

Reception for the Chinese New-Year on February 9th 2017 in Belgo-Chinese Chamber of Commerce)

Your Excellency,

Dear Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First and foremost, let me wish you a very happy New Year of the “Rooster” launched on 28th January last and I trust you will forgive me if I don’t venture out into the deep waters of the Chinese language to express my good wishes !

2017 is actually a “Fire” Rooster year, (every 12 years, according to the Chinese zodiac, there is rooster year, 2017 being a Fire Rooster year) associated with down-to earth-optimism and passion It seems to be an especially favourable year for debaters and negotiators, thus for tradesmen and politicians..... This is a rather comforting thought, it seems to me !

I would like to convey my deep appreciation for inviting me to this reception. Today we celebrate an event of great social, cultural and symbolic value, heralding a new beginning in Chinese society and I’m very glad you wish to share it with your Belgian friends !

This is indeed a fine opportunity for our countries to enhance their mutual regard and respect. Throughout the years, the many high level visits and missions on both sides have illustrated the excellent state of our bilateral relations in a vast number of areas.

Sino-Belgian relations owe a lot to the tireless efforts undertaken by the BCECC. You do not only concern yourself with smoothing the path of commercial relations and investments, you also encourage social encounters between Chinese and Belgian businessmen. You offer excellent services to those wishing to launch business strategies, helping them to realize their potential.

In December last, I met his Excellency Mr. Qu Xing the Chinese ambassador to Belgium who is here today.

Your Excellency,

I would like to pay tribute to your unrelenting belief in Belgium, country at the hub of the European Union". I greatly appreciate your view of Belgium as "a genetically inclusive, tolerant and open society" of "tremendous global influence". You note that, in fast-changing surroundings, it is hard to predict the danger of a terrorist attack, "continuing with normal life in society is another way to fight terrorism." "In this sense, terrorism attacks will not discourage investors."

I'm deeply grateful for these sincere and heartfelt words, spoken by an Ambassador of tremendous knowledge and great awareness of today's challenges Belgium is facing and its ability to deal with them.

I would like to call to mind a few highlights in Sino-Belgian relations over the last few years.

In October 2011, the H.R.H. Prince Philip, the present King led a highly successful commercial mission to China. The Chinese President H.E. Xi Jinping chose Belgium as a destination for an official visit to Belgium in March 2014 and in June 2015¹ (from June 20th to June 27th) H.R.H. King Philip and H.R.H. Queen Mathilde undertook a state visit to China.

Mr. Charles Michel, the Belgian Prime Minister visited China² at the end of October 2016, (visit was to have taken place on March 22nd 2016 but was adjourned because of the Brussels terrorist attacks), a tour qualified by Your Excellency (the Chinese ambassador to Belgium (H. E. Qu Xing) as a "further symbol that bilateral relations are being boosted to a "historic high" by leaders of both sides.

This visit marked the 45th anniversary of Sino-Belgian diplomatic relations, which started on 26th October 1971. Mr. Michel declared "that Belgium is glad to see the active trade and cultural exchanges

between Belgium and China, and is willing to expand cooperation with China in judiciary, investment, innovation, aviation, new energy, digital economy and infrastructure and under the "Belt and Road" framework, which aims to connect Asia, Europe and Africa. Firmly holding that developing a positive relationship with China conforms to the EU's own interests, Belgium is committed to promoting the establishment of an EU-China relationship featuring high-level mutual trust and mutually beneficial cooperation". (Europe-China Daily.com , 26.10.2016).

In a few months' time (March or April 2017), a delegation of the Belgian Senate, I have the honor to lead, will visit China. It will not be my first journey in China. I am glad to rediscover the wonderful opportunity of enjoying the social graces of Chinese society and the many delights of its culture

Belgium is proud to have in its midst a considerable Chinese community mainly occupied in restauration and catering. We all feast from time to time on the delicious and exquisitely spiced (or palate-pleasing) Chinese cuisine but we also enjoy the kindness and self-effacing courtesy of our hosts when we go out for a "Chinese" meal.

Our Chinese community of course also celebrates their New Year in an enchantingly colorful way.

I would like to attract your attention to the many Chinese companies established in Belgium including Anbang, Geely-Volvo, Cosco, Hainan Airlines, Huawei, ZTE (Chinese multinational telecommunications equipment and systems company), Bank of China and ICBC (Industrial and Commercial Bank of China)

There are some 300 Belgian companies based in China and active in various sectors which makes our country one of the frontrunners of the European Union.

Our exports to China are at the moment at the level they reached in 2010. Belgium's export of goods to China amounted in 2015 to a total value of 6,78 billion EURO. China is our ninth most important partner worldwide for our exports. Belgium imported goods from China for a total value of 14,67 billion EURO. China is Belgium's sixth most important supplier.

In 2015, Belgian export to China consisted among others of chemical and pharmaceutical products, transport equipment, base metals, machinery and plastics, food and agricultural product such as beer and chocolate. Belgium is mainly importing the following products from China: machinery and equipment, textile and base metals.

Belgium is the seventh trade partner of China (after Spain) within the European Union. The total trade in goods between China and the EU amounted in 2015 to 520 billion EURO. The European Union is China's most important trading partner.

I would like to stress the importance of Chinese-Belgian university programs for the exchange of young researchers and students. These undertakings may lay the groundwork for future industrial and commercial cooperation. Their combined talents will ensure we make the most of our future economic and commercial relations,

I am also highly in favour of promoting internships in companies for our young people. I am sure this kind of exchange creates an important added value for the up-and-coming talent and the entrepreneurs and I am very much looking forward to the conclusion of a bilateral agreement in this field.

This brings me to the subject of international trade and globalization. In this respect, I would like to refer to the trailblazing address of H.E. Mr. Xi Jin Ping, President of the People's Republic of China at the World Economic Forum at Davos on January 17th last. The President presented an inspired vision of the future of our planet and pleaded for an enlightened globalization ensuring that injustice and inequality are kept at bay.

Furthermore, the president urged all signatories of the Paris Agreement of December 12th 2015 on climate change (entered into force on November 4th 2016.) to stick to it rather than walk away.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you all have gathered, there is a lot at stake. We are at a crossroads-: shall we try to build a responsible and controlled global world order or let things drift into global disorder ? Both our countries, it seems to me, are willing take globalization proudly but prudently into their stride.

I would like to end my speech on a tender even “cuddly” note. I am referring to the Gentle Giants who were entrusted by China to the Belgian Pairi Daisa in 2014 for an exceptionally long period 15 years. I can assure you we have all fallen in love with those magnificent animals. In the meantime, the panda family was blessed with a baby, born in 2016, the year we celebrated our “45 years of diplomatic relations” ! This happy occasion, a precious gift from nature, is indeed a lovely symbol of our deep-rooted cordial bonds.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While your pandas have settled in Belgium, already one Belgian footballer has found his way to China. Who knows what the future holds in store.

I would like to invite everyone to raise their glass to the People's Republic of China and to the season of festive exuberance and merrymaking. May the New Year bring you happiness and prosperity and may our friendship continue to blossom and deepen in the years ahead....

Christine DEFRAIGNE

Speaker of the Belgian Senate