and Europe shares. This broader potential of mutual learning and collaboration between China and Europe would only grow clearer throughout the program in Hangzhou.

One of our first visits was to DEEP Robotics, where we were introduced to

* Katrine Hald, Danish, Master'S Student of Denmarks Technical University.

developments in artificial intelligence and robotics. The company had created various quadrupedal robots—some dog-like, some more humanoid—that included water-resistant models intended for rescue operations. Beyond their practical uses, it was simply fun to watch them perform somersaults and balance themselves after landing. The visit vividly showed how far robotics technology has come, and how actively China is pushing the field forward.

AI reappeared later the same day, when we visited Zhejiang Financial College for a forum with the students. I had the opportunity to speak with a business school student named Hang, who told me how he uses AI in his daily life. Much like I do, he uses it for studying and learning. During the forum, our discussions on AI moved between the benefits and the drawbacks of the technology. The advantages were clear: AI offers easy access to new knowledge, often explained in simple and understandable ways. However, concerns were raised about the trustworthiness of the information provided, and the tendency for people to become overly reliant on AI tools such as DeepSeek and ChatGPT. Here, critical thinking was highlighted as an important responsibility of the use of AI.

Another con of AI, as mentioned by one of the Chinese students, is the lack of creativity. As the information that AI can provide comes from being trained on already existing material, this limits it from thinking outside the box. This is from a European point of view also the fear and con of the technology. Both China and Europe are interested in deploying more AI in the industry and daily lives, but the fears of it are also the same. What if China and Europe could not only work together on creating the best AI technologies, but also combat the fears together?

Consumerism was another topic that came up during the forum. Online shopping has grown enormously in Denmark, and I quickly learned that it is even more widespread in China, especially through the incredibly popular Taobao app. We agreed that online shopping saves time, but also that it easily leads to overconsumption—something both Chinese and European students identified as a major environmental issue. With the green transition in mind, this became another area where both sides

share the same concerns and goals. If the problems are the same, why not tackle them together?

Another topic was consumerism. In Denmark online sales has become a huge market and the online sales seems even bigger in China with the easy access TaoBao app, that I heard was incredibly popular. Discussing this topic, we all agreed that `me can be saved by ordering items online, but also that it can easily lead to overconsumption. Having the green transition in mind, this was something that all Chinese as well as European students saw as a great disadvantage. Yet another topic where China and Europe would be interested in combing the same over consumption issue – so why not do it together?

Besides our visit to Zhejiang Financial College, we also visited Westlake University, where we attended a lecture on genetics titled “Why Are We All So Different?” The title struck me as ironic, given how much similarity I had observed in the preceding days. The content felt close to what I study in biotechnology at the Technical University of Denmark, and when the lecturer mentioned opportunities for exchange periods at Westlake University, I could not help but consider it. Before coming to China, I did not know anyone who had studied there. But witnessing firsthand the innovative research and the clear parallels between Chinese and European academic interests made me think that the lack of student exchange is a missed opportunity for both sides.

At our visit at ZJU-Hangzhou global scientific and technological innovation center the innovative progression were very clear from the huge screen meeting us when entering the building to the small straws in the exhibition. The straws illustrated how simple waste material like straws can be turned into graphene related materials under ambient conditions – produced in a sustainable manner for sustainable purposes like baferies for renewable energy. I Denmark, wind power through windmills is a big industry and an important way of trying to produce more green energy. It was hard not to connect and see the mutual benefices of both a technological as well as a trade collaboration on these innovations trying to make the future world a better and greener

place to live.

Many potential technological, political and economic collaborations have been shown evident during these visits at innovation hubs and universities.

Throughout all these visits—innovation hubs, universities, and cultural exchanges—the same message became clearer: there are numerous opportunities for more technological, political, and economic collaboration between China and Europe. These themes were strongly highlighted again at the China-Europe Youth Forum in Beijing on November 17th. I arrived with great anticipation, and the format of the forum exceeded my expectations. Sitting alongside representatives from 30 different European countries already felt significant. We were not just individuals; together, we represented Europe as a whole in dialogue with China.

The event began with a joint moderation from both a Chinese and a European moderator—a symbolic gesture that demonstrated how communication between our regions can be conducted with ease. Something that often seems difficult suddenly felt simple.

In Europe, political conversations in recent years have largely centered around the United States. But as former deputy prime minister of Poland, Grzegorz W. Kołodko, pointed out, global soft power is shifting—away from the US and increasingly toward China. This shift creates an opening for more engagement with China. Historically, China has long been a trade partner of Europe through the Silk Road. Perhaps it is time for Europe not only to look to the West, but also to re-examine its connection to the East.

This idea was echoed by Chang Jian, deputy director-general of the Department of European Affairs, who described these developments as part of a transition toward a multipolar world. To me, hearing the ambitions, wishes and goals from a Chinese perspective was especially interesting. Chang Jian emphasized that China and Europe share more similarities than differences—something I had already observed during our days in Hangzhou. He also argued that peace is a shared objective for both sides. This becomes especially important when considering the other major global powers, such as

the US and Russia, whose approaches to foreign affairs have shown to be with more military than soft power.

Chang Jian also mentioned interdependence as a fundamental characteristic of the China–EU relationship. Europe often worries about its dependence on China, but the 23,000 EU companies operating in China represent a reverse dependency as well. Interdependence can generate concern, but it can also foster mutual respect and recognition of each other's contributions.

Similarly, Kong Yuan from CASS expressed a desire for China and Europe's long-term friendship. A stable and enduring friendship seems particularly relevant today, at a time when internal political instability in the US raises questions about its long-term reliability as a partner. During this week in Hangzhou and Beijing, I genuinely felt that the seed of such friendship—built not only on political interest, but on human connection—had been planted.

However, it was expressed by the former deputy minister of foreign affairs of the Czech Republic, Petr Drulák, that the current situation does not exactly offer a strong friendship and trust between Europe and China yet. China is portrayed by the EU as a "partner, competitor and strategic rival". This sounds more like "keep your friends close, but your enemies closer" – with China as the enemy. Even though a lot of trade is already being done between Europe and China, the bridge between humans in a friendship is lacking even more and is left undone. There is no benefit for either China or Europe in seeing each other as enemies. Several themes reappeared across all speeches: Building a multipolar world, promoting peace, fostering curiosity, rebuilding trust, strengthening interdependency, and working together toward the shared goal of reducing carbon emissions.

Curiosity stood out to me as especially important. Being curious about each other's history, innovations, politics, and—most importantly—each other as people, is a humble but powerful way to build trust. As Europeans, we were warmly welcomed in China, and everything I learned about Chinese culture, education, and research only

sparked my curiosity to know more. Hopefully future generations will feel the same curiosity – but a necessary condition for this to happen, is that we get in contact with each other as humans and as professionals.

Avoiding biases and prejudices among young people in both part of the world will require more than hearing about each other through the media. People must engage directly with one another to build bridges and to understand that China is not simply a politically powerful country, but a diverse society full of people who resemble ourselves. We share more than we think—not only in who we are, but also in what we want for our respective futures.

The Silk Road once connected China and Europe through trade. Yes, at that time, China felt very far away from Europe. The geographical distance remains the same today, but practically speaking, China is no more than a ten-hour flight—a single night's sleep—away. And culturally, we are already closer than we often realize. Chinese restaurants are everywhere in Europe, and in China a chinese student also told about Linkin Park and other artists finding their way into her playlist. We are exposed to pieces of each other's cultures without directly meeting the people behind them.

Looking forward fifty years, I imagine a Europe–China relationship that is much more trusting and far less skeptical. A relationship where we are not only mutually dependent but mutually benefitting—particularly from innovations that help reduce carbon emissions and address global challenges. It is a relationship free of the skepticism I carried with me from Denmark, and filled instead with the curiosity I brought home from China. A curiosity made possible through direct human interaction—Europeans and Chinese meeting each other not only as political representatives, but as human beings.

## Kíra Zsuzsanna Dolmány: Travel as an Antidote to Misunderstanding: Beyond the Stereotypes of the Rising Power*

When I first arrived in Huzhou, in Anji Canton, I expected to be impressed by the scenery, the architecture, and perhaps the pace of development I had always associated with China. What I did not expect was that a single statue — the Worker's Statue of Huzhou — would evoke such an immediate and personal connection to my own past. Standing before it reminded me of the Harvester's Statue in my hometown of Dunaújváros, Hungary, once known as Stalin town, a model socialist city envisioned in the early 1950s.

The resemblance was striking not only in form, but in meaning. Both statues were born from the same ideological heritage: the glorification of work as a cornerstone of a just and prosperous society. They were symbols sculpted in concrete, metal, and marble — but also carved from the political philosophies of the twentieth century. Despite the vast geographical distance between Hungary and China, the ideological resonance across time and space was unmistakable.

Hungary and China, in this sense, share roots that extend beyond diplomacy or trade. Hungary, once called "the happiest barrack" of the European Soviet bloc, navigated decades of socialist influence with a uniquely pragmatic approach. China, on the other hand, remained loyal to its political trajectory, preserving its ideological core while adapting to the demands of modernization. Many would argue — given the results — that this long-term consistency was one of the wisest decisions China could have made.

Today, Hungary occupies a special position within Europe. It sees China not as a distant global actor but as a partner, a model, and a point of reference. This is evident in its foreign policy, its economic agreements, and the tone of its diplomatic engagement. Hungary has become, in a symbolic sense, either *"the gateway to the East for Europe"* or *"the gateway to the West for China."* This is not a new role but a

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continuation of a relationship that echoes the centuries-old Silk Road, a reminder of how trade, culture, and curiosity once flowed freely between continents.

Having lived in several European countries and in the United States, I considered myself someone familiar with cultural contrasts, political differences, and the nuances of global perspectives. Yet my one-week experience in China fundamentally shifted the way I see the global order. It challenged assumptions I had absorbed merely by living in the West and offered me a perspective that was not only new, but necessary.

In Hangzhou - the city Marco Polo once called *"the finest and noblest in the world"* and the *"City of Heaven"* — I found myself repeatedly astonished. Walking through its clean, orderly streets, surrounded by elegant skyscrapers connected seamlessly with parks, waterways, and lush greenery, I realized that China had succeeded in something Europe has been struggling with: balancing rapid modernization with respect for nature and social harmony.

Everywhere I went, I sensed a profound feeling of safety. People walked freely at night, public spaces were immaculate, and the efficiency of transportation made even the largest urban areas feel comfortable and accessible. China's scale is almost incomprehensible to a European mind, but what truly impressed me was not its size — it was its self-sufficiency. China possesses everything it needs to maintain stability and prosperity without relying heavily on external actors. It is a civilization-state, not merely a country.

One of the most memorable moments came during an evening walk along the West Lake in Hangzhou. The sun was setting behind the mountains, casting warm light over the water, and families gathered to play music, dance, or simply sit together. What I witnessed was not a society defined by political slogans or international controversies, but one defined by something universal: people living their lives with joy, routine, and a sense of belonging. It reminded me that behind every geopolitical narrative, there are millions of individual stories that rarely reach our news feeds in Europe.

This experience reinforced something essential: personal encounters are irreplaceable. When we talk about countries from a distance, we risk reducing them to

stereotypes —"the rising power", "the authoritarian state", "the economic rival". But when we meet people face to face, those categories dissolve. I met students who wanted to travel to Europe, engineers passionate about global innovation, and young entrepreneurs driven by creativity that transcends borders. Their aspirations mirrored ours. Their challenges mirrored ours. Their hopes for the future were — perhaps unsurprisingly — the same as ours.

Travel, in this sense, becomes an antidote to misunderstanding. It creates empathy not through theory, but through presence.

Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci once wrote:

*"The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters."*

His words came to mind often during my stay because I could clearly see that globalization, as we knew it, is slowing down. We are living through a transitional era. In this transformation, China stands as a symbol — some would say *the* symbol — of the end of Western dominance.

Europe, shaped by decades of integration and influenced by U.S. political and cultural models, has become highly homogenized. From the Four Freedoms — the movement of goods, services, capital, and labor — to political alignment within the Euro-Atlantic framework, Europe has embraced Westernization to such an extent that it sometimes struggles to maintain its individual identity.

China, conversely, preserved a strong nation-state identity while successfully integrating modernization, economic growth, and global competitiveness. Europe, meanwhile, has found itself in an era of cultural collision: internal disagreements, demographic challenges, and shifting geopolitical pressures all create a sense of uncertainty about the future.

Yet during my time in China, I came to understand that cultural differences should never be seen as obstacles. Rather, they can be powerful tools:

Tools for empathy.

Tools for creativity.

Tools for building something bigger than our individual backgrounds.

All the ingredients for a meaningful, long-term cooperation already exist. What we need now is the willingness to recognize them. Hangzhou taught me that international cooperation does not begin in conference halls or treaties. It begins in kindness, hospitality, shared laughter, and the courage to see the world through another person's eyes.

As the world becomes more fragmented, partnerships gain new importance. China and the European Union together represent more than a third of the world's GDP and nearly two billion people. Their relationship — cooperative, competitive, but increasingly intertwined — will shape not only their own futures but the global one as well.

Yet cooperation is not automatic. It requires intentional effort, especially when political systems and strategic priorities differ. What I realized in China is that partnership does not mean uniformity. We do not need identical worldviews to work side by side. What we need is mutual respect, a willingness to learn, and the awareness that global challenges — climate change, technological governance, sustainable development — cross all borders.

China's approach to long-term planning contrasted sharply with the short political cycles I had grown used to in Europe. While European policies often shift with each election cycle, China thinks in decades. This long-term vision is evident in everything from urban development to environmental policy. Seeing the transformation of Hangzhou, once a historically significant city and now a global digital and innovation hub, made me question how Europe can better balance tradition and progress. It also made me wonder whether Europe's future success may depend on adopting a similar long-term mindset.

The relationship between China and Europe is obviously not new. It began in the 1200s, when Marco Polo travelled along the Silk Road and arrived in Hangzhou. His descriptions of the city left a powerful legacy in European imagination. Reading his words today, and having walked the same streets he once admired, I can fully

understand why he was mesmerized. Diplomatic ties between China and the European nations, however, were formalized much later. The year 2025 marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the European Union in 1975. Half a century of cooperation is worth celebrating, yet it also invites reflection.

The contemporary relationship is complex: it includes trust and partnership but also concerns about economic competition and systemic rivalry. However, rivalry does not imply hostility. It can be a stimulus for innovation, mutual improvement, and deeper understanding.

The German sinologist Wolfgang Kubin said in Beijing:

*"We have an expectation for you to fulfil all the things we never did, and enjoy the world we never could."*

His message has been addressed to the younger generation — my generation. We are inheriting a world full of unresolved problems, but also full of unprecedented opportunities. We have the next 50 years to reshape global politics, diplomacy, and especially the European Union's approach to China.

During the conference in Beijing, several profound insights emerged — insights that I believe can serve as guiding principles for the future of Chinese-European relations:

**Building trust matters. Real collaboration needs mutual understanding, especially across very different political and social contexts.**

Trust is the foundation of cooperation. It cannot be mandated or forced; it must be nurtured through dialogue, sustained contact, and genuine curiosity.

**Youth are uniquely positioned to be "envoys for closer ties" — our openness, curiosity, and willingness to listen can break down barriers.**

Our generation is more open, more cosmopolitan, and less burdened by ideological rigidity. We approach international relations through dialogue, not confrontation.

**The conception of East and West is not absolute, but relative.**

These labels often obscure more than they reveal. Cultures have always interacted,

exchanged knowledge, and influenced one another.

**The European Union is indispensable.**

Europe belongs to both the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian spheres. It does not need to choose only one.

What struck me most during my week in China was not only what I saw, but what I *felt*. It is easy to view international relations through the lens of headlines, diplomatic statements, or economic statistics, but none of these capture the lived reality of a place. Being in China allowed me to move beyond abstract understanding and instead engage with the everyday life of a society that is often misunderstood in Europe.

As I reflect on these experiences, I keep returning to the idea that my generation carries a unique responsibility. We are the first generation that grew up fully immersed in globalization, but also the generation that may witness the end of it in its current form. We stand between two worlds: the fading certainty of Western primacy and the rise of multipolarity.

This dual awareness gives us a rare opportunity — to build bridges where earlier generations-built walls.

If China and Europe are to grow closer in the next 50 years, it will not be because politicians suddenly agree on everything. It will be because young people like us choose communication over distance, understanding over suspicion, and curiosity over fear.

In Hangzhou, I felt this future beginning to take shape. When European and Chinese students discussed innovation, culture, and global challenges, we were not merely exchanging ideas. We were practicing the very diplomacy that will define the next half-century.

As I left China, I felt that the relationship between our regions is far richer than commonly acknowledged. It is a relationship built not only on history and trade, but on shared interests, shared challenges, and shared humanity.

If the first 50 years of official cooperation were about establishing dialogue, then the next 50 years must be about deepening it — through youth exchanges, academic partnerships, cultural dialogue, sustainable development projects, and joint initiatives

in science and technology.

My week in China convinced me that we are capable of building a future where East and West are not rivals, but partners in shaping a stable and prosperous global order. And that future begins with us — today. I look forward with optimism to all the collaborations the next half-century will bring.

# Kristín Jökulsdóttir: Discovering Warmth, Technology, and Tradition in Hangzhou and Beijing*

After receiving the email confirming that I had been selected for the China Europe Youth Dialogue: Experience China program, I felt both grateful and excited. The message explained the schedule in detail, it was clear that the week would include visits to innovative companies, cultural activities, academic discussions and finally the youth dialogue forum in Beijing. Even though I had been in China once before, almost ten years ago, I knew that this experience would be completely different. China has changed a lot in the last decade and I was curious to see how the country had developed, especially in technology, infrastructure and daily life. Coming from Iceland, a small country that is very different in size and pace, I was also interested in seeing the contrasts again from a more mature point of view. This report covers my experiences, impressions and reflections from the trip between November 12 and 18 and describes how the program broadened my understanding of modern China, its culture and the importance of international cooperation.

**Arrival in Hangzhou**

I arrived in Hangzhou on the evening of November 12. The bus ride from the airport made an immediate impact on me. The very first thing I noticed was how immensely large everything was compared to Iceland: the roads were wider, the traffic heavier, the buildings taller and far more futuristic. Neon lights lit up the skyline, and the infrastructure felt modern and efficient. China instantly felt vibrant and dynamic. At the same time, the natural environment surprised me. There were trees everywhere, beautiful green areas, and well-kept parks surrounding the roads. The atmosphere was warm and humid, completely different from the cold Icelandic climate. Even on the first day, I could feel the contrast between Iceland's raw, untouched wilderness and

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China’s lush and cultivated urban greenery.

On the bus, I immediately met people from different European countries. Everyone was friendly and open, and the conversations flowed quickly even though we were all tired from traveling. When we reached the hotel, I checked in and took the evening to rest so I would be prepared for the intensive program ahead. The next morning, at breakfast, I met even more participants, and it became clear that the group dynamic would be positive and collaborative throughout the trip.

**Exploring modern China**

November 13 was the first full program day. Our first visit was to Deep Robotics, a company known for its advanced AI-driven quadruped robots. Their technology was incredible, and it felt almost unreal to see robots navigating tunnels, power stations, factories, and even participating in rescue drills. I was impressed by how practical and widely used their robots were. Watching the robots move, jump, balance, and walk smoothly made me realize how advanced China is in certain high-tech fields. It felt like watching a scene from the future.

After visiting Deep Robotics, we continued exploring Hangzhou. We visited Westlake University, Zhejiang Financial College, and the Financial Museum. What struck me most was how modern, beautiful, and comfortable the campuses and buildings were. The learning environments felt welcoming and well-organized, with plenty of space and resources for students. I really appreciated how thoughtfully these institutions had been designed to support both study and collaboration. Visiting these academic sites gave me insight into how China is developing its education system alongside its technological growth. On November 14, we explored additional innovative and community-focused sites. We visited the ZJU-Hangzhou Global Scientific and Technological Innovation Center, which showcased how universities and research institutions collaborate with industries to drive innovation. I found it inspiring to see ideas being turned into practical projects that can impact society and the economy. Later, we went to Zhang Wu Village.

The next day we got to explore many other fascinating places in Hangzhou, which made the trip even more memorable. Among them, I especially enjoyed the China National Silk Museum, where I learned about the history of silk production and its cultural significance. The exhibits were beautifully displayed, and I found it amazing how silk has shaped China's art, culture, and trade over centuries.

One of the highlights of the trip for me was visiting West Lake. The scenery was breathtaking, calm water, green hills, bridges, and misty pathways. Compared to Iceland, the landscape felt lush, cultivated, and full of life. Walking around the lake was peaceful and almost magical, and it was easy to see why this place is so famous.

Another interesting site was the Hangzhou section of the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal. Seeing this historic waterway up close was fascinating. I could imagine how it had supported trade and daily life for centuries. The combination of old architecture with modern city surroundings highlighted how China blends tradition and modernity.

Overall, I visited many interesting and unique places, but Saturday, November 15, stood out as the most enjoyable day. The mix of culture, history, and natural beauty made it especially engaging. It was the day I felt most connected to the richness of Chinese heritage and the vibrancy of Hangzhou as a city. I appreciated how each place we visited offered a different perspective, from cutting-edge technology at Deep Robotics to the serenity and elegance of West Lake, and from historical craftsmanship at the Silk Museum to the centuries-old Grand Canal. These experiences helped me understand modern China not only as a technologically advanced nation but also as a country deeply connected to its history and traditions.

On November 16, we traveled from Hangzhou to Beijing by train, arriving just after noon. The journey itself was comfortable and offered a chance to rest before exploring the city. Shortly after arriving, a group of us decided to explore together. We started with a visit to the Temple of Heaven, a historic site that left a strong impression on me. The scale of the complex, the colors, the intricate details of the architecture, and the sense of history were remarkable. It was easy to imagine the ceremonies and

traditions that had taken place there for centuries.

After the Temple of Heaven, we walked through a local market. This was both lively and fun. I enjoyed trying new snacks, seeing the variety of products, and experiencing the local culture firsthand. The market was busy and full of energy, giving me a sense of everyday life in Beijing and how vibrant the city can be. Being with other participants while exploring the market also strengthened our group bond. We laughed, shared experiences, and got to know each other much better.

November 17 was the main day of the program: the China-Europe Youth Dialogue Forum. This was the final and most formal part of the trip. The forum was extremely well organized, with engaging speeches and interactive discussions. Speakers focused on topics like international cooperation, innovation, and the role of young people in shaping the future. I found the discussions particularly inspiring because they allowed us to exchange ideas and perspectives with students from both Europe and China. It was motivating to see how passionate everyone was about creating solutions to global challenges, from sustainability to education and technological development.

Although the forum was formal, I appreciated the opportunity to interact with participants personally. I realized how valuable it is to connect with young people from other countries, share experiences, and learn from their perspectives. The event not only broadened my understanding of global issues but also made me feel part of a larger community of young leaders working towards positive change.

**Conclusion**

The “China-Europe Youth Dialogue: Experience China” program exceeded my expectations. The week was both educational and enjoyable, allowing me to learn more about China’s culture, society, and modernization. One of the aspects I enjoyed the most was getting to know participants from different European countries. Sharing experiences, laughing together, and forming friendships made the trip even more memorable and added a lot of fun to the program.

The program also reminded me of the value of stepping out of my comfort zone,

experiencing new environments, and engaging with people from diverse backgrounds. It was inspiring to see how much young people from different countries can connect, exchange ideas, and learn from one another.

Overall, this experience has motivated me to seek out more international opportunities, to continue broadening my perspective, and to maintain the friendships I made during the program. I am grateful for having been selected, and I will carry the lessons, memories, and connections from this week with me into the future.

## Luka Grbac: The Shock of the New: A Business Reality Check*

In just five days, our delegation moved at a speed that matched China's own relentless development pace. The schedule was more than just a list of meetings; it was a statement about density and scale. We went from the labs of DEEP Robotics and Westlake University in Hangzhou to the academic centers of the World Association of Young Scientists (WAYS) and the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing. It was a whirlwind tour of a nation that is running its economy at full speed.

This trip, built around the "China-Europe Youth Dialogue 2025," was organized with executive precision. It was a clear display of capability. The Institute of European Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) created an experience that went far beyond typical tourism. By putting us in meetings with former European leaders like Grzegorz Kolodko and showing us the operational side of places like Zhejiang Financial College, our hosts demonstrated a high-level organizational capacity. The goal was to prove to us that the China of today is vastly different from the China many in the West imagine.

However, for this partnership to truly work, we need to go deeper than just the official presentations. During our visits to DEEP Robotics and Westlake University, our hosts were very welcoming and showed us what they described as their latest technology. Yet, as someone who closely follows global market trends, I noticed that we were likely seeing established products rather than the absolute cutting edge of their research.

It is understandable that they would want to show us their most polished successes rather than their experimental risks. But for a mature relationship, we need more. We need to move from ceremonial tours to honest exchanges based on real data. True respect in business comes from transparency. We should encourage an approach where we act as open partners who share the full reality of our capabilities, rather than just

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guests at a curated display.

This leads to the main point of this report: China is not just a market we can try to access or a competitor we should be afraid of. It is a functional reality that Europe has to deal with. As we moved between innovation centers and cultural sites, the feeling among the delegates was clear. Cooperation isn't a choice anymore; it is a business necessity that we have to manage. As was rightly noted during the summit, we cannot simply 'choose' whether to deal with China. That decision has already been made by the reality of the global market. The only real choice left is how we engage with the opportunities right in front of us. This report is an attempt to map that reality objectively.

**Pragmatism in Concrete: The Operating System of the East**

The biggest shock in China isn't the politics; it is the functionality. From the moment you land, you see an efficiency that feels very different from Europe, where trains are often late and projects get stuck in endless debates. In China, the lights stay on, transportation runs on a perfect schedule, and digital technology works seamlessly with the physical world.

The difference in China is defined by the sheer scale of the ambition. The numbers confirm a massive domestic undertaking that operates on a level rarely seen elsewhere. As of 2025, China operates about 45,000 kilometers of high-speed rail, creating a unified network that effectively shrinks the continent and connects the entire country into a single economic zone. This is the result of a deliberate state strategy where the government consistently invests approximately 10% to 14% of its GDP into physical assets every year. Unlike economic models that rely heavily on market timing or short-term fiscal cycles, Beijing directs capital into physical assets with a speed and volume that creates a fundamentally different landscape. The focus is on total connectivity—ensuring that the digital and physical worlds overlay seamlessly to facilitate rapid economic movement.

This output comes from a distinct "Engineering Mindset" that permeates the state administration. In China, governance is historically dominated by technocrats and

engineers whose primary metric for success is system stability and project throughput. This is "Chinese Pragmatism" in concrete form. To them, a bridge is not a matter of political negotiation; it is simply the solution to a logistical problem. While other systems might prioritize process and extensive debate to ensure total consensus, the Chinese model focuses on the quickest technical solution to remove a bottleneck. If a mountain blocks a trade route, the instinct is not to debate the dilemma for a decade, but to simply bore a tunnel to keep the supply chain moving.

This mindset treats the whole nation like one big, integrated machine. It explains the duality we observe: they might burn coal to keep the heavy industry running today while aggressively building solar farms to secure the power grid for tomorrow. They aren't being hypocritical; they are simply optimizing the system for survival and growth, prioritizing function above ideology. This "operating system" is ruthlessly efficient at getting things done. While we should not copy their governance model, observing this level of execution reveals a gap in our own strategy. It is clear that this capacity for decisive action and long-term planning is a specific form of pragmatism that Europe is currently missing and must find a way to emulate within our own democratic framework.

**The Green Paradox: Business Reality vs. Ecology**

Walking through the streets of Beijing or Hangzhou today, the situation is nuanced. It is certainly not the "apocalypse" depicted in the infamous photos from the early 2000s, but to call it purely "clean" would be an exaggeration. You can still feel the smog; a faint, tangible haze often hangs over the city, a reminder of the massive industrial engine humming nearby. However, this visible reality hides a deeply complex and contradictory truth. In my analysis of the energy market, I found a critical "Green Paradox": China presents us with a fascinating duality, acting simultaneously as the source of the world’s greatest environmental challenges and the engine of our most promising green solutions.

We cannot shy away from the difficult numbers on the negative side. My research

confirms that China currently burns more coal than the rest of the world combined, accounting for over 56% of global coal demand in 2023. While Western nations debate the nuances of phasing out fossil fuels, China is aggressively expanding them to ensure the lights stay on for their industries. In 2024 alone, the country initiated the construction of 95 gigawatts of new coal power energy. To put that massive figure into perspective, that single year of new construction is nearly equal to the total coal energy output of all of Europe combined.

However, if we view China only through the shadow of coal, we miss the incredible industrial transformation that is taking place alongside it. They have effectively embraced the future. Clean energy technology now makes up 10% of China's entire GDP. They produce 80% of the world's solar panels, 70% of lithium-ion batteries, and 65% of all wind turbines.

This leadership is the result of a deliberate strategy to democratize access to green tech by producing it at a scale that crushes costs. This effort drove the price of solar from $4 per watt down to just $0.20—a 90% drop between 2010 and 2023. As a result, Chinese consumers bought over 11 million electric vehicles (EVs) in 2024—a figure that exceeds what the entire world bought just two years prior.

Perhaps most encouragingly, I found that two-thirds of these EVs were cheaper than gas-powered cars, proving that they have made going green affordable and profitable without relying solely on subsidies.

This creates a shared reality that Europe can embrace: Europe brings the high standards, and China brings the necessary scale. The atmosphere is a common treasure shared by everyone. The data shows an unavoidable fact: by 2030, nearly two-thirds of global emissions will come from China, India, and South-East Asia. If the West turns away from this reality with "net-zero" activism that is only for show, we risk a tragic outcome. Developed nations might pay a high price to go green at home, yet we would still suffer from the heartbreak of climate change caused by rising emissions in the Global South. We have moved past the point where cooperation is just a moral choice; it is now a shared destiny. We must engage with Chinese capacity not just because of

strategy, but because without their massive scale, we cannot solve the global climate problem that affects us all.

**The Human Element: Tradition & Youth**

The statistics about infrastructure and factories are impressive, but the warmest and most lasting memory of this trip came from the people running them. Our visits to the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences and the World Association of Young Scientists (WAYS) introduced us to a generation that shatters the old Western stereotype of rigid, brainwashed students. Instead, we found a vibrant group of people who are smart, ambitious, and surprisingly graceful at weaving together old traditions and modern life.

At the "China-Europe Youth Dialogue," I witnessed a beautiful synthesis of the old and the new. The students we met spoke the language of global tech and innovation fluently—discussing AI ethics and green finance with the same ease and passion as their European counterparts. Yet, beneath this modern appearance, there is a strong, grounding foundation of cultural tradition. As I noted in my strategic analysis, this is not a generation that has lost its heritage to capitalism or communism. They have turned their history into a modern strength.

This warmth was palpable when we talked to them. Our Chinese hosts, including the Institute of European Studies at CASS, organized the event with a hospitality rooted in the ancient Confucian principle of Li (rituals and propriety). They treated the dialogue not just as a policy meeting, but as a sincere ritual for building lasting friendships. As Zhao Rui, vice president of CASS, wisely noted, young people are the best envoys for overcoming barriers. This wasn't just a speech; it felt like a genuine belief in the power of youth to bridge our worlds.

The media coverage surrounding the event, particularly the positive sentiments highlighted by outlets like the Global Times, reinforced this spirit of connection. When one student representative described China as "innovation, friendship, and opportunities", it wasn't just a soundbite. It reflected a genuine realization among the

European delegates that the "Great Wall" is not a barrier, but a door open to connection.

The "Pragmatism" I identified earlier is alive in these students, but it is a pragmatism filled with hope. They respect the stability of their state (Tradition), but they are fiercely focused on results and connecting with the world (Youth). They see no contradiction between wearing Hanfu (traditional clothing) and writing code for DEEP Robotics. For them, history is not a heavy weight that holds them back; it is the firm foundation they use to launch themselves into the future. Building friendships with this generation is more than just cultural diplomacy; it is an investment in the only group of people capable of bridging the geopolitical divide and bringing our worlds closer together.

**The Inevitability of Cooperation**

The five days spent traversing Beijing and Hangzhou have crystallized a singular truth: the notion of "decoupling" Europe from China is a rhetorical fantasy that collapses upon contact with reality. When one stands on the floor of a DEEP Robotics lab or observes the logistical ballet of a city running on the "Engineering Mindset," the sheer density of their industrial base becomes undeniable. We are not just inextricably linked by trade data; we are bound by the physics of global production. The supply chains for our digital and green future—from the batteries in our electric fleets to the rare earth magnets in our wind turbines—run directly through the provinces we just visited. To sever these ties would not be an act of strategic autonomy; it would be an act of economic self-immolation.

This relationship has shifted from a diplomatic option to an existential imperative. We are past the point where cooperation is a moral choice based on shared values; it is now a mathematical necessity based on shared threats. As I detailed in the "Green Paradox," the atmosphere is indivisible. With China generating the manufacturing scale required for the global green transition and Europe holding the regulatory standards to guide it, our strengths are complementary even if our political systems are contradictory. We must cooperate not because we endorse their governance model, but because the

alternative is a collective planetary failure.

Therefore, the mandate for this EU delegation is clear. We must move beyond the polite rituals of the "Youth Dialogue" and convert these interpersonal connections into concrete, functional projects. The goodwill generated with institutions like the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the World Association of Young Scientists cannot be allowed to dissipate once we leave. We need to establish joint working groups on green hydrogen, shared standards for AI safety, and continued academic exchanges that can survive periods of political frostiness.

The narrative must change. To say we "should" cooperate implies we have the luxury of walking away. We do not. We are locked in a forced marriage of necessity. The question is no longer whether we can get along, but whether we can pragmatically manage our differences long enough to solve the problems that will otherwise destroy us both. This is not appeasement; it is the cold logic of survival.

## Maksymilian Woroszylo: A Future of Honest Dialogue*

In mid-November, I had the opportunity to travel with over 60 other young European students and entrepreneurs to China for the China–Europe Youth Forum marking 50 years of relations between China and Europe. Before arriving in Beijing for the forum on November 17th, we spent several days in Hangzhou from the 12th to the 16th—a city that genuinely surprised me. Hangzhou is often described as one of China's most innovative hubs, and it absolutely lived up to that reputation. Located in Zhejiang Province, it combines modern technology with a relaxed, almost poetic atmosphere. During our stay, we visited both Westlake University and Zhejiang University, two institutions that stand out not only for their strength in research, innovation, and international business, but also for the way they support their students. We also visited DeepAI, a company producing advanced robotics systems and playing an increasingly important role in China's AI development. The professional demonstration we were given showed just how far the field has progressed there. Throughout the trip, we spoke with multiple groups of young Chinese students, and one comment stuck with me: when I asked several of them about AI, they explained that they saw AI more as a tool—especially for translation or small tasks—but not as a source of thinking or creativity. The creation, they said, should remain personal. I found that to be an honest and refreshing answer, especially in a world where people tend to immediately embrace or immediately fear new technologies without nuance.

Arriving in Beijing for the forum organized by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), we joined many Chinese students, along with scholars and political representatives. The sessions were direct, sometimes surprisingly open, and reflected a genuine willingness to understand each other beyond the usual diplomatic language. For me—coming from Luxembourg, studying finance, and being politically active—it was a unique experience to see these debates and the sincerity behind many of the

* Maksymilian Woroszylo, Luxembourger, President of ADRenalin and Economics Student at University of Neuchâtel.

contributions. The event gathered many prominent scientists from different backgrounds — social sciences, natural sciences — as well as politicians. The mood was one of optimism and mutual respect.

The opening speech by the CASS Vice-President, Zhao Rui, was full of encouragement. He urged young Chinese people to have the courage to realize their ideals—an idea that has run through China since its founding, so that youth understand they are the upcoming generation and that it is in their hands to bring about change. Equally poignant was the message from Emeritus Professor Eberhard Sandschneider of the Freie Universität Berlin. He urged the young to remain curious and to build bridges of understanding. “Even though we may speak the same language, oftentimes it is difficult to understand each other,” he said. His point: before one can truly relate to another person, one must understand them. That principle of deep understanding, he stressed, is a foundation for meaningful cooperation. Then there was Andrew Kristoffer Dean, Professor at the University of Sunderland, who brought a scientific lens to the dialogue. As a natural scientist, he emphasized the need to change perspectives. He underlined the importance of recognizing that current situations are situational — that is, they can change abruptly. His speech helped clarify the current relationship between China and Europe: it is no longer a predictable landscape, but one that shifts and evolves. The world is not bipolar anymore, but a multipolar world, with innovative nations taking the lead in some areas.

This insight sets the tone for how young European and Chinese leaders must proceed: building trusting relationships, helping each other flourish, and advancing together toward a future of innovation—and, of course, peace. Trust is a recurring theme: not just in institutions, but between individuals, cultures, and generations. Finally, the Deputy Director-General for European Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Cang Jian, emphasized the importance of cooperation between Chinese and European youth. In the end, it is for us to lead the world into new waters, and we need to be curious, to break artificial barriers of the old world order, and to build new bridges of understanding and cooperation.

As the formal speeches ended, I had the privilege of participating in a roundtable discussion on the future of European–Chinese economic cooperation. There, I exchanged views with Chinese students and young Europeans alike. Coming from Luxembourg, I put forward these reflections: In Luxembourg, we live in a very international environment; one of our strengths is in forging and sustaining relationships — not just short-term, but long-term. In 1991, the Bank of China officially established its first European hub in Luxembourg, thereby playing a crucial role in helping Chinese investors enter the European market. After that, other Chinese banks followed. This relationship, stable and mutually beneficial, demonstrates to me that there is fertile ground for additional projects. We could enhance cooperation in fields such as fintech, university partnerships, and student exchange programs.

An especially important point was raised by a Chinese student: often, European politicians come to China, speak very positively, and then return to Europe only to criticize China in various ways. This incoherence has become unnecessarily common among certain European leaders — who struggle between appeasing external nations and maintaining consistency. And that is why more coherent politicians, even if they face criticism for their hard stance, are gaining popularity in Europe.

During our debate, I referenced the comment made by the European Commission's High Representative Kaja Kallas about the Chinese military parade held to mark the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II — an event in which China invited Asian and international leaders from all over the world and played a crucial role in combating fascism. Instead of acknowledging China's important wartime role, Ms Kallas commented that "it would be the meeting of authoritarian powers." That remark, I argued, was unacceptable and undiplomatic in every way.

But aside from the official schedule, the speeches, and the political importance of the event, there was something else that struck me during the trip — something simple and human. In Hangzhou, by the lake, I saw so many young couples just walking, talking, taking pictures, or simply sitting together enjoying the moment. There was something very pure and beautiful in that. It wasn't staged, it wasn't political, it wasn't

part of any official program. It was daily life, and it showed a very warm side of China. These scenes stayed with me and warmed my heart.

Looking back, this entire experience was my first time in China, and I honestly didn't have clear expectations before arriving. But it became an experience I'll think about for a long time. It opened my eyes to how much potential there is for cooperation, especially in fields like finance, technology, and education. More importantly, I saw that young Chinese are genuinely interested in exchanging ideas and perspectives with us — and that they view these exchanges with sincerity, not just formal politeness.

I left with the impression that there is far more room for collaboration than what we currently use, and far more goodwill among the younger generation than what politics often suggests. Instead of seeking confrontation, we should seek dialogue. I look forward to returning, discovering more, and contributing to a relationship that — if handled honestly — can lead to a future that is not only productive but also genuinely welcoming and human.

I hereby confirm that this article may be published. All statements, opinions, and descriptions contained within it are based on my own personal experience and reflect my own views.

# Martin Hugo: A Real Homecoming: Reconnecting with the Idea of China Beyond the Dream of 2018*

**Context: "D'où parles-tu, camarade ?"**

My legal name as a French citizen is Hugo Martin, but upon my birth, a message was dispatched to my distant relatives in China, and the clan chose for me the full name: "岑德浩" (Ceng Dehao). I have only fragmentary knowledge of my Chinese family's history, gleaned from conversations with the ancients, what research I was able to carry out and deciphering the "族谱" (Genealogy) which has remained in our possession in spite of all our travels.

岑 is considered a rare surname in China. This is because although the clan is based in Canton, it used to live in Xi'an. When Wu Zetian successfully plotted her way into wielding the Mandate of Heaven, interrupting the Tang dynasty for a full 15 years from 690 to 705, the imperial administration, led by the "岑" clan, resisted her coup. This is because Wu Zetian had converted to Buddhism in order to become empress, as Chinese imperial customs, much like the Frankish Salic Law, prevented a woman to assume the supreme office. Wu Zetian won the power struggle against the 岑 clan, had its patriarch beheaded and forced the rest to either share the same fate or flee. Those who fled settled in Canton.

My family left China almost ninety years ago, in the first years of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. They scattered across the world; I have cousins in North America, Europe and, singularly, Madagascar, where my mother was born and where my family remained for four generations. They became French citizens upon Malagasy independence; earlier, when the Chinese Communist Party had decisively defeated and expelled the Kuomintang from the mainland, my family was given a choice between becoming citizens of either the People's Republic of China or the Republic of China. They chose the Republic of China. Believing that China would

* Martin Hugo, French, Research Visiting Fellow of Danube Institute.

remain poor in perpetuity, they also chose assimilation: my mother was not taught Cantonese, Mandarin or Malagasy, but was only raised in French. As a child, she was made to move definitively to France, where she would grow up and eventually meet my father, a Frenchman of Breton and Lorraine origin.

Two things relevant to this report must be said of my Breton ancestors. My great-grandfather, René Cariou, was a communist resistance fighter against the German fascists during World War Two; his father, Pierre-Louis Cariou, had joined the newly-founded French Communist Party in the immediate aftermath of the 1920 Tours Congress, which was the 18th National Congress of the French Section of the Workers' International and at the end of which the majority voted to join the Third International.

Our grandmother would often lull us to sleep with the "Chant des partisans", the meaning of which is similar to the "跨过高山，越过平原" or to the "義勇軍進行曲". She has memories of singing it with her father in the streets of Paris, after the Liberation.

**First trip to China**

I had been to China once before in my life. It was in 2018, between my first and second year of French superior education humanities (known as hypokhâgne and khâgne) after high school. This was a two-week trip organized by the Chinese half of my family over the summer to reconnect us with our roots. The French husband of my aunt, who was the main organizer, was jokingly referred to as an "egg" by our guide: white on the outside but yellow on the inside. My siblings and myself were jokingly referred to as "bananas": yellow on the outside but white on the inside.

We went around the country, landing in Hong Kong, then visiting Guangdong, Guilin, our nearby ancestral village (I remember an abandoned but clean house, with only its beams and roof remaining, and old black-and-white portraits), Xi'an, Beijing and finally Shanghai. We visited many landmarks, including a great many natural and artificial landmarks and wonders. "Art has two principles", writes Victor Hugo, "the Idea, which produces European art, and the Chimera, which produces oriental art"; if

there is a Great Architect, He has assuredly built Chinese landscapes in the image of what would become the Summer Palace.

I have vivid memories of this trip, yet it does not feel real to me, but rather like a dream, or perhaps a past life. I was also very ignorant of history and politics, compared with what I know today. This is why I knew, from the moment my colleague and friend Dr. Eric Hendriks referred me to the 2025 China-Europe Youth Dialogue, that I needed a second trip, which would be my real homecoming.

**Anticipation**

From the moment I sat down in Budapest International Airport, I began to write my anticipations and impressions in a notebook.

O China! Ancestor and vanguard, continuator of the Revolution, which history betrayed in France and in Russia! Older than history itself, as Charles de Gaulle reminded us, you, too, were shattered by Europe as well as the rest of the world; your pieces came back together under the banner of Lenin. Had this not been the case, you might be today like Africa or South America, controlled by a comprador class.

My family forsook you; or at least I have, by not living up to what you are and learning all about you in my most formative years. But Lee Kuan Yew began to learn Mandarin at the age of 32, so it is never too late, especially given that sentiment I feel for my ancestral mère patrie, and which is best summarized by this excerpt from Chapter 26 of Jules Vallès' L'insurgé - 1871:

*» Ô grand Paris !*

*» Lâches que nous étions, nous parlions déjà de te quitter et de nous éloigner de tes faubourgs qu'on croyait morts !*

*» Pardon ! patrie de l'honneur, cité du salut, bivouac de la Révolution !*

*» Quoi qu'il arrive, dussions-nous être de nouveau vaincus et mourir demain, notre génération est consolée ! Nous sommes payés de vingt ans de défaites et d'angoisses.*

*» Clairons ! sonnez dans le vent ! Tambours ! battez aux champs !*

*» Embrasse-moi, camarade, qui a comme moi les cheveux gris ! Et toi, marmot, qui joue aux billes derrière la barricade, viens que je t'embrasse aussi !*

*» Le 18 mars te l'a sauvé belle, gamin ! Tu pouvais, comme nous, grandir dans le brouillard, patauger dans la boue, rouler dans le sang, crever de honte, avoir l'indicible douleur des déshonorés !*

*» C'est fini !*

*» Nous avons saigné et pleuré pour toi. Tu recueilleras notre héritage.*

*» Fils des désespérés, tu seras un homme libre ! »*

1991 was an année terrible. A Revolution is always a conclusion more than a beginning; 1991 was the conclusion of the deliquescence of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, whose cadres had lost faith in communism and long prepared their surrender. To this point, an anecdote was related by Georges Gastaud, national secretary of the Pôle de renaissance communist en France (PRCF): during the Cold War, a delegation of Polish employers visited France. They expressed their admiration for the living conditions of the French employers, belittling their own living conditions in the Polish People's Republic. But their French host (Gastaud himself, perhaps, I do not quite recall) asked them: "What did your parents do as a job?" And the Polish employers replied that they were peasants and workers. "Do you think the parents of those French employers were peasants and workers?" The Polish employers' faces reddened and they did not know what to say. Atlanticist imperialism had a centuries-long head start on the communist bloc; the sequin of it all was enough, as the Americans put it, to "win the hearts and minds" of the intelligentsia in the Eastern Bloc.

Thus the sun set over Europe; but still it shone bright in Asia, as almost a decade later, China joined the WTO and would soon rise again at last.

*"Combien de nos chairs se repaissent ! / Mais si les corbeaux, les vautours, / Un de ces matins disparaissent, / Le soleil brillera toujours !"*

"When China awakens… the world will tremble". This was the title of a 1973 essay by Alain Peyrefitte. There are those who fear a tyrannical China; to them, and to the Chinese themselves, let us quote from Deng Xiaoping's speech at the Sixth Special

Session of the UN General Assembly on April 9, 1974: “if one day China should change her colour and turn into a superpower, if she too should play the tyrant in the world, and everywhere subject others to her bullying, aggression and exploitation, the people of the world should identify her as social-imperialism, expose it, oppose it and work together with the Chinese people to overthrow it.”

The Chinese Communist Party is the guardian of this promise, as well as of many others. What it does will be imperfect and there will be many mistakes, but it has given itself a mission and at least it is bound by it; in the same way that the Catholic Church, in spite of its many, many mistakes, remains the custodian of the New Testament, defined by Henri Guillemin as “a new look at the world”, as “a proposition made constantly to what Shakespeare calls our ‘heart of hearts’”, which corresponds to this dimension of obligation at the core of our being, the existence of which Sartre confessed to on his deathbed and which Guillemin summarises thus: “to care just a bit, even just a little bit, for something other than sex or one’s bank account.”

Christ is described by Luke as a “sign of contradiction”. This is what unites the cross and the hammer and sickle: when our basest instincts weigh us down over the years, when complete and utter cynicism appear to us necessary, when virtue becomes vice and vice becomes virtue, and when Machiavelli and Mozi reign supreme, there is a little voice that repeats: “I am here”, and although Jesus Christ and Confucius have passed, there will be a Karl Marx, there will be a Mengzi, to hear and side with this “sign of contradiction”.

*À force de prier, on entend ce qu’on dit.*

Charles de Gaulle indicted both communism and capitalism, considering that from the point of view of man, the former brought a bad solution, and the latter did not bring a satisfactory solution. He envisioned “participation” as a means of reconciling the two; but he stepped down in 1969 before he could begin to try to enact it. As Guillemin also says, the Gospel does not need updating: it is what it was, and we move away from it as time moves forward with us. New syntheses come about that will contradict the old. May “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” succeed in China as participation might

have succeeded in France, had Charles de Gaulle had the opportunity to attempt its implementation.

I expect my overarching impression, during this organised China trip, to be that "I have seen the future and it works", in the words of Lincoln Steffens; may it turn out, as the 1967 song "Quand fera-t-il jour camarade?" would have it, that this time, "c'est pour de bon".

**First Beijing Layover**

It is in Beijing, on the way to Hangzhou, that I first identified members of the European delegation. Those would become my most regular travel companions throughout this programme:

But before meeting them, on the first shuttle I took out of the airport in Beijing, the first sight that struck me was that of a young Chinese man helping an old wheelchaired woman. He wore light makeup and contacts. Men do no such things in the West; in fact, throughout the Chinese big cities we visited, I was struck to see fashion trends I associated with South Korea and Japan also be present in China. I had heard several times of the cultural convergence between the youths of all three countries; I do not recall seeing anything of the sort in 2018. May such trends benefit the peoples of all three countries, and similarly, may all three countries tackle shared problems together!

**Hangzhou**

On 13 November 2025, we visited the Deep Robotics corporation. My friend Merlin Zhang, who works for the CEEC Innovation Center Ningbo-Budapest and is currently doing a master's degree in international relations at Eötvös Loránd University, is familiar with this company; in fact, his employers have invested in it in the past.

At the facility, androids and dogbots were presented to us. I will confess I find them gimmicky; what I was most interested in was the modified dogbot with wheels at the ends of each leg which we were shown on video and which could act as an all-

terrain first respondent for firefighting emergencies.

At West Lake University, what was especially interesting to me in the lecture on DNA given in English by Prof. Jian Yang was that we could peer into the fields with the greatest bioethics concerns in the West. I had heard, for instance, that whereas gene editing would never be allowed in the West, the Chinese were much more open to it; when I asked Prof. Jian Yang about his opinion, he surprised me by saying that although he saw gene editing to prevent heritable diseases as entirely moral, he was against gene editing to enhance babies and try to make them "perfect". This added nuance to this black-and-white notion I had of the Westerners' and the Chinese's take on the ethics of gene editing.

In Zhejiang Financial College, we then got to meet several Chinese youths for the first time proper. The programme was very telegraphed, such that at some point, I found more interest in mostly ignoring the presentations and instead picking the brain of a single Chinese student. She told me about how she recalled her childhood changing rapidly, from mostly playing outdoors to her friends suddenly all being on their phones or computers all the time. The elders of her hometown also had a hard time adapting to the rapid technologization of daily life. I would not be surprised if this was a major concern discussed at meetings of the Chinese Communist Party at various levels.

At the subsequent visit of the college's financial museum, it can be said that engaging with this Chinese student "paid off" (pun intended), as she was one of the guides during our tour of it, and even though we were running short on time, she got me a sneak peek into a section of the museum that the rest of the delegation did not have the leisure to access. Sometimes, genuine interest in your fellow human being pays off almost instantly!

On 14 November 2025, we had a quick visit of the recently established ZJU-Hangzhou Global Scientific and Technological Innovation Centre. We took a two-hour bus trip to our next destination, at which point I understood the majority of our trip would actually involve us Europeans talking with each other about China in China, rather than talking to Chinese youth.

I appreciated the historical value of Zhang Wu Village and got to sharpen my acknowledge of the Mao era and other topics, especially in conversation with Zhejiang Media Group journalist Huanming Zhang, whose education background at Texas A&M University made him one of the most approachable Chinese people of the trip. I was not the only one to acknowledge that; several other members of the European youth delegation also made it a point to converse at length with him. I believe he was the one who explained to us that because domestic tourism had been interrupted due to COVID-19, the individual provinces of China had all made many forays in attracting international tourism.

On the morning of 15 November 2025, I carefully examined the surroundings of the Jade Emperor Hotel, where we were staying. I observed construction sites and noted down the different suppliers of the materials in use. I noted that the Italian-based flooring brand LONGHOO was in use; I will cite this against those who claim that China only exports to and never imports from Europe.

We had lunch at one of those Chinese restaurants with every dish on a rotating plate at the center of the table. I had an epiphany that this was an everyday illustration of how Chinese society organizes itself: everyone wants a piece, but everyone needs to wait their turn, and so everyone spontaneously organizes in such a way that everyone can be fed.

The subsequent visits of the West Lake and of the Hangzhou section of the Beijing-Hangzhou grand canal were the most touristy sections of the programme, but I suppose it is in order that our delegation should stimulate the local economy, especially when everything else was generously paid for.

**Beijing**

We arrived in Beijing on the 16th. My most recurring travel companions (pictured in “First Beijing Layover”) and I had dumplings at a restaurant for dinner. Under the glass table, tourists from all over the world had slipped a bill of their national currency. I drew a 500 Hungarian forint bill from my wallet and we all signed it with our Chinese

names before also slipping it under the glass table.

Another recurring travel companion was Richard Štěpán, of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, in whose company much time was spent in Beijing. We sang through the entire repertoire of the Red Army Choir together.

The day-long conference proper that was to be the culmination of our stay took place on the 17th at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). I refer you to the extensive report of the day's proceedings I have already posted on LinkedIn.

怎么办? (How to do?)

I was approached by an employee of China Today about an interview, which I subsequently gave recently. This employee mentioned the possibility of my collaborating with the Francophone branch of China Today; I would be delighted to do so. As can be read in the "Context" and "Anticipation" segments of this document, I have strong sentiments and a fleshed-out worldview of China's place in the world that owes a lot to my French heritage.

At an early point of the programme in Hangzhou, I made it a point to introduce myself to Ju Weiwei, Vice-President of the China-CEE Institute in Budapest, and to inform him that I wanted to discuss business with him back in Hungary. I have an already rather mature project related to Chinese infrastructure in the Balkans. I will submit it to him once I am back in Budapest from Japan (where I will remain until 2nd December).

Several members of the European delegation were relevant to this project, and I believe I will be working with them on it. These include Fridolin Kollmar, who works on Serbia-China-Germany relations, and Iva Naskova, who is the youngest employee of the North Macedonian legislature.

My design is to promote the consolidation of Chinese infrastructure in the Balkans under the most favourable terms for all parties involved, that true prosperity for the people may come out of it, hopefully redefining Europe's approach to Chinese investments.

Should my business bring me back to Paris soon, my interests towards this project would still be furthered, as Deng Li, the current Chinese ambassador to France, is (or was?) also in charge of China-CEEC.

In March 2026, I am to participate in the Telos Conference in New York, where I am to present the 2024 commented translation of the works of Mengzi by the French sinologist Yves Branca, who passed away in 2025, as well as his studies on Auguste Comte.

All in all, I believe attending this programme has been very valuable to me, and that many fruitful endeavors, many of which are listed in the present document, can come from the connections I made during it, if I work towards them diligently.

… a word on Madagascar, perhaps, as an epilogue. From 1975 to 1992, a Marxist-Leninist Second Republic was proclaimed, 15 years after independence from France in 1960. After the fall of the Second Republic, my family had attempted to encourage the people to conquer their rights. The people were too discouraged; all my family got was their house in Madagascar wiretapped. My maternal grandfather always despairs at the waste that Madagascar has been, with its rampant corruption and obscene disparities of fortunes. But a new revolution was led in Madagascar in September-October 2025, by the youth, as it had been in 1972. Can we hope then, can we dream? “Hope is not a strategy”, as a US saying goes; but Lenin wrote: “we must dream”; and so, let us, but awake.

## Martta Petrelius: My Academic and Cultural Trip to China*

As a 20-year-old student of international relations specializing in Chinese politics, I have always believed that intellectual understanding becomes truly meaningful only when paired with lived experience. Books, lectures, and research articles can only go so far in conveying the depth of a country's political landscape, its technological ambitions, and the cultural forces that shape everyday life. My trip to China, which took place from November 12 to November 17, became a defining academic journey precisely because it allowed me to witness firsthand the modernization projects, governance practices, and cultural heritage that I had studied for two years beforehand. This report summarizes my experience throughout the trip, reflecting not only on the itinerary but also on how the journey deepened my appreciation for Chinese society, politics, culture, and daily life.

**Arrival in Hangzhou: First Impressions**

My journey began with a full-day arrival and registration process in Hangzhou, a city renowned for its blend of natural beauty and technological innovation. Despite the fatigue from long flights and time zone adjustments, my excitement was overwhelming. As our group of international delegates gathered at the registration site by the airport, I immediately felt immersed in an atmosphere that blended hospitality, efficiency, and cultural exchange, all thanks to the Chinese students who took us in so well and who were so curious to meet us.

Upon checking into the designated hotel in the evening, I took a moment to observe my surroundings. Hangzhou at night felt both ancient and futuristic. It was a balance that reflects the broader Chinese approach to development. My first interactions with the students and the staff of CASS revealed the friendliness and warmth I would continue to encounter throughout the trip. Apart from being extremely friendly, Chinese people were also terribly curious about us westerners, even taking pictures of us in

* Martta Petrelius, Finnish, Undergraduate of University of Lapland.

secret while visiting the city and cultural places.

Although the first day did not involve any formal activities, it allowed me to begin absorbing the cultural differences from communication styles to the rhythms of city life that are not easily captured by academic study alone. Even though there were no formal activities, I took a taxi on the app called “didi” by myself to the city center and visited the huge shopping districts and streets filled with colourful stores. I had never seen anything like that before in my hometown Rovaniemi in northern Lapland.

**Experiencing Chinese Modernization Through Technology**

The first full day of our itinerary focused on the theme of Chinese modernization, which aligned somewhat perfectly with my academic interests. The morning began with a visit to Unitree Robotics, an AI technology company based in Hangzhou. As someone who studies Chinese politics, I have long been fascinated by the government’s focus on technological development as a strategic pillar of modernization. Walking through the company’s facilities, observing robotics demonstrations, and watching the engineers demonstrations with the robots offered a vivid insight into how innovation is not simply an economic goal in China, but part of a broader national narrative.

Industrial and research applications embodied a vision of the future being actively constructed rather than theoretically imagined. What impressed me beyond the technology itself was the confidence and ambition with which the company spoke about China’s role in global robotics and ai development. This aligned with my studies on China’s national plans for technological self-strengthening, giving me a more concrete understanding of policy implementation at the enterprise level. Asking questions about the day to day use of said robots, revealed that on prefecture level, it is common to replace in person police patrols with robots which rather watch over the city during unconventional hours such as night time.

Lunch in Hangzhou offered my first opportunity to explore Chinese cuisine on this trip. I have always loved Chinese food, but this meal reaffirmed my affection. Sharing dishes with fellow delegates and our hosts made the meal feel communal, embodying

the Chinese cultural emphasis on togetherness. The hotel buffet was an overall hit, and it was a great pleasure to taste the traditional Chinese food. One of my all-time favorite Chinese foods is Beijing duck, and I must say that eating Chinese dishes in China is incomparable to their western counterparts.

**Understanding China's Social Governance**

Our itinerary shifted from technological modernization to social governance, allowing me to engage directly with political themes central to my studies. The morning seminar was held at the Zhejiang Financial College and co-hosted by the European Studies Institute. The academic environment was familiar, yet the topics and perspectives presented offered a distinctly Chinese viewpoint.

A prominent scholar in the field of bioethics recently spoke about the rapidly evolving world of genetic modification. He emphasized that humanity is standing at a turning point: we now possess tools powerful enough to reshape life at its most fundamental level. According to him, technologies like CRISPR and advanced gene-editing platforms offer extraordinary benefits for curing inherited diseases. He would also continue to argue that scientific ability does not automatically grant moral permission. Genetic modification raises questions about fairness, consent, and the possibility of unintended consequences. Who gets access to these technologies? How do we protect vulnerable populations from misuse? And how can societies draw ethical boundaries when the science moves faster than legislation?

In his view, the discussion must remain global and participatory. He urged governments, researchers, and citizens to engage in transparent debate, recognizing that genetic modification is not merely a scientific milestone, but it is a cultural, ethical, and human challenge. Ultimately, he insisted that the goal should not be to chase perfection, but to use genetic knowledge responsibly, with humility and respect for the complexity of life.

**Immersion in Traditional Chinese Culture**

After two days centered on modernization and governance, we were now offered a chance to connect with traditional Chinese culture.

The morning visit to West Lake was breathtaking. The lake's serene waters, willow-lined pathways, and ancient pagodas created an atmosphere that reminded me why Hangzhou has inspired poets, painters, and philosophers for centuries. I felt as though I had stepped inside the pages of Chinese history and literature. The streets around West lake were filled with Chinese girls dressed up and taking pictures in historical Han-Chinese clothing called Hanfu.

Following the natural beauty of West Lake, we visited the Chinese fabric and costume museum (which were together with the tea museum). Visiting the Silk museum was like walking through a living timeline of China's aesthetic imagination. Each room was filled with a chapter of Chinese fabric history, revealing how fabric has carried the stories, identities, and craftsmanship of countless generations. I found the silk route to be an especially fascinating concept, seeing how Chinese textiles affected European court fashion during the late Middle Ages.

The first galleries focus on ancient textile traditions, displaying fragments of hemp and silk from early dynasties. Behind the glass cases, you can see the delicate weaves of Han and Manchu -period garments or the bold geometric embroidery of nomadic cultures from the northern steppes. These early pieces show how fabric served not only as clothing, but as protection, social marker, and spiritual symbol.

In the afternoon, we walked along the streets of the Hefang area, an environment rich with historical architecture, local shops, and traditional crafts. Vendors sold silk garments, handicrafts, snacks, and herbal remedies. I tried traditional foods, browsed clothing stores, and admired intricate designs on silk scarves and jackets. Chinese clothing has always struck me as beautifully expressive of cultural heritage, and being able to see and touch these garments brought that appreciation to life. I also wanted to bring a piece of this culture back home, and ended up on a green-golden silk Hanfu, which is the traditional clothing of the Han-people in China.

Overall, this day fulfilled a personal dream: to immerse myself in the cultural

traditions that first sparked my interest in China years ago. It reminded me that while China is a global leader in technology and governance, its cultural heritage remains a vital foundation of its national identity. It is hard to miss the fact that China does have the most entries in the UNESCO intangible heritage list, and now I could finally truly see it for myself.

**Departure and Reflection**

On the final day, we departed for Beijing at noon. Although the journey from Hangzhou marked the end of the first phase of our trip, it also symbolized a transition from learning through direct experience to reflecting on what I had gained.

As I left Hangzhou, I felt enriched personally, and culturally. The trip allowed me to witness how modernization, social governance, and cultural preservation coexist in China not as isolated elements but as interconnected components of a dynamic society. I returned with clarity about why studying Chinese politics is both challenging and rewarding. More importantly, I returned with a deeper love for Chinese culture, clothing, food, and the spirit of hospitality that I encountered everywhere.

This journey reaffirmed my commitment to understanding China not just as an academic subject, but as a complex, vibrant, and evolving country. It strengthened my desire to continue studying Chinese politics and to foster cross-cultural understanding in my future career in international relations. Now it is safe to say that I will most definitely be visiting China again.

## Mateo Danilo Guzman Rodriguez: A Norwegian Lens on China's Rise*

I want to start by saying a huge thank you once again for this amazing experience. I'm truly grateful I got to participate.

The visit to Hangzhou was incredibly educational. I loved getting to see local institutions and companies. My visit to Deep Robotics was great, though it was a bit of a bummer that the biggest and most impressive robot wasn't working that day. As a computer science student, I would have also loved to see the factory where the robots are actually put together. It would have been a perfect way to show how advanced Chinese manufacturing really is. That said, it was still impressive to see the other robots in action, like the small jumping one and the medium-sized robot that could climb stairs. The universities were a real highlight. Westlake University had a stunning, modern campus and an educational lecture—I even asked for information about future degrees! Zhejiang University also stood out. In Europe, our public universities are often hundreds of years old and don't have such modern facilities, so it was impressive to see a public university with such a cutting-edge campus.

One of my favorite parts was the discussion event at the European center. I really enjoyed hearing everyone's points at our table, and I even went up to the board to represent my group. We also got coffee during the event, which was a nice touch. Hearing the different perspectives from other groups was very valuable. Later, we got to make our own matcha and draw with it, which was fun but also surprisingly tiring! The best part, though, was the live music played with Chinese instruments. It was a unique experience you can only find in China.

Without a doubt, my favorite visit in Hangzhou was HIC-ZJU, where I felt we learned the most about Chinese innovation. We were shown plans for a future campus expansion, and we could actually see it being built from our bus. It made me feel that China is truly committed to investing in research and long-term development. Sometimes in Europe, governments can be hesitant to put money into innovation if

* Mateo Danilo Guzman Rodriguez, Norwegian, Undergraduate of University of Oslo.

there aren't immediate results, so I really admire China's forward-thinking vision here. The project that interested me the most was about modernizing agriculture. They showed us machines that enhance production and reduce waste, like bio-packaging and new fertilizers. They even have machines for harvesting strawberries. I appreciated that they stressed the importance of keeping prices low so these machines are actually affordable for farmers. This is especially important to me, as I come from an area where this kind of agricultural innovation hasn't arrived yet. We were also introduced to other critical fields, like the development of the microchips we need millions—or even billions— for hardware innovation.

The visit to the former camp where Chinese leaders were trained was also very educational from a historical view. The only feedback I have is that the rooms were quite small, so only a few people could fit inside at a time, meaning many of us missed the guide's explanations. Maybe for next year, the guides could use a microphone with earpieces so everyone can hear, even from outside the room.

We also visited the birthplace of Wu Changshuo, a famous painter and calligrapher from the last century who was also very popular in Japan, as I learned that day.

To conclude the day, we visited a kindergarten in a remote area. I was struck by how modern and well-equipped it was, despite its location. This clearly demonstrates China's strong commitment to educating its entire population. Ensuring access to quality education like this, no matter where children live, is one of the most powerful tools for fighting inequality.

The Silk Museum was another one of my favorites. We were split into two small groups with our own guides, which made it so much easier to follow along and listen without the crowd. Seeing the actual examples and learning about how they produced and dyed silk in ancient China was a great experience.

Afterwards, we went to Xi Lake, which was beautiful, and I took some great pictures, including one in front of a World Heritage site. My only wish is that we had a bit more time there before we had to get back on the bus.

The day of the event in Beijing was bitterly cold and windy, especially compared

to Hangzhou. Hangzhou felt rich with nature and trees, while Beijing felt much more like a dense, urban city. However, the event itself was fantastic. It was an honor to hear speeches from former European leaders and to be participating in the same event as them. The speeches had great points about cooperation between Europe and China, and how a trade war isn't good for anyone. The focus was on how we should work together, rather than confront each other like the USA seems to be doing now.

I was also interviewed by Chinese media, and I was quoted in the official news article, which felt like a real privilege since many people were interviewed but only a few were quoted. During the breaks, we had snacks and I got to talk with other students about China. I learned that the institution hosting us is very difficult to get into, which didn't surprise me at all after speaking to its alumni, who spoke some of the best English I've heard in China.

During the event, there was a session where European representatives from our group gave great speeches, and then there was a Q&A. Volunteers from the audience answered, but I didn't raise my hand—a decision I now regret. One question has stuck with me the most: “Do you think being here today could hurt your career?”

I didn't answer publicly that day, so I'll answer it now in this report.

I personally think that our countries may be hesitant to cooperate with China in the next 2-3 years. But looking ahead 4-5 years, I believe cooperation with China will not be a choice, but a necessity. Our job will be to negotiate terms that are beneficial for both sides. I think the fact that we are getting involved with this mindset early on will be a major benefit in the long run, even if others are hesitant right now.

Later, we attended a Sub-Forum where we broke into our groups to share points we wanted to include for developing relations between China and Europe. For my country, Norway, I brought up the importance of environmentally friendly development. Norway is known for its beautiful nature and fjords, which are at risk of disappearing because of global warming. Fortunately, China is well on its way to improving its emissions. Unfortunately, other big contributors to the problem, like India and the US, aren't even planning to establish procedures to improve the situation. That's why, in my

opinion, China is our biggest potential ally in this fight, even though there's still a lot of work to be done.

I also mentioned that China is a very diverse country in its landscape, especially in areas like Tibet and Xinjiang. A huge part of the Himalayas, including Mount Everest, is located in China. This means China and Norway share a common interest in reducing the causes and effects of global change.

Norway's economy is heavily dependent on oil and gas exports, which is a risk. To be less dependent, my suggestion is for Norway to use its oil profits to invest in foreign companies within different, fast-growing sectors. I would focus on technology, which is seeing some of the best results. By investing in tech companies abroad—for example, in important markets like China—Norway could turn its non-renewable resource profits into a stake in more sustainable and diverse industries for the future.

I'd like to end this report by thanking all the organizers, teachers, and photographers for taking such great care of us. At this event, I met some extraordinary people who are also interested in China, which I really appreciated. Back in Norway, there are very few of us with this interest, and sometimes it can feel a bit lonely. So it was refreshing to meet more young people engaged with Chinese culture and development.

It was also a great chance to practice my Chinese. I'm only at about an HSK4 level, so I still have a lot of room to improve, but I got to use it a lot and get feedback from locals. This trip confirmed that I made the right decision a year and a half ago when I chose to learn Mandarin instead of a more conventional language like French or German. I always tell younger students they should choose Mandarin because of experiences like this.

I am really looking forward to coming back to this amazing country and hopefully helping to enhance relations between our nations on an even bigger scale.

## Merel Hamers: The Art of Trust and Innovation*

On invitation by the China-CEE Institute, hosted by the Chinese Academy of Social Science, I had the amazing opportunity to spend a week in Hangzhou and Beijing, exploring and discovering the many aspects of Chinese life, culture, and innovation. During my stay I was surprised and intrigued by the developments of China in a diverse range of areas, learning about new perspectives and methods that deepened and expanded my understanding of China as a prominent player on the world stage. I out my sincerest gratitude to both host and organization, for offering us, a group of 61 young adults from 30 different European countries the chance to engage, explore and experience China.

As an International Arts and Culture student from the Netherlands, I had some understanding of Chinese art, history and culture, but being able to experience this first-hand definitely changed my knowledge for the better. From the first moment we were welcomed by the CASS committee, I felt beyond curious to learn more about everything China has to offer. For several days we were invited as guests in Hangzhou, and I would once again like to take this moment to thank all the staff, for organizing and arranging such a wonderful trip. We were guided along all what China has to offer, in numerous fields, starting with a visit to the tech-company DeepRobotics. Although I am not too familiar in the technological innovation behind robots, the demonstrations and clear explanations by the company members made it easy and inviting to follow along. It is inspiring to see the many ways China has expanded its technological innovation, and discussing the different layers of innovation, powered by this visit, remained a topic well-discussed throughout the week. Experiencing the beauty of West Lake university, and the interesting lecture on patterns in DNA gave me a clear impression of the innovative theme of the day, supplying my perspective and comments in this field.

The first day we experienced a conference in Hangzhou, where we, divided in

* Merel Hamers, Dutch, Undergraduate of Erasmus University Rotterdam - Codarts University of The Arts.

smaller groups, got the opportunity to meet several Chinese students from Zhejiang Financial College. During this conference, I enjoyed the speeches of the CASS members and organization, expressing our joint interests and positive attitude to learn and mutually grow as two forces in the contemporary world, China and Europe.

What especially stood out to me, after hearing the speeches, was the openminded and positive mindset with which the perspectives and goals for the future were formulated. This way, the tone was set for the whole excursion, and the open view in which all members of both Chinese and European organizations entered this week, made the exchange, discussions and debates even more special and fruitful. Hearing the positive and hopeful words during the opening speeches inspired me immensely, and gave me much hope for not only the following week, but the next 50 years of China-Europe relations.

After the speeches and presentations, we were invited to discuss various topics within our group. I loved the diversity of topics introduced, enabling participation for everyone at our table. It was very interesting to hear about the others shopping expenses, discussing differences in both economies and cultures at the same time. Also, the discussion on AI sparked a lot of different perspectives and points, but due to the warm environment and establishment of mutual trust and interest at the beginning of the conference, we were able to have an interesting and compelling discussion. Hearing the opinions of the Chinese students was especially interesting to me, and I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to discuss these important themes with them, learning so much more about a different perspective. The tea ceremony was a fun and easy way to learn even more about Chinese culture, and I was very thankful for the help of the Chinese students during this precise ceremony. I am glad to have experienced another part of Chinese culture using a more hands-on, interactive
approach, and it was a nice moment to bond with both European and Chinese students.

I would also quickly like to remark the traditional Chinese musical performance, as this was another highlight of that day. I was unfamiliar with many of the instruments, and was absolutely delighted to be able to enjoy its workings first-hand. The musicians

are beyond talented, and this cultural performance added another layer of the China-Europe exchange. The following days we saw much more of all China has to offer. Seeing the smart, innovative and sustainable way that the ZJU-Hangzhou Global Scientific and Technological Innovation Center dealt with global issues like urban planning, environmental impact, really opened my eyes on the solutions innovation can bring. I think Europe and the Netherlands have much to learn, and hope that these insights and solutions can be of global impact, through mutual learning and understanding. The China-Europe Youth Dialogue is a small, but fundamental step in this road of exchange and mutual understanding, and I am honored to have been part of it.

Gaining new cultural insights from the visits to the West Lake, Zhangwu Village, the Silk Museum and the Hangzhou Section of the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal was something I truly enjoyed, and I am happy to expand my existing knowledge on arts and culture of China with the experiences I gained these days. As an Arts and Culture major, I have had my fair share of research in historical and philosophical topics like Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, learning about the rich history of Dynasties in China from text, but during these visits saw this knowledge come alive before my eyes. We walked from a busy shopping street into a Taoist temple, from standing between robotic dogs to standing in historical houses. It made me aware of the sharp contrast between old and new, tradition and innovation, and it is amazing to see how China has embraced both of its essential qualities. Departing for Beijing was once again proof of China's innovative efficiency, by travelling the country, gaining all new kind of impressions by looking outside the window alone, while marking 300 km/h. In the brief free hours, I did my best to expand my knowledge on Chinas history by visiting the Forbidden City and Temple of Heavens, while preparing myself to discuss the future, hoping for another 50 fruitful years of China-Europe exchange.

The main event of this program, the conference regarding China-Europe relations for the next 50 years, with a special focus on youth, and enabling dialogue between youth from both China and Europe, exceeded all my expectations.

During the opening speech of Zhao Rui, vice president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, he emphasized the main goal of this conference and dialogue to be set on mutual understanding, learning, progressing and developing, but above all, trust. Trust that this generation, of which I am proudly part of, wants to do things differently. Trust that we will not repeat the mistakes before us, and appreciate the chances given. Trust that no matter our ethnicity, identity or nationality, we all have similar goals, and similar hopes for the future. A trust built, and once and once again confirmed, during all the pleasant experiences and impressions of the program, a trust that grew stronger, through each exchange, conversation, and perspective shared by both European and Chinese students alike.

I thoroughly enjoyed the diversity of speeches during the opening ceremony, from both experienced and youth speakers alike. Although I did not always agree with some of the statements made, the underlying message of hope for a better future, established by a smooth next 50 years of China-Europe relations was something that shined through all presenters alike.

During the main part of the conference, the dialogue between Chinese and European students, I was invited at panel four, discussing Youth and the Future of China-Europe Science and Technology Cooperation. Although I might not be an expert in the field of Technology Cooperation, I do aspire to be a future cultural scientist, and thus felt comfortable to share my views and knowledge concerning this topic. After a short introduction by our moderators, Langjia Zeren and Fridolin Kolmar, we were asked to firstly share our experiences of the program so far, and our first impression of the conference. I was happy to see both Chinese and European student equally enthusiastic to start the discussion. Reflecting on what previous speakers like Kong Yuan, Chang Jian, and Grzegorz Kolodko had stated, we quickly agreed that the main takeaway from all of the speakers was, as I previously mentioned, the importance of trust.

The feeling of allowing ourselves to trust became an underlying tread during our conversation, resulting in beautiful discussions on anything that came to mind, up until

the point that even when our time was up, our dialogue was far from over. We discussed Chinese innovative efficiency, how we as inhabitants from different countries in Europe had no idea how easy it could be to pay, haul a cab, or order something. We discussed multiple topics across multiple fields, posing questions to each other, simply for the sake of more understanding. In response to an excellent point by a Chinese colleague, on how political messages can travel and be shared through art, I shared my views on how the perspective on the arts has shifted throughout the ages, sparking a debate what the cultural differences are between Europe and China concerning politics and art. Although this topic might not be directly related to the original panel theme, the open environment to just ask and learn anything we are wondering about, was what made this conversation even more special. We discussed the relation between politics and science, agreeing that ethics are a core value within technological innovation, once again emphasizing the importance of mutual understanding in science. We discussed topics like intellectual propriety, concluding that China can learn something about Europe's laws and regulation concerning copyrighting intellectual inventions, guarding and safekeeping an important stakeholder within scientific development. In return, many European colleagues were surprised when our Chinese friends explained their supporting attitude towards the older generation, by not only promoting technological innovation, but at the same time enabling its accessibility to all members of society, by creating easier versions of for example apps, for kids and the elderly. This is something Europe can definitely improve in.

One of the main issues potentially disrupting smoothly operating diplomacy, is a mistrusting attitude. Although there are important differences in point of view to consider, especially concerning ethical concerns or humanitarian conflicts, a better world is not built by inaction, mistrust, and closed borders. During the discussion panel, this notion became quite clear. We as youth have seen and learned from generations before us. We have seen how deep the cuts of cultural ignorance can go, and how easily this ignorance can be diminished as long as all parties are open to do so. This was not always the case in previous generations. We have seen debate after debate, ending in

nothing, purely because people choose to talk instead of to listen. During the short time we have learned so much more about China, than any of us would have ever thought. And we choose to listen. Listen to what others have to say, listen to others explaining how, why and when, battling this cultural ignorance sentence by sentence. During the youth dialogue in Beijing, this journey reached its peak, and we freely discussed a variety of topics, all important to us, and our future.

I am beyond grateful for having the opportunity to see and experience China in such an inspiring way. Talking to young people who were born at the other side of the planet, but all share the same dream of hope for a better future, gave me faith in the years to come. I want to thank the Chinese Academy of Social Science for hosting us, the China-CEE institution for co-organizing this event, and all the amazing people, staff, students, colleagues and friends I met during this special time. 非常感谢(Thank you).

## Nanako Logean: A Shared Future Worth Building: Insights from a Young Swiss-Japanese Perspective*

I first learned about the China-Europe Youth Dialogue through contacts at the Chinese Embassy in Switzerland, who reached out to let me know about this excellent opportunity and encouraged me to apply. At the time, I did not know much about the initiative, but upon their encouragement I decided to submit my application. I had visited China before and the prospect of returning there years later was really exciting to me. The programme brought together more than 60 youth delegates from over 30 European countries, all heading to China to learn more about Chinese innovation in fields such as economy, trade, sustainable development, and artificial intelligence, as well as to explore avenues for better cooperation between China and Europe in those key areas. The Dialogue took place at a meaningful moment as well, as 2025 is the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and the European Union.

Back home in Switzerland now after having participated in the 2025 China-Europe Youth Dialogue, I can confidently say that the organization was exceptional: flights, accommodation, meals, and transfers were all arranged for us, which made the entire experience very smooth and enjoyable. My heartfelt thanks go to everyone organized the trip for us and made sure everything worked seamlessly and efficiently for us. In the next part of the report I'll talk about the programme which consisted of two parts: an organized delegation visit to Zhejiang Province, followed by a full-day Conference in Beijing.

**First part: Delegation Visit in Zhejiang**

After long hours of flight, I landed in Beijing, hopped onto a transfer-flight to Hangzhou, and was warmly welcomed by CASS volunteers at my arrival. Together with several other European delegates who had arrived at around the same time, we were taken by minibus to our hotel, which was very comfortable and which served us

* Nanako Logean, Swiss, Master'S Student of University of Geneva.

excellent food during our stay. We had our first evening free to rest and get to know the other participants.

Our first official visit the was the next morning, where we headed to DEEPRobotics, a national high-tech enterprise headquartered in Hangzhou. As they explained to us, the company focuses on embodied intelligence products and their industrial applications. We were shown various robots, all striking for their agility, speed, and precision. A moment that will stick by me was watching one of the smaller robots performing back-flips, which impressed and amused all of us.

We then visited Westlake University, where we toured part of the campus and attended a short lecture by one of the professors. The campus was modern and inspiring and the lecture very engaging. I personally can easily imagine myself studying in such a place and it was a very motivating environment. The campus is very green and even has a river running through it, which adds to its charm. Greenery is known to lower stress levels and therefore, I really appreciated how thoughtfully designed the campus and buildings were, it felt like they were conceived with the students' best interest at heart, made modern, convenient, and most importantly comfortable for students to learn in.

Our next stop was Zhejiang Financial College, where members of the Academic Committee, members of the Ministry of Education, and members of the Ministry of Finance welcomed us. They presented to us the university's role in research, particularly concerning Europe and economic studies. We also participated in an open brainstorming and discussion session with Chinese students from Zhejiang Financial College in topics such as usage and pros and cons of AI. We enjoyed a beautiful traditional Chinese musical performance performed by some students there and even received an introduction to the art of "Diancha" by a Chinese tea ceremony specialist. Afterwards, we visited the College's Financial Museum, where we discovered the rich history of Chinese and international currencies.

The following morning, we visited the ZJU–Hangzhou Global Scientific and Technological Center, a joint initiative of Zhejiang University and the Hangzhou

Municipal Government. The center focuses on materials science, information science, and life sciences, and is unsurprisingly modern with a very sleek appearance and displays showcasing the latest technologies. It was fascinating to venture in the exposition and although many scientific topics were outside of my non-existing scientific expertise, it was still exciting to learn about the technological advancements that have taken place across so many fields in recent years. Before leaving the Center, we made a quick stop at the souvenir shop for some university merchandise. In the afternoon, we travelled to Zhang Wu Village in Anji County, Huzhou. We learned about traditional farming practices and rural life, which offered an interesting perspective on China's cultural heritage.

On our last day in Zhejiang, we visited the China National Silk Museum which is the world's largest silk museum. Its exhibited silks were absolutely stunning, and we learned a lot about the history and techniques of silk production. We then visited West Lake, where our guide shared with us the famous legend of the White Snake Lady. Although our time there was short, we enjoyed a walk along the lake and across some gorgeous ancient bridges. Our final stop in Zhejiang was the Hangzhou section of the Beijing–Hangzhou Grand Canal, which is surrounded by historic buildings and artisanal shops. We explored the area and were able to enjoy some local shopping before returning to the hotel.

**Second part: Conference in Beijing**

The next morning, we took the high-speed train to Beijing, where we checked into a hotel near the conference center. We had a free afternoon and along with several other European delegates I went to explore Beijing 798 Art Zone.

China–Europe Youth Dialogue Forum

The next day, we had a full day forum about China-Europe Relations in the Next 50 years. The forum took place at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), organized by the Institute of European Studies of CASS with support from the World Association of Young Scientists. The opening ceremony featured speeches by notable figures, including the former Deputy Prime Minister of Spain, the former Deputy Prime

Minister of Finance of Poland, and senior officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. Youth representatives from both regions also delivered speeches.

The speech that stood out to me most was delivered by Chan Jian, Deputy Director-General of the Department of European Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. I was genuinely impressed by how eloquent and assured he was as a speaker. It was truly a pleasure hearing him express his thoughts with such clarity. I can say that in some way his words gave me reassurance and inspiration for our shared future. One phrase he said, although I don't remember the exact wording, stayed with me: "Even when we don't agree on everything, partnership is worth having." To me, this sums up the ideas I took away from the week and I believe it is a thoughtful reminder of the value of cooperation, even amidst our differences.

After a tea break, we attended additional presentations from Chinese and European experts. There were interactive sessions where moderators engaged us with questions on our impressions of China, cooperation, cultural exchange, and the future of China-Europe relations. We also enjoyed cultural performances: a traditional Chinese dance by a Chinese student, and an Irish violin performance by one of the European delegates.

Lunch at the CASS dining hall was a highlight for me, the food was excellent and the architecture of the dining hall itself was beautiful, with large windows opening onto green spaces. Speaking as a foodie, (and a fan of Chinese cuisine) I was genuinely impressed by the food options and I only wish I could have enjoyed many more meals there. Honestly, I might need to come back just for the food.

In the afternoon, we split into thematic parallel forums. I was part of Parallel Forum 3: Youth and the Future of China-Europe-Cultural Exchange and Mutual Learning among Civilizations. Moderated by Chen Siyang, who is an Assistant Research Fellow of the Institute of European Studies at CASS and Iva Naskova from North Macedonia, who is Deputy Assistant National Advisor of the Parliamentary Institute of the Republic of North Macedonia and a Western Balkans European Youth Ambassador. We discussed our respective countries' relations with China, challenges in China–Europe cooperation, challenges about mutual skepticism in the workplace,

and ideas for improving communication, including through joint media initiatives.

The day concluded with a closing ceremony and final speeches, followed by dinner where I sat with some CASS students and we had friendly talks and all agreed that we were sad that the eventful week was coming to an end.

**Personal Reflections**

Overall, the programme was an enriching, eye-opening, and wonderfully organized experience. We learned a lot about China's innovation, culture, and development, and were very well taken care of throughout. The programme was very fast-paced, and although we were constantly learning and discovering new things, I do wish we had had more time to talk with Chinese students and young professionals and also to meet more locals. Still, spending so much time with other European delegates also gave me new perspectives on Europe itself and on the diversity within our continent. The forum in Beijing was also extremely engaging, and although I felt like many of the older European speakers seemed to have rather bleak views of Europe and its future, I hope that we, as European youth, demonstrated our enthusiasm and our commitment to innovation and progress.

As someone who is half-Japanese and half-Swiss I found this exchange particularly meaningful. Despite the historical and ever-ongoing tensions between China and Japan, I sincerely hope to see more programmes that bring Chinese and Japanese youth together, as well as young people from all Asian countries. I strongly believe in deeper Asian partnership and collaboration, and I would love to see China help foster greater dialogue among Asian youth, just as it does so successfully with European youth. In a world facing enormous and emerging challenges, from AI governance to sustainable development, international collaboration is essential in every way. I hope all countries can come together to work toward our shared future. China's innovation and the openness of its youth are truly inspiring, and I hope we were able to inspire and share valuable insights in return.

I would be delighted to participate in future events of the China–Europe Youth Dialogue and hope to remain involved in initiatives that promote understanding,

dialogue, and cooperation across cultures. This experience has been invaluable, and I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute and learn in this way.

## Paulina Thum: Harmonizing the Modern and the Ancient*

My journey to China constituted an exceptionally meaningful and generous opportunity—one for which I remain sincerely grateful. Although the long travel time was at moments physically demanding, the overall experience more than compensated for any fatigue. I would, without hesitation, undertake the same journey again.

Upon our arrival at the airport, we were warmly welcomed by the staff assigned to receive us and were immediately escorted to the bus that would take us to our accommodation. It was during this initial drive to the hotel that I first became aware of the fundamental differences between China and Germany. The landscape that unfolded outside the bus windows presented a fascinating blend of towering skyscrapers and expansive green areas. The coexistence of dense, vertically oriented urban architecture with generous natural spaces was striking. It challenged many of my preconceived notions about large metropolitan centers and demonstrated an impressive balance between rapid economic development and environmental consciousness. This first impression set the tone for the remainder of my stay and shaped my understanding of China's ongoing efforts to harmonize modernization with cultural and ecological preservation.

I was particularly appreciative that the program allowed us not only to explore the country's modern institutions, but also to gain insight into its historical traditions and cultural foundations. Hangzhou, one of the central cities we visited, proved especially rich in both cultural heritage and contemporary innovation. Our activities ranged from visits to the National Silk Museum and local markets to tours of the Financial Museum, research institutes, companies, and universities. Each of these visits highlighted the distinctive ways in which nations develop their societal structures, cultural priorities, and academic landscapes.

One moment that left a particularly lasting impression occurred during a conversation with a Chinese university student. We asked him why construction work

* Paulina Thum, German, Student of Hans-Leinberger-Gymnasium.

in China often takes place late at night—something that would be highly unusual in Germany. His response was remarkably pragmatic: “You cannot simply interrupt daytime traffic to repair the roads, so the work must be done at night.” This attitude exemplifies a broader cultural mindset that values efficiency, collective responsibility, and a willingness to make personal adjustments for the benefit of society. I found this approach admirable, as it reflects a cohesive societal philosophy in which individuals contribute to the smooth functioning of the wider community. Such perspectives, I believe, play a significant role in shaping the social fabric of a nation. A community in which people actively consider the needs of others tends to cultivate a strong sense of unity and shared purpose. Throughout our stay, similar examples emerged repeatedly, each reinforcing the impression that China possesses a deeply ingrained orientation toward collective well-being, long-term planning, and social harmony.

Our visit to the National Silk Museum was another highlight of the trip. While I was aware of China’s historical association with silk production, witnessing the craftsmanship and artistic precision involved in the weaving techniques was truly remarkable. The museum presented not only the origins and evolution of silk but also its cultural and economic significance throughout various dynasties. I also learned that some of the region’s most esteemed green tea varieties originate precisely from the area we were visiting. This became evident when we later explored a local village, where we gained firsthand insights into the process of tea cultivation. Observing the meticulous work of the farmers and learning about the heritage of tea production deepened my appreciation for the way cultural traditions continue to shape daily life in China.

China’s extensive and multifaceted history was one of the most captivating aspects of the trip. The temples we visited—particularly the Temple of Heaven in Beijing—were breathtaking. Their architectural beauty, combined with their deep historical and spiritual relevance, made a profound impression on me. Several smaller historical buildings, representing earlier periods of Chinese civilization, also offered a compelling glimpse into the cultural and philosophical developments that have shaped the country

over centuries. Walking through these heritage sites provided a tangible sense of continuity between past and present and highlighted the enduring significance of China's ancient traditions.

A central component of our visit was our participation in the "European Youth Embracing Zhejiang: A Rendezvous for a Shared Future" initiative. This program substantially advanced the overarching objective of fostering deeper dialogue and collaboration between European and Chinese youth. Such exchanges are essential in an increasingly interconnected world. They build not only cultural understanding but also lay the groundwork for sustainable political partnerships and future economic cooperation.

The China-Europe Youth Dialogue, one of the key events of the program, focused on the relationship between China and Europe over the next fifty years. The discussions brought together highly qualified experts, including both European speakers and Chinese scholars. Their contributions were intellectually engaging and addressed a wide range of topics related to international relations, economic strategies, and cultural exchange.

The moderators—particularly the young representatives from both regions—facilitated the dialogue skillfully and ensured that diverse viewpoints were presented and respected. During the smaller forum sessions, we had the opportunity to engage in direct and open conversation with Chinese participants. These discussions were invaluable, as they allowed us to hear candid opinions on various sensitive topics. Despite their strong sense of national pride, many participants acknowledged that China might need to reconsider certain approaches or address issues that are viewed critically in parts of Europe.

At the same time, they emphasized that Europe must also take initiative, approach China with a greater willingness to understand its perspectives, and reconsider oversimplified or outdated narratives. Both sides recognized that meaningful cooperation requires mutual effort, openness, and a readiness to adapt. Ultimately, our exchanges led to a shared conclusion: long-term, stable relations between Europe and

China can only be achieved through reciprocal engagement. Europe must invest in deeper communication, approach China with a more nuanced understanding, and critically but fairly reassess its views. China, in turn, may need to address certain policies or topics that European countries find sensitive. Through such balanced efforts, both sides can work toward a sustainable and mutually beneficial partnership.

Reflecting on the entire experience, I can say with confidence that the journey significantly broadened my global perspective. China revealed itself as a country of remarkable historical depth, cultural richness, and forward-looking ambition. The people we met were consistently welcoming, intellectually curious, and eager to engage in dialogue about the future of international cooperation. The combination of cultural exposure, academic discussion, and personal exchange transformed this trip into far more than a simple visit; it became an educational experience that has shaped my understanding of global relations.

Traveling to China demonstrated to me that genuine understanding between nations cannot be achieved solely through media portrayals or political discourse. It emerges through firsthand observation, direct conversation, and a willingness to encounter the unfamiliar with an open mind. Whether observing the efficiency of nighttime construction work, exploring centuries-old temples, learning about silk manufacturing, or participating in international youth dialogues, each experience contributed to a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of China.

This journey reinforced my belief that cultural exchange is an indispensable foundation for peaceful international relations. It is through these encounters that individuals—and eventually nations—can develop trust, empathy, and shared vision. I am grateful for the opportunity to have taken part in such an initiative and am confident that the insights gained during this trip will continue to inform my perspective for many years to come.

## Rando Künnapuu: A Tale of Two Cities, Hangzhou and Beijing*

Firstly, the entrance into China would be summarized. The intervals in between the events in Hangzhou and Peking will be detailed. The author names these breaks in between the daily trips and conferences as intermezzi, as they are quite different in experience and in regard to who is responsible for the visitor. Hangzhou and Peking will be treated differently here. The departure will be also described.

**Entrance to China**

The first impression that a visitor has to his or her destination these days is the trip to the country in the first place, the flight and the air carrier. All the steps preceding it regarding the sending of passport copy and other information were smooth.

The experience with the national air carrier Air China was not seamless, specifically its online platform. The issues with it are widely known among foreigners who fly on it. The experience on board is a different matter and quite alright.

There was an issue with arriving one hour late to Peking airport and missing the domestic flight to Hangzhou. Luckily the domestic flights fly more often than foreign ones. The author recommends sending someone to Peking airport to facilitate the travelling through the airport security, since the author and the other delegate of Estonia barely missed the flight due to issues of delay of the first flight and the long lines in the security. It is recommended to leave at least three hours of free space in between flights in large airports, while two would be minimal. In our case we had only one hour of time to walk through the security over to the domestic flight, which was insufficient.

As we arrived Hangzhou we were welcomed by group of the dialogue event volunteers from local university. This part was quite positive. The volunteers were helpful and were flawless in their welcoming. They assisted us getting a Chinese phone number, which is meant for foreigners.

The phone number caused the author some issues later, since it doesn't allow the phone to send messages to the author while using services online. This meant that quite

* Rando Künnapuu, Estonian, Master'S Student of the University Thomas Wade Society.

a few services was inaccessible to the author, including hiring chemical cleaning, ordering food in some places etc. The phone number did guarantee internet.

**First intermezzo**

The food system with tickets was excellent and the author no complaints with that. The first evening in Hangzhou was calm. The hotel location had the advantage of being close to Xihu, so a lot of delegates were able to explore Xihu themselves. Usually, whenever the author has heard of tours in China for foreigners the Chinese have packed the itinerary full of events, not allowing the foreigners to have time to go out explore on their own. The balance between spare time and events was appropriate and it is a popular choice, it should be added, since in other tours foreigners tend to wish that they had this free time to sate their curiosity outside the bounds of guided tours.

**First day – technology**

The idea to stay several days in one city has its advantage in that the visitor is able to have a more multifaceted understanding of a large city, which otherwise might remain superficial or uncomplete if done in one day. As a person of humanities, it is useful to diversify one's knowledge on other fields, such as robotics and natural sciences. The first day was spent visiting Deep Robotics company, two universities – the Xihu university and Zhejiang Financial College with its finance museum.

Robot dogs were certainly noteworthy and their agility is surprising. The next visit to Western Lake university entailed a natural science lecture. The author not sure why we were shown this lecture in particular, but it was interesting. As a humanity student the author did not understand most of it, but there were useful comments in the end regarding genetical modification.

Subsequently we travelled to Zhejiang Financial College where there was a seminar. The topics for discussion were kind of safe topics, but not superficial. AI is indeed a topic that should be discussed, and we heard opinions from both ends of the spectrum. The topic for consumption could have been done better, as it was asked that the visitors take a positive and a negative view of consumption. However, this is not in the author's view a topic where there are only negative and positive sides to it. What is

one's "way of consumption"? The whiteboard did not lend itself to that task very well. It was interesting regardless to hear different opinions.

The final topic on matcha was memorable and great.

From thereon, the visit went on to the finance museum of the college, which encompassed different currencies and histories of finance of the silk road.

**Second day - administration**

The bus took us to Zhejiang University-Hangzhou Global Scientific and Technological Innovation Center in Xiaoshan. The complex looked aesthetic and majestic, as did the Western Lake university. Looking at the website of the innovation center, one could recommend this style as a model to strive towards for. Hangzhou people certainly have skill in design. The author especially approves the logo of the city. The next stop was the Anji county near Anhui province. The timing was not perfect, as too much time was allotted to visitors to shop in the Innovation Center café and tourist shop. The Zhang Wu village, if the author remembers the name correctly, included a perspective of it in three time periods – ancient, "youth to countryside" period and today's infrastructure. Being from a former Soviet nation of Estonia the visit to the Maoist period village was interesting, as the author had not imagined before how the life of Maoist period looked like in old traditional style buildings. Usually, one thinks of the demolition of the old and construction of the new, when thinking of Maoism abroad, that old traditional buildings have little to do with Maoism, left to decay and what not. If there had been time, the author would have liked to visit the temple of the village up by the mountains.

The kindergarten of the village looked like a modern rich person's home, but was a clear indicator of what modernity looked like in the village.

There was some spontaneous singing, which the organizers were hesitant to break up, on – the groups were two hours behind the schedule. It would have been recommended to suggest to people to get on the bus immediately after reaching them, but the video material was likely the best part of the video clip later revealed in Beijing conference. Spontaneity can produce best things.

**Second intermezzo**

Briefly, the author visited a friend that lives near the city, and we roamed in the old streets of Hangzhou, where one could see the combination of modernity and antiquity in the most tasteful ways. Our city designers could learn a ton from the taste of Hangzhou. The way how a small stream flowed through the streets was endearing. There was some solid tea to be found.

**Third day – culture**

The crowning day of the Hangzhou days, where the groups could see the serene waters of Xihu. The view was tranquil and illustrious. The Grand Canal was likewise interesting and what was surprising were the numerous museums around, including a fan museum. The author was able to visit a Taoist temple, where he could see how animals like cats were harmoniously integrated into the temple life.

**The travel to Peking**

The early morning high-speed train journey to Beijing took five hours. The view from the train provided glimpses of Nanjing, Jinan, Tianjin, and the changing geography of eastern China. The trains were comfortable and efficient.

The hotel in Beijing was conveniently located next to CASS. Compared to Hangzhou's mild climate, Beijing's winds were harsh. From an Estonian perspective, Hangzhou is a more liveable city year-round, while Beijing is more pleasant in summer. The author attempted to rent a suit due to the wrinkles in his own, but again, the lack of a proper Chinese phone number made the process difficult.

**The dialogue event in CASS, Beijing**

The final day entailed the seminar from early morning of 9 am to 6pm.

The day began with a movie clip made from the Hangzhou days so far. The most positive part of the seminar was that there were quite different opinions among the speakers. There were speakers from various countries: Poland, Spain, England, Scotland, Germany etc. The first speakers, Feng Yongping and Zhao Rui were formal enough. The pro-Russian Spaniard was too radical for the likes of the author, but it was nice to hear different languages.

The dialogue event focused on the European and Chinese youth relations in next 50 years. While the author felt that the sharpest issues were avoided, the general event was organized quite well. As former finance minister of Poland Kolodko said in the private seminar, he was quite pleasantly surprised that the youth speak so much of culture as a point of unison. This, the author believes, is a solid start, a warming up to speak of more sensitive issues. It is those sensitive issues that will become new challenges in European-Chinese relations, but the author believes that these all could be solved peacefully through dialogue. There will be challenges, no doubt, but the goals of European and Chinese are one – it is simply the modes that are different.

The author notes that references to multilateralism persist in Chinese discourse. However, for smaller European states, true multilateralism is unrealistic and potentially dangerous. Not all countries seek harmony. Russia, for example, pursues destructive policies toward several Eastern European states, including Ukraine, as seen in its de-Ukrainianization strategy. Multilateralism can be used as a tool to undermine NATO. Without alliances, Eastern European countries would be vulnerable. Reliance solely on one or two great powers such as the US or China is not sustainable.

Nevertheless, Eastern European countries hope for peaceful future relations and trade with Russia.

The moderated Q&A was positive, and the author shared his impressions of Hangzhou. The author also approves of the lunch canteen and the picture-taking.

In the seminar, the author raised a point that more investment is needed into AI-assisted language learning apps and that author knows one app that could be invested in, which helps advanced level Chinese speakers keep developing the language. It might be the only app like that, since all the other apps focus mostly on beginner level or intermediate levels.

The seminar was a key part of the event, since this allowed Chinese and Western delegates to interact with each other for the first time during the trip in that necessary depth. This also allowed Chinese to develop the output skill of their English.

An advice: If you present a dancer from a minority ethnic group of China, do also

tell what group they are from. Representation is very important for minority groups.

In the end, some of the delegates also had a chance to speak in front of the podium. I remember well one Swiss delegate saying that instead of the countries the people should try to converse and that perhaps if one day there is a crisis, then it is through one's contacts that the issue could be resolved.

**Departure**

The leaving proceeded smoothly until Denmark, however an incident there regarding lost luggage is not the responsibility of the organizers of the event, so let it be. Still, the organizers did try to locate my luggage, and I received it 4 days later after I reached home.

## Samir Yasin: Innovation and Identity in Modern China*

This report provides a detailed reflection on a six-day academic and cultural study trip to China, taking place from 12 to 18 November 2025. The visit included four days in Hangzhou—one of China's emerging innovation hubs—and two days in Beijing, the country's political and cultural capital. The primary purpose of this report is to capture the academic experiences, cultural encounters, personal impressions, and overall learning outcomes that resulted from the program.

Beyond documenting the itinerary itself, the report aims to offer a structured and analytical reflection on what these experiences revealed about China's development, its technological landscape, and its cultural identity. The report therefore moves beyond simple description and focuses on understanding how these experiences shaped my perspectives as a European student visiting China for the first time

Although the group consisted of students from various academic backgrounds—many from political or social sciences—my own background is in business informatics. For this reason, I naturally paid particular attention to aspects related to technology, digitalization, AI, robotics, infrastructure, and innovation ecosystems.

China's reputation as a global leader in digital adoption and technological advancement strongly influenced my expectations prior to the trip. Experiencing this environment firsthand provided a meaningful contrast to my European academic experience and allowed me to reflect on the role of technology in a broader societal and cultural context.

While this report includes personal observations from this perspective, these reflections are integrated subtly and only where they add value to understanding the trip as a whole.

The objective of this report is to summarize and analyze the activities of the trip in a structured and coherent way, while reflecting on academic, cultural, and personal learning outcomes.

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* Samir Yasin, Croatian, Master'S Student of Karsruhe Institute Of Techonogy.

The report is divided into six chapters. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the program's duration, destinations, and goals. Chapter 3 presents a chronological description of the experiences in Hangzhou, followed by Chapter 4, which summarizes the experiences in Beijing. Chapter 5 reflects on cultural, academic, and personal insights gained throughout the trip. Chapter 6 concludes the report with an overall summary, the key impressions, and potential implications for the future. The objective is to showcase a more personal perspective of the overall experience in China and the China-Europe Youth Dialogue.

The program lasted six days, beginning with the arrival in Hangzhou on 12 November and concluding with the departure from Beijing on 18 November.

- Hangzhou (12–16 November): Known for its combination of traditional culture and cutting-edge innovation, Hangzhou provided a rich environment for university visits, company tours, cultural activities, and personal exploration.
- Beijing (16–18 November): The final two days in Beijing focused on conferences, academic exchange, and allowed for personal visits to historical and cultural sites.

Although the schedule was compact, it offered a diverse mix of academic content, cultural exposure, and personal experiences.

**Experience in China**

Day 1 - Arrival and First Impressions

The trip began with our arrival in Hangzhou. After checking into the hotel and receiving a short orientation, we were given free time to explore the city. While some participants decided to rest after the long journey, our small group chose to begin discovering Hangzhou immediately.

We visited the city centre, explored local clothing markets, and walked along the shores of West Lake, one of China's most famous scenic attractions. The lake provided a first impression of Hangzhou's cultural identity—beautiful landscapes, traditional architecture, and a calm atmosphere.

For dinner, we tried Longjing shrimp, a traditional dish closely connected to the

region's tea culture. The evening concluded with a spectacular fountain show at West Lake, combining music, lights, and water choreography. This display was not only aesthetically impressive but also an early example of how digital technology integrates seamlessly into public life in China. From a personal perspective I initially thought that the city would be quite crowded, due to it being home to over 12 million people, however due to the size of the city It did not feel like this often even feeling quite empty in parts of the city.

Overall the first impressions were positive and already shattered perceived prejudices, especially as we engaged with the local people

Day 2 – Deep Robotics, Westlake University, Cross-Cultural Dialogue

The second day centred on academic visits and cultural exchange.

Our first stop was Deep Robotics, a company specializing in highly advanced robotic dogs. One model, equipped with wheels, could achieve speeds comparable to Usain Bolt. Observing these robots in action offered valuable insights into China's progress in robotics and automation. From a business informatics viewpoint, the sophistication of the control systems, hardware integration, and real-world application potential was particularly fascinating. While I could see the value in aspects such as for rescuing I could see how it could be utilized

We then visited Westlake University, where a professor delivered a lecture on DNA research. Although not directly related to my field, the interdisciplinary research approach presented during the talk demonstrated how computational tools and data analysis are embedded in modern scientific innovation.

Afterwards, we travelled to Zhejiang University, one of China's top institutions. Following lunch in the university canteen, we participated in a conference discussing topics such as AI, cross-border collaboration, and China–Europe relations. The conference included cultural elements such as traditional music performances and demonstrations of tea preparation.

During the conference we got to directly engage with Chinese Youth and share our differing perspectives about relevant topics. Personally, I was surprised by how similar

our opinions on some of the topics were. Often coming to the realization that even though we might be far apart we often face similar problems. I think dialogue like this encourages learning from one another and could lead to us also solving our problems.

After the conference, we decided to use our persomal time to visit the Hefang Street, a culturally vibrant area filled with shops, food stands, and historical elements.

Day 3 – High-Tech Research, Traditional Narratives, and Rural Insights

The third day began with a visit to HIC ZJU, a state-of-the-art research facility at Zhejiang University. The tour introduced us to ongoing research projects across various scientific fields, illustrating the scale of China's investment in innovation. The interdisciplinary collaboration and advanced equipment left a strong impression.

Afterwards, we returned to West Lake, where we learned about cultural narratives such as the famous White Snake Legend. These stories deepened our understanding of the region's cultural history.

Later in the day, we visited a traditional Chinese village called Zhangwu, providing a striking contrast to the urban landscape of Hangzhou. The differences in lifestyle, infrastructure, and economic development between rural and urban China became much clearer.

In the evening, our group explored Hangzhou's nightlife, including live music performances and dancing. Beyond entertainment, the evening allowed us to reflect informally on the first half of the trip and share impressions and experiences.

Day 4 – Tea Culture, Silk History, and the Grand Canal

One of the most memorable experiences of the entire trip resulted from a spontaneous encounter. Earlier in our stay, we met a local man who owned a tea farm. He invited us to visit his sister's tea shop, where we tasted authentic Chinese green and black tea. This informal cultural exchange offered a unique perspective on local life, hospitality, and tradition.

Our first planned activity was a visit to the China National Silk Museum, where we learned about the long history of silk production and its role in shaping China's economic and cultural development.

The day continued with a trip to the Hangzhou Grand Canal. The surrounding markets and shops offered a lively cultural atmosphere.

The evening was spent at a popular night market, exploring food stalls, tea shops, and small artisan stands. This marked our final full day in Hangzhou before departing for Beijing.

Day 5 – Arrival and First Impressions

We travelled from Hangzhou to Beijing using China's high-speed rail system, which was impressive not only for its speed and efficiency but also for the views it offered along the way. Passing through different regions of China allowed us to observe varying landscapes, infrastructure, and numerous forms of energy production, including renewable energy facilities and large power plants.

Upon arrival, the first day in Beijing followed a similar structure to our first day in Hangzhou: after checking in, we had the freedom to plan our own activities. We chose to visit the Temple of Heaven (Heaven Palace), a stunning cultural and historical site surrounded by extensive parkland that reflected traditional Chinese architecture and symbolism.

Later in the evening, we went out to experience Beijing's nightlife and were once again pleasantly surprised by the kindness, openness, and welcoming attitude of the local people. The combination of cultural exploration during the day and social interaction at night made our first impressions of Beijing particularly memorable.

Day 6 – Beijing Conference and Farewell

The final day in Beijing was dedicated to the closing conference, which featured a diverse range of lectures delivered by foreign professors, researchers from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), and even the Deputy Prime Ministers of Poland and Portugal. The overarching message of their speeches emphasized that the future of China–Europe relations lies in the hands of today's youth, highlighting our responsibility to foster cooperation, understanding, and innovation across continents.

Following the plenary lectures, we participated in smaller workshop groups composed equally of European and Chinese representatives. Our group engaged in

discussions on the topic “Youth and the Future of China–Europe Scientific and Technological Cooperation.” I personally found this exchange particularly meaningful, as it aligned closely with my academic interests in technology and digital innovation. What stood out most was the balance between shared perspectives and constructive differences. The dialogue remained respectful and thoughtful throughout, and both sides demonstrated a genuine willingness to understand one another’s viewpoints, reflecting the broader goals of the program.

After the workshop phase, all participants reconvened in the main conference hall for the official closing ceremony. This final gathering marked the end of an intensive but rewarding week, and was followed by a shared dinner, offering one last opportunity for informal conversation and reflection before departure.

Because our flight departed later that night, there was limited free time after the conference. We chose to spend these final hours with the other representatives, reflecting together on the experiences, exchanges, and friendships formed throughout the week. As a final cultural moment, we visited a nearby lake, where we once again interacted with locals and played Jianzi, a traditional sport similar to a weighted shuttlecock game. This small but meaningful activity provided a fitting end to our stay, capturing the spirit of openness and curiosity that had defined the entire trip.

Shortly thereafter, we departed for the airport, bringing an unforgettable and enriching week in China to a close.

**Reflection and Personal Takeaways**

The trip offered a broad and meaningful introduction to Chinese culture, ranging from traditional elements such as tea ceremonies, local cuisine, and historical stories to modern expressions like music, markets, and urban nightlife. Being able to interact directly with locals—whether through planned activities or spontaneous encounters—helped break down stereotypes and provided a more human understanding of daily life in China.

What stood out most was the combination of deep cultural heritage and fast-paced modernization. In Hangzhou, ancient stories like the White Snake Legend were shared

only a short distance away from advanced robotics labs and research facilities. In Beijing, centuries-old architecture existed alongside one of the world's most modern transportation systems. These contrasts highlighted the multifaceted nature of China's identity and helped me appreciate how tradition and innovation coexist in a way that is less common in Europe.

Academically, the program offered valuable exposure to China's innovation landscape. Visits to institutions such as Deep Robotics, HIC ZJU, Westlake University, and Zhejiang University demonstrated China's strong emphasis on research-driven development and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Although the content varied across fields—from robotics to DNA research—the underlying theme was clear: technology, data, and innovation play a central role in China's vision for the future. For me, coming from a business informatics background, it was interesting to see how closely aligned many Chinese research priorities are with global technological trends.

The final conference in Beijing also reinforced the importance of international cooperation in scientific and technological development. Discussing these topics with Chinese and European students showed that, despite differences in background or political context, there is a shared interest in shaping a future built on collaboration, innovation, and mutual understanding.

On a personal level, the trip was an opportunity to develop adaptability, openness, and intercultural communication skills. Being in an unfamiliar environment required navigating new customs, different social norms, and a foreign language, all of which encouraged curiosity and flexibility.

Engaging with students and professionals from diverse backgrounds also strengthened my confidence in expressing ideas, listening actively, and understanding perspectives that differ from my own. The shared experiences—whether during academic activities or informal evenings—helped build genuine connections and made the entire program feel welcoming and collaborative.

Overall, the trip broadened my worldview, deepened my appreciation for cultural

diversity, and strengthened my motivation to pursue more international experiences in the future.

## Sara Sarafimova: Echoes of West Lake and Winds of Beijing*

I walk along the lake and begin to feel as if the world has turned into silk: water lies smooth like fabric stretched between graceful pagodas, tall trees, and the carved stone slabs beneath my feet-so many of them, and yet each one different. As I wonder whether an identical pattern will ever repeat, I'm surrounded by bamboo, osmanthus, willows, and other beautiful plants that lend the scene its quiet magic. Although they say these willows droop out of sorrow, it seems to me they bend in order to lean closer to the lake, curious whether love stories and legends still linger beneath the lotus blossoms. Is the frightened White Snake still hiding somewhere below? Do the two Butterfly Lovers ever return to the lake to revel in its view? And the longer I walk, the more convinced I am that the legends are alive – alive in every couple taking pictures on the Broken Bridge; in every woman dressed in a traditional, flowing silk gown, often with floral patterns and long sleeves, her hair pinned up, her face delicately painted, a matching parasol in her hand; and alive as well in every passerby gazing to the tall Leifeng Pagoda rising from the opposite shore, guarding its stories and secrets, and, in a way, watching over the lake itself.

If I turn slightly to the left, the view stretches from the lake to the nearby hills and mountains, and the lake becomes a kind of path-calm, inviting-leading to those stepped peaks all the way to the point where earth meets sky. No wonder the Chinese once imagined the mountain tops as the home of the gods, and scholars sought refuge and peace among them. And yet, it seems to me that the divine is hiding here as well —— in the lake itself, in its depths, in the plants that guard it, in the birds that admire it.

If I turn to the right, it is as if a city of glass rises up out of water in the distance – towering, narrow skyscrapers creating a sharp contrast with this eternally wide, serene lake. What must the view be like from one of those towers, when almost the entire lake stretches below? Can one see the Three Pools Mirroring the Moon — those stone

* Sara Sarafimova, North Macedonian, Master student of Faculty Of Electrical Engineering and Information Technologies of Skopje.

guardians standing in quiet defiance before the approaching city? Do the skyscrapers ever feel intimidated by the richness of those three seemingly small towers?

I can picture someone surrounded by screens, ads, and robots, looking down at the vast lake and suddenly realizing how small they are-and how small that tower is-compared to this expanse of water. When she found herself at op the tallest building in the world, a Serbian poet wrote:

"How close God is to me! Never has He been so near...Thus does the soul rise, lifted,

While the blood runs cold;

\…\

But, ah!

How I wish I knew

Whether He is here-the Lord

To whom they prey so fervently- Up there in the sky, Or down below, Where man crawls like an ant or a worm."

Frozen with fear on "the crown of that giant," closer to God than ever, she wondered whether He was even there at all. And I find myself asking- would she have believed if, from that same height, she were looking at the magnificent West Lake? Would she have felt that something greater, higher, and truer than those giants stood before her? A message, a reminder, that nothing more colossal could ever be.

I keep walking, realizing how grateful I am that my first experience in China was shaped by this city- this unreal blend of contrasts: nature and urban life, tradition and modernity, the old and the new. These opposites seem to echo the very foundations of Chinese philosophy, forming harmony only when they come together.

Lost in thought, I suddenly hear music and notice that I am approaching a livelier corner of the park. People are dancing. In pairs or alone, without purpose or direction, they move freely to the melody. They don't seem to follow any choreography- if anything, each person dances in their own way- yet they look so attuned to one another. As if the calm lake were passing its quiet rhythm into their bodies, guiding them. So many smiles, so much peace... I imagine every day here looks like this. And I begin to

feel almost embarrassed for staring, because they are not the strange ones- the dancers- I am, for finding their dancing strange, for insisting on saying they dance for no reason at all, as if dance itself ever needed a reason or a purpose.

To understand this park- which, with all its little details and beauty, feels like Chinese culture in miniature- I realize I have to step out of my familiar world, the world that demands causes and consequences, names and ownership, labels and signatures. After music and dancing, I arrive at a fountain. It wouldn't stand out if the passerby didn't turn its water into words, transforming it into an endless source of poetry. Poems, proverbs, perhaps even short stories appear across the pavement- unsigned, untitled, created simply for no reason at all. Half-dried by the sun, some characters are already fading, as if they exist only to live in the moment, carrying with them the magic of what is felt now, right here. And just like the moment itself, they will vanish with the wind and sunlight, taking their patterns, impressions, stories, and lessons with them.

Night falls. I feared that day would steal away the lake's beauty, but I am taken aback by how breathtaking it becomes after dark: the surrounding pagodas and the occasional boat glowing softly, illuminating the wide and quiet surface. The lake answers by reflecting their light, creating an even more magical image- one you never want to part with. But I had to.

After our stay in Hangzhou, we headed to the capital. Leaving meant more than stepping away from silk, love stories, and the richness of green tea- it meant crossing from calm into urgency, from quiet into a gentle kind of unrest, and, most strikingly, from autumn into winter.After Hangzhou, where technology and nature interwine and tea fields seem endless, Beijing felt- at the very least-different. In one word, colder. I knew Beijing was cold, but I never imagined a wind that cuts through every layer and freezes every part of your body. And not only that-the atmosphere itself felt colder. I didn't get the chance to stroll through the parks and see whether warmth hides here too, or whether those songs truly belong only to the magic of West Lake...

I wandered through Beijing convinced the question would remain unanswered. Fighting the cold, I stared at the tall buildings and wondered how much history their

walls hold. Everything felt strict, uniform, and yet beautiful. Passing through an underground walkway to cross the street, I noticed how organized and, despite its uniformity, surprisingly decorated the city is. Walking alone and observing the details of what seemed like an ordinary passageway, someone else entered it with me. A food delivery driver on a scooter. Again, the cold wrapped itself around my thoughts and body, and I suddenly shivered. I had often thought about everything a delivery driver endures-weather, traffic, the city's infrastructure-to bring someone dinner. Here, the infrastructure seems kind to him, but how cold must he be, riding so exposed, delivered over to the mercy and cruelty of this Beijing cold and its relentless, unforgiving wind? As he drew closer, I heard something besides the hum of the scooter. No, he did not greet me. It was the sound of singing. And the cold city cracked open for a moment-splits by a single human voice. That song seemed to carve tiny openings in the city's stern façade; it warmed the air just a little. And he didn't stop singing because of me. On the contrary, it felt like he wanted to share it-with me, with everyone.

I stood there, puzzled, asking myself why-and how? Does the magic of West Lake reach all the way here? Or is it something else? Does he sing to pass the time, to stay warm, or perhaps… simply for no reason at all?

## Stijn Kluck: Seeing Once is Better Than Hearing a Million Times*

The famous Chinese proverb, “Seeing once is better than hearing a million times,” perfectly encapsulates my journey before and during the China-Europe Youth Dialogue. My decision to join the program was not born of naive belief in Western media, but rather from a cultivated skepticism towards it. My studies in International Land and Water Management have instilled in me the importance of critical analysis, of seeking primary sources over secondary interpretations.

Furthermore, witnessing the ongoing genocide in Palestine and the often-outrageous disinformation and state responses from Western media and governments has profoundly shaped my ability to question official narratives. This critical lens was firmly in place when I considered the prevailing discourse on China in the Netherlands, a discourse that portrays the nation as an oppressive monolith, a threat, and a violator of human rights.

While I did not endorse these views, they create a pervasive atmosphere of suspicion. A friend of mine declined to apply to the same program, stating simply that China was a "bad country." Common conversations about my trip were punctuated with warnings about a lack of freedom and the mistreatment of minorities. Yet, countering this were verifiable facts: China’s leadership in green technology, its staggering achievement in reforesting an area larger than France and Germany combined over 70 years, and its rapid elevation of hundreds of millions from poverty. I thus arrived in China not with closed-minded prejudice, but with open, critical questions, eager to see for myself and to move beyond the limitations of mediated narratives.

### Shattering Stereotypes

The most immediate and powerful correction to the abstract narratives I had encountered came from the Chinese students themselves. The stereotype of the indoctrinated, uncritical youth, a common trope in Western media, was dismantled

* Stijn Kluck, Dutch, Master’S Student of Wageningen University & Research.

through genuine interaction.

I vividly recall sharing a meal with students of cultural philosophy and political economy. They were not passive receptacles of state doctrine but dynamic, multi-faceted individuals. They organized musical clubs and do dance alongside their rigorous studies, demonstrating a balance of intellectual and artistic passion. Our discussions on the multipolar world, climate justice, and the philosophy of peaceful development were not rehearsed party lines; they were sophisticated, well-reasoned, and reflected a deep engagement with global affairs. They articulated a worldview that was both patriotic and globally conscious, expressing a genuine desire for understanding and collaboration with Europe. This direct human interaction was the most effective antidote to the dehumanizing propaganda. It solidified the knowledge that the Chinese people are, like all people, our brothers and sisters, with individual aspirations, critical minds, and a shared hope for a better future.

**Witnessing the Progress**

The theoretical statistics of China's development, 800 million lifted from poverty, life expectancy soaring from 35 in 1949 to 81 today were transformed into a tangible, observable reality on the streets of Beijing and Hangzhou.

The most compelling evidence was in the fundamental aspects of social welfare. The absence of homelessness, the sight of countless young children in uniforms accessing education, and the bustling markets overflowing with affordable, fresh fruit, fish, and meat painted a picture of a society that has successfully provided a foundational level of security and prosperity for its citizens. This material reality stood in stark contrast to the lingering Western perception of a uniformly poor population.

The infrastructure was a constant, awe-inspiring testament to this progress. The skylines, punctuated by high-modern architecture, the quiet fleets of electric vehicles, and the world-class public transport system were not mere symbols of economic growth, but the very engines of a modern civilization. This was not the poor China with a poor very population, it was a nation that had decisively arrived at a future of its own making.

**Innovation**

Our visit to a modern university campus was a direct immersion into this future. The experience was surreal and enlightening: high-fiving a robot dog capable of performing backflips and standing before a curved screen the size of a house were not just displays of technological prowess but indicators of a society investing heavily in its innovative capacity.

The pivotal moment, however, was academic. Attending a lecture by a distinguished professor of neurobiology and genetics revealed the sheer quality of education available. The intellectual rigor, the clarity of the presentation, and the access to cutting-edge research filled me with a sense of inspiration. Learning that the annual student housing rent was less than my monthly rent in the Netherlands highlighted a commitment to making this world-class education accessible. This combination of academic excellence, technological integration, and affordability was a powerful catalyst. It was this experience that directly solidified my decision to apply for a Master's degree at Peking University, transforming China in my mind from a subject of study into a leading platform for my own academic and professional development.

**The Dialogue and Geopolitical Analysis**

The formal proceedings of the China-Europe Youth Dialogue provided the intellectual architecture to understand the geopolitical context of my experiences. The conference featured an impressive roster of distinguished speakers, whose analyses were both sobering and illuminating.

Hearing from former European leaders like Mr. Pablo Iglesias Turrión, former Deputy Prime Minister of Spain; Mr. Grzegorz W. Kołodko, former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance of Poland; and Mr. Petr Drulák, former Deputy Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic provided a crucial European perspective that is often marginalized in mainstream discourse. They offered a geopolitical analysis of recent history that critiqued the unipolar world order and emphasized the rise of a

multipolar reality. Alongside them, Chinese scholars such as Mr. Zhao Rui, Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; Professor Zhang Yi, Academician of CASS; and Mr. Chang Jian, Deputy Director-General of the Department of European Affairs of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs articulated China's developmental journey and its vision for international relations based on mutual respect and non-interference.

The core message from both sides was unequivocal: the importance of EU-China relations for global development, for tackling existential challenges like climate change, and for ensuring we can live together in peace. A key learning point was the historical shift in the EU's official stance: from designating China a "strategic partnership" in 2003 to a "systemic rival" in 2019. This was widely framed by the speakers as an undesirable and dangerous cooling of relations. The consensus was clear: China is a civilizational giant whose re-emergence is a historical fact. It should be respected, engaged with cooperatively, and above all, never be confronted with hostility or the threat of war. We learned about the deliberate stages of China's development, from an agricultural to an industrial, and now to a service and robotics-based economy, a journey that commands not fear, but deep study.

**Culture and Nature**

Beyond the conference halls and campuses, the trip was a deep immersion into China’s profound cultural and natural heritage. In Beijing, the Forbidden City was not merely a tourist attraction but a monumental statement of an ancient, continuous, and sophisticated civilization. Its scale and artistry spoke to a historical depth that fundamentally challenges any notion of China as a nascent power.

This cultural richness was dynamic and diverse. An evening listening to live Tibetan music in a Beijing bar and meals enjoyed in the city's vibrant Islamic quarters showcased the multifaceted nature of Chinese society, directly countering the monolithic image often propagated abroad.

My travels before the official program began further enriched this picture. I hiked

the cloud-piercing peaks of the Huangshan and Huashan mountains, wandered the ancient walls of Xi'an, marveled at Shanghai's futuristic skyline, and drifted along the serene canals of Suzhou. The official program’s trip to Hangzhou, with its breathtaking West Lake adorned with water lilies, was a perfect. The professional photographers captured these moments with such beauty to inspire envy and curiosity back home.

**Conclusion and Recommendation**

My journey to China moved me from a position of having many questions to possessing a lived, firsthand understanding. The experience was a powerful validation of my critical approach to Western media and a testament to the transformative power of direct engagement. The "black propaganda" was replaced by the nuanced reality of a complex, dynamic, and hospitable nation.

I now strongly advise my friends, family, and any European with an open mind to visit China if they can. To witness its development, to be welcomed by the profound kindness of its people, to experience its cultural depth and natural beauty—this is the only way to build the mutual understanding our world desperately needs. For students in particular, I advocate looking beyond Western campuses and considering the immense opportunities for study and personal growth that Chinese universities offer.

The China-Europe Youth Dialogue provided me with more than a trip; it provided a new paradigm for understanding global affairs. It solidified my conviction that our collective future depends not on isolation and hostility, but on the rigorous, empathetic, and peaceful intellectual exchange that I was so privileged to experience. I am now not just an observer, but a committed advocate for this bridge of understanding, convinced that partnership with China is not a concession, but a necessity for a livable world. Therefore, I am actively pursuing a Master’s degree in China Studies at Peking University, seeking the deep academic foundation in policy and international relations required to contribute meaningfully to this essential partnership.

# Tara Kegl Callanan: A Tale of Two Cities - My Story from the China-Europe Youth Dialogue Conference*

The China-CEE institute selected 61 youth representatives from across Europe to participate in the "China-Europe Youth Dialogue: Experiencing China" event in order to enhance the understanding of China among European youth and strengthen exchanges and interactions between young people from China and Europe. It was hosted on the 11th to the 18th November 2025 in Hangzhou and Beijing. I was very excited by this extraordinary opportunity and applied immediately.

My journey began in Dublin Airport with a 10 hour flight to Beijing. Landing in Beijing gave me quite a culture shock as no one around me seemed to speak English, all the attendants carried devices that translated their words into text on screen. I was devastated to be parted with my portable charger that had been made in China, but apparently did not have a required certification to travel within country. Leaving it behind with the employees, I ran to catch my next flight, travelling from Beijing to Hangzhou.

Our group consisted of 61 youth representatives from 30 different countries, ranging from Middle Schoolers, to Post-Graduate students. Everyone was extremely friendly and welcoming, and eager to learn more about China. Some participants had never visited or learned about China, while some visited regularly and could communicate fluently with the natives around us. But something that joined us together is our desire to learn more about China.

This tale of two cities kicks with a guided visit to DEEP Robotics headquarters in Xihu District, a center of incredible technology innovation with all kinds of robots, varying from wheeled dog-like, to bipedal human-like. We were able to watch fascinating videos of what these robots were capable of, from scaling ledges, swimming, and jumping of heights. We also received a live demonstration with high fives, flips and

* Tara Kegl Callanan, Irish, Undergraduate of University College Dublin.

many other cool technical tricks which was very enjoyable, particularly as it was set in beautiful natural scenery.

After the visit to the Robot skills demonstration, we visited Westlake University and had the chance to listen to a lecture on genetics, specifically containing some really interesting insights on how ailments such as where the genes determining the presence of depression or early male pattern balding can be found in a mouse. While not all of us were in a scientific/biological field, I still found the topic fascinating. It showed us how scientific research is developing at an incredible pace.

**Zhejiang Financial College**

Our next location was Zhejiang Financial College. We sat down for lunch first, which gave us a chance to talk amongst ourselves, it was the first time I talked with some friends that I spent a lot of my trip with.

After our lunch we participated in a conference on European Youth Embracing Zhejiang, we were divided among tables and mixed with Chinese Students. This allowed us to think and work together to answer some questions, such as the advantages and disadvantages of online shopping and consumerism. We were able to bond over similarities between our cultures, and learn more about our di□erences. I learned about steps being taken in China to improve their sustainability, such as a really interesting app that was developed, “Ant Forest”, that shows you how much carbon your choices save, and allows you to both compete with your friends and plant real trees. I thought this was a particularly clever way to promote environmental consciousness, especially among young people.

A few students then serenaded us with a traditional Chinese piece played on the Guzheng, followed by a traditional Irish piece played on the fiddle by a fellow exchange participant from Galway. The Chinese instrument was a new experience for me and the di□erent aspects of Irish and Chinese traditional music was skilled and vibrant. This exchange of traditions was amazing to see and listen to, highlighting the importance of a bridge between cultures.

We got the chance to create our own Matcha tea, with traditional methods and

tools. It was a lovely process to take part in, from start to finish it was very involved, with every participant sharing a cup between 3-4 people and taking turns mixing the matcha in. We all got to draw a design on the foam at the end, as is traditional. This gave us a really nice chance to bond with other members of the Exchange, and also Chinese students.

To end the day we were brought to the Financial Museum, on the top floor of the Zhejiang Financial College, where we were able to explore the evolution of money across the globe. I thought it was quite interesting to follow how China moved from small physical coins to an almost completely cashless society. As someone unfamiliar with these systems, it was interesting to see how seamlessly digital payments such as Alipay and WeChat have integrated into everyday life in China. Adjusting to using these apps was a lot easier experience for me than I thought it might be, though it definitely helped that I had set all the apps up before my travels.

**ZJU-Hangzhou Global Scientific and Technological Innovation Centre**

On our second day in Hangzhou we visited the ZJU-Hangzhou Global Scientific and Technological Innovation Centre. This is a newly developed University campus that emphasises Innovation. It was created as a joint project between Hangzhou Municipal Government and Zhejiang University. It was a huge campus, with students needing to use mopeds just to traverse it. We were eager to visit the gift shop, giving all of us a chance to collect some souvenirs to bring home to family and friends. It was an a amazing visit overall, giving us the chance to see some of the positive creations that have already been made and will hopefully be implemented in the future to improve the worlds sustainability.

**Personal/Social Time**

That evening we had the chance to finally explore Hangzhou ourselves, a group of us walked down to Hefang Street and explored all the beautiful shops and street vendors, enjoying the rich and vivacious city around us. I took pleasure in taking the time to go through each shop, buying a few beautiful postcards on the way. It was a really nice change of pace from the busy days, and I’m glad I had the time to get to know the other

young adults on the trip, I think we really made some good friends for life on this trip.

**Farewell to Hangzhou**

Our last day in Hangzhou, we had the opportunity to visit the China National Silk Museum. It was amazing to learn about the traditional process of silk-making. We got to see many traditional robes, fans, and embroideries, and both the vibrant colours and intricacies were beautiful. I really enjoyed reading about how fashion has evolved throughout time and seeing some of the interesting styles that used to be worn.

We explored the area around the stunning West Lake. We travelled there with a guide and got to hear a folk story that was passed down through generations about a white snake goddess trapped in a tower, and her human lover. The sights were beautiful, and walking around the lake was an incredibly enjoyable experience, despite the many stares from both young and old. My favourite part was enjoying a freshly blitzed pear juice while sitting in the sun.

The day ended at the Hangzhou Grand Canal, another tourist opportunity with many adorable little shops and more incredible views.

**Bullet train to Beijing**

The next day we woke up early to reach the central train station. We travelled from Hangzhou to Beijing on a fast train, shortening our journey from over 12 hours to under 5. It was really interesting to travel on a train that reached speeds of 450 km/h, and being able to watch the landscape change around me was an added bonus. We saw green landscape become yellow and brown, and finally transform into high rise cities. By the time we reached Beijing, the freezing winds were quite a shock to the system in comparison to the beautiful sunny days in Hangzhou.

Having the rest of the day free after we checked in to our hotel, my friends and I went to visit the Palace Museum and both the Beihai and Jingshan parks. I can’t overemphasise how incredible this was, the views were inspirational and the culture all around us was beautiful. We then visited a dumpling spot I had found online, and loved it.

**China-Europe Youth Dialogue Conference**

Our final day in Beijing consisted of our last conference, taking place in the University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. We were privileged enough to receive speeches from Former Deputy Prime Ministers of Poland, Spain and of Foreign A□airs in the Czech Republic amongst many others. This whole conference was an amazing experience, especially as it was my first encounter with live translation aides. Live translation is an extremely interesting job and I was very impressed.

The forum after the conference was a very valuable activity as well. I took part in the third forum, Youth and the Future of China-Europe Cultural Exchange and Mutual Learning among Civilizations. Being able to hear from so different nationalities was a really fascinating experience, and I learned so much from both the Chinese students in the room, and European participants. I got the chance to add my own input to the conversation with an Irish perspective on China-Ireland/Europe relations, I really appreciated this opportunity and I hope I gave a unique insight to the other members of the forum.

Overall, this trip was an incredible experience, and I would recommend anyone who has a similar opportunity to grab hold of it with both hands. The culture you'll discover, language you'll learn, and connections you'll make are invaluable. In today's global world, a lack of dialogue between countries is one of the biggest mistakes to make, we all have so much we can learn from one another. Every single person I've met on this trip has been incredible and I hope I'm able to stay in contact with each one of them, and maybe even meet them again in the near future.

My advice for any future participants on similar trips, would be to make sure your power bank has the correct certification to travel within China, to organize all your apps and SIM cards ahead of time, research the weather of the city you're visiting, and most importantly prepare to put yourself out there and absorb as much culture as you possibly can. I cannot emphasize enough how much more fun you'll have and how much more you will get out of your trips if you do this.

非常感谢 (Thank you very much).

## Veira Cadahía Pablo: Youth, Innovation, and the Future of Eurasia*

Thanks to the collaboration between the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Zhejiang University, and Fundación Cátedra China, I had the opportunity to attend the China-Europe Youth Dialogue 2025, which took place in Hangzhou and Beijing from November 12 to 17.

During those days, a series of events were organized with the aim of showcasing to young Europeans from different academic and professional backgrounds the modernization and innovation of China, in one of the key locations for this process in the country: Hangzhou, the capital of the economically advanced Zhejiang Province, and the splendid capital of the Southern Song dynast —known at that time as Lin'an. Finally, the exchange concluded with a dialogue forum held at the CASS headquarters in Beijing, where discussions took place with young Chinese participants on shared topics of interest concerning China-Europe relations.

I will begin by discussing the part of the exchange that took place in Hangzhou.

The first visit of the program took place on Thursday, at the headquarters of DEEP Robotics, a company founded in 2017 that focuses on the production of highly durable quadruped robots capable of moving across almost any kind of terrain with apparent ease. In recent years, this tech company has been working on the development of anthropomorphic robots that can even operate in contact with water. It was particularly enlightening that we were given the opportunity to interact directly with the robots.

Next, we were taken to Westlake University, an innovative private university that opened only in 2018. This institution focuses on research in the fields of science and business. In its modern facilities, a professor gave us a lecture on new genetics studies they are conducting there in coordination with other foreign universities, such as those in Australia. It was particularly interesting to learn that they are trying to pinpoint exactly which parts of the nervous system in animals and humans activate the genes

* Veira Cadahía Pablo, Spanish, Phd Student/Junior Adviser of University of Santiago De Compostela And CáTedra China.

associated with depression, and which do not. In this way, more effective and less harmful antidepressant medications may be developed.

At the Zhejiang Financial College (ZFC), an institution where a significant number of China's bankers have been trained, a formal meeting was held with the organizers of this exchange program. We also took part in interactive activities and discussions on sustainable consumption, where we reached conclusions that could be useful for future projects, in addition to participating in a small tea workshop.

The last event of the day took place in the same institution, at its Financial Museum. This museum, opened in 2005, aims to present the history of money in China and the world across its 900 square meters and through more than 5,000 objects. Among its displays were rare ancient coins, including pieces from the Greek kingdoms of Central Asia.

On Friday we began the day at the Zhejiang University Hangzhou Global Scientific and Technological Innovation Center. This is another large, modern campus that was built in a very short period of time —it opened in 2019. We were shown the visitor center, where we had the opportunity to learn about some of the projects they are developing in materials science and microchips. In my view, these are very comfortable, excellently designed facilities that foster inspiration among the students and scientists who work there.

After having lunch at the hotel, we travelled by bus for two hours to visit a socialist village from the Mao era, where we were able to see preserved and reconstructed buildings that allowed us to understand what rural life was like during the Cultural Revolution. Afterwards, not far from there, we were shown Zhangwu village (Anji County, Huzhou), which still preserves its architectural essence from the Ming and Qing dynasties. This small and charming village was the home of Wu Changshuo (1844–1927), an artist celebrated for his masterpieces in poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal engraving.

On Saturday, the day was dedicated to learning about the history and monuments of Hangzhou. In the morning, we visited the National Silk Museum of China, which

preserves an excellent collection of garments from various Chinese dynasties, including the Sui. There are also textile fragments from the Han dynasty and even from the Warring States period. What impressed me the most was the detailed and historically informed life-sized reconstruction of a Han dynasty silk loom, which shows the remarkable level of technological development the Chinese had in such an early period. After the museum, we were given half an hour to see part of the famous West Lake of Hangzhou, an essential site in the cultural history of the former capital of the Southern Song. This body of water, measuring 6.39 square kilometers, is surrounded by forests, temples, pagodas and stupas, and was recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2011. It was here that renowned thinkers, poets and artists such as Bai Juyi (772–846) and Su Shi (1037–1101) found inspiration.

To end the day, we walked along a stretch of the Hangzhou section of the Grand Canal of China, a monumental engineering project begun in the Sui dynasty and crucial to China's historical development. In this area one can find traditional-style houses, numerous shops —including some specializing in high-quality handicrafts, temples, and the last remaining Ming dynasty bridge still standing over the canal.

However, although we were able to get a sense of the history and heritage of Hangzhou, I would have liked to have had a bit more time to explore such an important capital in China's cultural history. For example, it would have been wonderful to visit the replica of the Leifeng Pagoda and the ruins of the original, or the Zhejiang Provincial Museum to learn more about the region's cultural treasures. This would have given us a broader perspective on the traditional foundations upon which the modernization of Zhejiang Province was built, although scheduling such an extensive visit is understandably difficult.

Early on Sunday morning, we travelled to Beijing by high-speed train. Over the course of more than 1,000 km in five and a half hours, we were able to observe the rural landscape of China. We saw farmland, generally much smaller in size than that of the Spanish Meseta, villages of clustered houses, and cities emerging on the horizon with groups of high-rise buildings—often more than twenty stories tall—standing together

like forests. We also saw wind turbines, though spaced dozens of kilometers apart, unlike the aligned rows commonly found in Spain. What impressed me the most was the immense investment in infrastructure: multilayered fast-traffic highways built one above another, and the construction of another high-speed railway line running just a few hundred meters parallel to the one that was taking us to the capital.

The main event of the China-Europe Youth Dialogue 2025 was held the following day at the impressive facilities of CASS in the very center of the capital. The opening ceremony featured prominent figures such as the Vice President of CASS and Grzegorz Witold Kołodko, former Deputy Prime Minister of Poland and renown scholar. From Spain, the former Deputy Prime Minister Pablo Iglesias also took part. The speakers' addresses highlighted the enormous potential of closer cooperation between Chinese and European civilizations, encouraging the current generation of young people to become more actively involved in bringing our cultures closer together.

After lunch in a special building on the CASS campus, the participants were divided into four thematic groups to facilitate the exchange of ideas in smaller rooms. In my case, the topic was "Youth and the Future of China-Europe Relations", and the discussions were held at the CASS Academy of Marxism. In addition to Professor Grzegorz Witold Kołodko, several Chinese undergraduate and postgraduate students from the same institution joined us to share their perspectives, which made the session very dynamic and diverse.

Finally, after the breakout sessions, the closing ceremony took place in the CASS auditorium. It is worth highlighting the talent of the European participants who moderated or spoke throughout the event, contributing greatly to its success. I very much appreciated having the opportunity not only to visit the prestigious CASS, but also to engage in discussions on topics of shared interest for Eurasia with students and specialists from both China and Europe. I must admit that the visit and the event made me consider the idea of conducting research there, although being accepted by CASS is an extremely competitive and demanding process, fully in line with the institution's academic prestige in China and worldwide.

Although I was in Beijing for just over 24 hours, it was the city that impressed me the most during the entire trip. It is a monumental city with a remarkably well-preserved historical heritage. Along its kilometric and wide avenues stand the headquarters of ministries and other public institutions, giving you the real sense of being in the capital of the global power that is China. The city's architecture was solemn and retained a distinctive style that gave it great elegance. Based on my experience, the word that best describes the city is "imposing".

Regarding the organization of the entire exchange throughout the week, the level of detail, planning, and attention provided by the organizers deserves recognition, and I am especially grateful for the generous work of the young volunteers who accompanied and assisted us in Hangzhou. The hotels in both Hangzhou and Beijing were extremely comfortable. Although the exchange lasted barely a week, the organizers succeeded in showing us a significant part of both China's tradition and its modernization, all within an environment highly conducive to dialogue between cultures.

I have very fond memories of all my fellow participants during the trip. We not only shared good moments and experiences, but also different and highly enriching points of view. All of them came with strong academic and professional backgrounds, and events like this help the next generation of European leaders work toward a stable and mutually beneficial relationship between China and Europe.

To conclude, this exchange opened my mind to new ideas and inspired me to look for ways to become more involved in bringing Chinese and European civilizations closer together, so that both can address common challenges in a coordinated way and make the most of the benefits of mutual cooperation. Achieving this is a very complex and demanding task. However, this experience showed me that there is a well-educated and experienced generation of young people in both China and Europe who will undoubtedly help bring us closer and work for the common good in the coming years. I keep wondering how, five or ten years from now, this one-week CASS event may have contributed to the shared successes between China and Europe in which many of the participants will have played a part.

# About the Contributors

**Chen Siyang** is an Assistant Research Fellow in the Department of Central and Eastern Europe at the Institute of European Studies(IES), Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Her research focuses on Polish studies, China-CEEC cooperation, and China-Poland relations. She earned a B.A. in Polish Language and Literature from Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) in 2014 and an M.A. in Foreign Languages and Literatures from BFSU in 2017. She has published articles in leading Chinese newspapers, including *Guangming Daily*, *Chinese Social Sciences Today*, *Economic Daily*, and *China Daily*, and in academic journals such as *International Economic Review* and *Studies of Foreign Issues*. These publications have generated a positive response in both academic and public circles. For nine consecutive years, she has contributed to the *Annual Development Report of Europe*, the *Annual Report on the Development of Central and Eastern European Countries*, and the *Annual Report on Development of Poland*. She has also published in edited volumes and serial publications, including *European Language and Culture Studies*, *China-CEEC People to People Exchange: Past, Present and the Future*, and *Proceedings of the First National Symposium on Slavic Country and Area Studies*. She has led a CASS youth research project and other projects and served as a key team member on projects funded by the National Social Science Fund of China and the Ministry of Education.