

## **China's People-to-people Diplomacy and Its Importance to China-EU Relations: A Historical Institutionalism Perspective**

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**Abstract:** People-to-people exchange has become a heated topic of the Chinese foreign policy. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, China has established people-to-people dialogues with the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, France and Russia. In 2012, China and the EU established a high-level dialogue for people-to-people exchange, making people-to-people exchange the third pillar of China-EU relations. However, China is not a newcomer to people-to-people exchanges with Europe. Why does China launch the people-to-people diplomacy? Is it a plus or a must for China as well as for China-EU relations? The author reviews the history and current situation of China's people-to-people exchange and investigates China's motivations behind the policy. Using the historical institutionalism as an approach, this paper argues that people-to-people diplomacy is a key component of the contemporary Chinese foreign policy towards Europe. China has long been an unequal counterpart to Europe since the 1840s. After the development of bilateral political and economic cooperation in the past four decades, people-to-people diplomacy is the last part that China needs to finish in order to regain equal status with Europe. In addition, it is also a step towards realising the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation".

**Keywords:** Chinese Foreign Policy, China-EU Relations, People-to-People Diplomacy, Historical Institutionalism

### **Introduction**

Speaking of diplomacy, the first scenario that comes into mind is usually two national leaders shaking each other's hands and smiling to the press, which is formal, political, elegant, and far away from the general public. However, diplomacy is far more than just dialogues between national leaders or international summit for foreign ministers. Among all the methods, people-to-people diplomacy has been one of the heated topics especially since Joseph Nye defined "soft power" and pointed out its importance to foreign affairs (Nye, 2004). All major powers in the world have been devoted to the spreading of their soft power through people-to-people exchanges including the People's Republic of China and the European Union (EU).

People-to-people diplomacy, a pathway of public diplomacy, has been widely used when there are obstacles to establish hard diplomacy. People-to-people diplomacy used to be a complementary method to hard diplomacy such as political dialogue between government officials, economic relations between nations and corporations and military practices between

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allies. It refers to two or more individuals having a conversation in an effort to further understand what they have in common, as well as developing mutual respect for their respective differences (Brown, 2002). This approach of soft diplomacy includes various forms such as cultural events, academic exchange, and sports competitions. However, it substitutes hard diplomacy as the first choice under certain circumstances when hard diplomacy cannot be conducted. Examples include South and North Korea's reunion of family members (Bae, 2011), Cross Taiwan Strait economic negotiations (Hickey, 1994) and US-Iran interactions on topics other than nuclear issues (Chehabi, 2001).

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, China has been a major player on the international platform and an active one to use people-to-people diplomacy. Five generations of Chinese top leaders from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping all attach importance to people-to-people diplomacy in Chinese foreign affairs. Various institutions have been established since the founding of the New China in 1949 to conduct people-to-people exchange. Before the 1970s, these institutions were mainly used to handle the Cross Strait relationship with Taiwan and relations with other Communist countries. After China launched the Reform and Opening-up, these institutions have been expanded to cover a larger scale. Along with the changing of the international structure, China needs to master people-to-people approach in order to survive in the emerging multipolar world.

The EU is an important partner which China wants to get closer to through people-to-people diplomacy. If we take the EU economy as a whole, it is the largest economy in the world followed by the United States and China as the largest economies of a single country. The diplomatic bilateral relationship was established in 1975 and celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2015. Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a milestone visit to the EU's headquarters in Brussels in 2014, which was the first time that a Chinese President visited the EU's headquarters. The visit symbolises that China-EU relations are better than ever. The Chinese government has added people-to-people diplomacy as a "third pillar" to the China-EU strategic partnership along with the High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue ("first pillar") and the High-Level Strategic Dialogue ("second pillar") (European Commission, 2012). Although the bilateral relationship between China and the EU has been discussed widely among scholars, people-to-people diplomacy is a new topic for the academic (Meng, 2006; Balducci and Men, 2010; Pan, 2010; Chen, 2012; Smith, 2014). The importance of people-to-people diplomacy in the China-EU relationship may need more attention (Xinhua, 2015b).

This paper tries to investigate the motivations behind China's people-to-people diplomacy using historical institutionalism. It is hard to understand the current China-EU relations without taking the historical background into consideration. This paper consists of three main parts. The first part briefly introduces the historical institutionalism as a theoretical approach in political science. The second part reviews China-EU relations from a historical institutionalism perspective and investigates China-EU people-to-people exchange since the Ming Dynasty with a special focus on the development of China's people-to-people diplomacy from the 1950s to the present. The third part examines China's driven powers of people-to-people diplomacy in the twenty-first century based on historical institutionalism in order to reveal its importance and the potential.

### **A Historical Institutionalism Perspective**

Historical institutionalism is a major approach in institutionalism which has been widely used in political science since the 1950s. Different from other schools of institutionalism, historical institutionalists "analyse macro contexts and hypothesizes about the combined effects of institutions and processes rather than examining just one institution or process at a time" (Pierson and Skocpol, 2002: 696). In other words, historical institutionalists take history into consideration when conducting research. In addition, they argue that all actions should be explained by all kinds of institutions and processes, not only the states or elites, which are the method of rational choice institutionalism and other schools of institutionalism (Shepsle, 2008).

Historical institutionalism consists of two major parts, history and institutions. First, what is the role of history in historical institutionalism? Historical institutionalists argue that history always provides the grand context to all topics. Historical institutionalists take history seriously, "as something much more than a set of facts located in the past" (Pierson and Skocpol, 2002: 698). They also argue that to "understand an interesting outcome or set of arrangements usually means to analyze processes over a substantial stretch of years, maybe even many decades or centuries" (Ibid.). Without history, from their perspective, argument is unconvincing. Therefore, using historical institutionalism always refers to taking several decades of history into consideration (Ibid.).

Second, what is institution? Historical institutionalism has loosened the definition of institutions. In this approach, institutions can take the shape of a formal bureaucratic structure but also an ideology or an informal custom (Pierson and Skocpol, 2002). For example, the American government can be regarded as an institution. The traditional thoughts of the Chinese scholars can also be regarded as institutions. In emphasizing the participation of all kinds of groups, not just elites or states, historical institutionalism offers a dynamic approach to history. “Historical institutionalists, meanwhile, probe uneasy balances of power and resources, and see institutions as the developing products of struggle among unequal actors” (Ibid.: 706).

Historical institutionalism has been widely used to investigate domestic politics, especially American politics. John Mark Hansen’s *Gaining Access: Congress and the Farm Lobby (1919-1981)*, Theda Skocpol’s *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* and Stephen Skowronek’s *The Politics Presidents Make* have made great contributions to the development of historical institutionalism (Hansen, 1991; Theda, 1995; Skowronek, 1997). It has also been used in other countries’ and continents’ politics, such as Peter A. Hall’s book *Governing the Economy: The Politics of State Intervention in Britain and France*, Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier’s *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* and Thomas Ertman’s *Brith of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Early Modern Europe* (Hall, 1986; Collier & Collier, 1991; Ertman, 1997).

Historical institutionalists have raised and highlighted the idea of “critical juncture”. Collier and Collier defined critical juncture “as a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or in other unites of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies” (1991: 29). They also stressed the importance of specifying the duration of the critical juncture as well as the effecting historical legacies and highlighted the timing of the critical juncture, in relation to other developments, being consequential to subsequent politics (Ibid.: 31-34). Critical juncture is key to the explanation of historical institutionalism since “they may be the initial markers of path-dependent processes” (Fioretos, Falleti and Sheningate, 2015: 10).

Historical institutionalism argues that powers can change from unbalanced to balanced or vice versa, which is exactly how China views the China-EU relations. (Pierson and Skocpol, 2002). Since the EU consists of the UK, France, Germany, Italy and many other European countries which have invaded the “Central Kingdom” in the Qing Dynasty, China regards the economic, political and military development of itself as steps towards an equal China-EU partnership again. The twenty-first century is a “critical juncture” for China to regain its dignity in the bilateral relations.

People-to-people diplomacy is not only based on elite politics but rather on all kinds of groups of people, which is exactly what historical institutionalists point out in their theory. It is conducted by the general public in the society of globalisation, owing to the development of modern technology and transportation. Nevertheless, the importance of people-to-people diplomacy is no less than political and economic interactions in national foreign policy. Impacting the life of the general public, people-to-people diplomacy can accelerate the forming of public opinion on certain issues.

### **People-to-People Diplomacy: Not New to China**

#### *China's People-to-People Diplomacy since Mao*

People-to-people diplomacy is not a new approach in the foreign affairs of the People's Republic of China. Back in the 1950s, soon after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, President Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai regarded people-to-people diplomacy as an important component in China's foreign affairs because China was weak in political and economic power. Meanwhile, as a newly born country at that time, China wanted to gain international recognition as quickly as possible. People-to-people diplomacy was one of the few measures it could afford. However, due to the historical background of the Cold War, the people-to-people diplomacy of China then was mainly targeted at African countries and the Communist countries between the 1950s and 1970s (Chen, 2005; Kobayashi et al, 2011).

In order to handle people-to-people diplomacy between China and other countries, institutions were established soon after the founding of the New China. One of the most famous cases is the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA) which was established in 1949. It was led by the then Premier and Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai and was the first organisation in

China in charge of people-to-people exchanges. It also carries out research on international affairs and foreign policies. Today the CPIFA is still one of the major actors in Chinese public diplomacy. According to China's former State Councillor Tang Jiaxuan, the CPIFA should "know more about situation in grass roots and play the role of a bridge between the people and the government" (Xinhua, 2004).

In the 1970s, people-to-people diplomacy played a key role in the normalisation of the bilateral relationship between China and the US. In 1971, during the World Table Tennis Championship held in Nagoya in Japan, Glenn Cowan, an American player missed his own team's bus and accidentally got on the bus full of Chinese players. Both Glenn and the Chinese players were embarrassed until one of the Chinese players, Zhuang Zedong, stood up and welcomed Glenn to have a seat. (DeHart, 2013; BBC, 2013) This dramatic encounter is called "Ping-Pong Diplomacy" and is a household story in China now. It paved the way for the American President Nixon's historic visit to China the following year (Zhu, 2015).

After Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening-up Policy launched in the late 1970s, China's people-to-people diplomacy has entered a new era. Due to the trade with western countries and investment from foreign corporations, the Chinese economy started to boom. More government funding could be allocated to conduct people-to-people diplomacy while some non-governmental organisations also appeared to facilitate people-to-people exchanges (Wang, 2013). When the Cold War ended in the 1990s, the international environment turned to be more favourable to China's development. Since China's population and potential as the world's largest market, the US, Japan and European countries needed to understand China as well as China's curiosity to the outside world. Chinese people-to-people diplomacy expanded from Communist countries and developing countries to the whole world (Ibid.).

As mentioned above, a lot of institutions have been built in China in order to conduct people-to-people diplomacy. Besides the CPIFA, some other institutions have been established after the launch of the Opening and Reform Policy. These institutions and organisations participating in people-to-people diplomacy include the Confucius Institutes and the China Scholarship Council as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the National Bureau of Tourism and Ministry of Education as government bodies. Both NGOs and government bodies are actors nowadays in Chinese people-to-people exchanges. Foreign NGOs are also

coming to China for certain targets. For example, Greenpeace has established a China office and contributed to the environment protection and sustainable development of China (Greenpeace China, 2015).

In recent decades, China has stressed the importance of people-to-people diplomacy in China's foreign affairs. During the last administration led by Hu Jintao, China attached importance to "non-governmental diplomacy" so as to "give full play to the advantages of the people-to-people exchanges with other countries" (Xinhua, 2004). China has tried its best to host the 2001 Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) conference in Shanghai, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the 2010 Shanghai World Expo and the 2013 Nanjing Youth Olympic Games, thus encouraging more foreigners to visit China and better understand the country. The number of international students coming to China to have a degree or short-term study is increasing substantially while Chinese students have already become one of the largest groups of overseas students in the US, the United Kingdom, France and many other European countries (Jiang, 2014).

The new Chinese leadership has inherited the tradition of foreign policy to further develop people-to-people diplomacy. For example, High-Level People-to-People Dialogue has been established as a major compound of strategic partnership between China and the United Kingdom, China and France, China and Germany as well as China and the EU (Zhang, 2012; Xinhua, 2015a; Xi, 2014a; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2015). In July 2015, Beijing was named as the host city of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games, thus becoming the first city to host both summer and winter Olympics (International Olympic Committee, 2015). Although the bidding result arouses controversies (Capps, 2015; Pramuk, 2015), it reveals China's ambition and confidence to use people-to-people diplomacy as a major tool to influence the world in the future. As the Chinese President Xi Jinping mentioned in a speech: "we should strengthen inter-civilisation exchanges and mutual learning" and "people-to-people diplomacy represents the most profound force in promoting such exchanges and mutual learning" (Xi, 2014).

#### *People-to-People Exchanges between China and Europe*

When discussing China-EU relations, one should not neglect the historical background of China-Europe relations, especially the interactions since the 1840s. For the Chinese people,

China-Europe relations have long been unequal. The European powers used military power and ordered China to open to the west. The Opium War and the separations of Chinese territories such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, etc. are major historical events in China's contemporary history. Even after the end of WWII, these problems were not solved. Hong Kong and Macau were handed over by the British and Portuguese authorities at the end of the twentieth century. Yet, Taiwan still remains a major problem in Chinese politics and foreign affairs.

China-EU has established bilateral relations for four decades. In 1975, the European Community (EC) and China built up formal bilateral diplomatic relations. Since then, China and the EC/EU have been cooperating in numerous areas including politics, economy, trade, technology, education, climate change, etc., and have achieved great success owing to both parties' efforts (EEAS, 2015). Besides, although China experienced leadership change from 2012 to 2013 and the EU from 2014 to 2015, both China and the EU's new administrations attach great importance to their bilateral relationship (Ibid.). After the new Chinese President Xi Jinping took office, he has reformed China's foreign policy strategy and made China-EU relations as important as China-US, China-Russia and China-neighbouring countries relations. His historic visit to the headquarters of the EU in Brussels in 2014 symbolises that China-EU relations have never been better.

People-to-people diplomacy is not a newcomer to China-EU relations. Back in the seventeenth century, early Ming Dynasty China and early modern Europe have already communicated via people-to-people diplomacy (Zhang, 2014; Jiang, 2015). Hundreds of European missionaries came to China and brought modern knowledge and technology to the dynasty. However, the Chinese people did not embrace the European culture until they lost the Opium War in 1842 against the British. Concessions were built afterwards in major cities such as Shanghai, Tianjin and Qingdao. The Chinese people started to have direct people-to-people exchanges with the Europeans. Some of the European cultures and languages successfully integrated into local cultures and languages especially in Shanghai, which is the main reason why it became the economic centre and most international city of China (Xu, 2014).



Yet, during the colonisation century from the end of the First Opium War (1840-1842) to the end of WWII, Chinese people struggled to regain independence and terminate the colonisation. The UK, France, Germany, Italy and other European countries were interested in China's raw materials, cultural heritages and large market to export their own goods. Economics and trade were the motivations behind the European colonisation. During WWII, China was an ally of the Anti-Fascist countries. Without its resistance in Asia, the former Soviet Union Red Army would have needed to invest more troops in the Far East against Japan. If this had been the case, it would have led to a possible defeat of the Allies in Europe, resulting in a longer period of war time for European countries. After the two world wars, all European countries eventually gave up their concessions in Mainland China.

The end of the civil war of China in 1949 changed China's relationship with the European countries dramatically. When the New China was founded in 1949, all European countries still had diplomatic relations with the Republic of China's government in Taipei. France was the first major European country to recognise the People's Republic and establish diplomatic relationship with it under President Charles de Gaulle's command. But the ideology fight between the Communism led by the Soviet Union and Capitalism led by the US divided China and European countries into two camps, respectively. The "Iron Curtain" between the East and the West prevented the two continents from communication. This situation changed after the People's Republic became the legitimate representative of China in the United Nations in 1971. The European Community also established diplomatic relationship with China in 1975 which encouraged more European countries to follow.

After launching the Opening and Reform Policy in the 1980s, China has welcomed overseas investment, especially from European countries and corporations. The normalisation of political relations between China and European countries paved way for economic and trade cooperation. European investment and corporations started to enter the Chinese market while Chinese products began to be sold to Europe. During the past 30 years, the trade between China and European markets have boosted. Almost all major European corporations have started their businesses in China. In recent years, Chinese businessmen started to buy European companies due to the economic and Euro crisis. The investment is moving towards a more balanced and healthy status. In 2003, China and the EU upgraded their relations and entered into a strategic partnership. Nonetheless, the reality is not as sound as the appearance.

Economy and trade have been emphasized while other areas' potential are still underestimated (Hoslag, 2011).

The strategic partnership's main question is: politics, economy, trade, technology, and then what? Although China and the EU have maintained a relatively healthy relationship in recent years and celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2015, there are few fields which China and the EU could use to improve their bilateral relations substantially in the future. In political and economic areas, China and the EU are already Strategic Partners and have become each other's most important trading partner. Yet, the EU has still neither recognised China's marketing economy status, nor lifted sanctions on arms embargo. In other fields, such as military and technology, cooperation between China and the EU has been limited to a low level due to the sensitivity of these areas. Therefore, both sides are eager to find a new way to improve their bilateral relations and people-to-people exchange is the most doable measure.

People-to-people diplomacy is a new and maybe the only channel for both China and the EU to improve their relations further. China as the main economic engine of the world is playing a more and more important role in international politics. However, there are still conflicts between the Western world and China on several issues such as human rights, rule of law and political system. China regards the Western opinion on these issues towards China are bias (Xinhua, 2016). People-to-people diplomacy is a smart way to avoid leaving the impression of being assertive and ambitious. The EU sees itself as a normative power in the world (Manners, 2002; Diez, 2005). Its core values are its power and attractiveness to other regions. Trying to become an international normative power, the EU has to create more contact with countries outside of Europe. People-to-people exchange is an effective measure to influence the growing Chinese civil society.

### **Plus or Must: Motivations of China's People-to-People Diplomacy**

Before drawing a conclusion on whether people-to-people diplomacy is a plus or must for Chinese diplomacy, the author would like to define "plus" and "must". It is necessary to set up a standard before judgement. If China does not include people-to-people diplomacy into its future interaction with the EU as well as other countries, and China's relations with the EU and other countries can still be improved, then people-to-people diplomacy is a "plus" to China. If using only the current measures in its diplomatic toolbox without people-to-people

diplomacy, China will encounter difficulty in dealing with bilateral or multilateral relations, or domestic problems and appeals may arise, then people-to-people diplomacy is a “must” to China. It is worth to point out that both the international and regional situation as well as domestic elements should be taken into consideration.

China is facing a new international structure with two characteristics: a multipolar world and a rising Asia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the international structure has long been described as “unipolar”, where the United States is the only superpower worldwide. However, along with the economic development of China and other emerging markets, the structure is changing gradually. The five BRICS countries, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, are joining the list of the world’s largest economies. Other fast growing economies include Turkey, Indonesia, Nigeria, etc. Among these developing countries, there is no doubt that the significance of China to the world economy and trade is vital. Europe, the US and even other BRICS countries are depending on China’s import and export. Meanwhile, China could no longer be a free rider of the international order and avoid shouldering international responsibility. Its foreign policy focus should not be limited to Asia or neighbouring countries but rather the entire world. The second characteristic is an intense regional situation especially between China and neighbouring countries on the South China Sea. In recent years, Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam and other countries are in conflict with China over territory on the South China Sea. Although China has maintained harmonious relationships with South Korea, Russia and Central Asian countries, the conflicts in the South prevent China from becoming the dominant power in East Asia. Also, the US is backing its allies in territory claims against China which has worsened the regional situation from the Chinese perspective (Mazza, 2015).

Borrowing from the historical institutionalism, a “critical juncture” is faced by China. In response to such an international and regional environment, is people-to-people diplomacy a plus or a must for China? There have already been discussions among Chinese scholars (Wang, 2008; Zhao, 2015). This paper argues that it is a must, especially when China needs to deal with the ever deteriorating neighbouring relations. There are four main reasons for China to take people-to-people diplomacy as a necessary measure in foreign affairs.

First, people-to-people diplomacy is a good measure to improve China’s international image. In the past, China tried to use political or economic power to improve its image but in vain.

For example, China has sent more soldiers to participate in the United Nations peacekeeping troops than any other countries. However, this contribution has hardly been mentioned or appreciated by the international society. Thus, China needs new methods to reach the goal, in this case, to improve its national image. People-to-people exchange provides China with a new and smarter method, exporting the Chinese culture in a soft way. In recent years, China has tried its best to host international events such as the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the 2010 Shanghai World Expo and the 2014 Nanjing Youth Olympic Games. Holding these eye-catching international events, China has attracted hundreds of thousands of foreign people to visit it. In addition, China has not only held events inside its territory but also overseas. In the recent decade, China has held Chinese language year or cultural year in other countries such as Russia, the United Kingdom and France with the support from the local government. In practice, these activities act as “institutions” in exporting Chinese culture, language and history to the general public via people-to-people exchanges.

Second, people-to-people diplomacy is a complementary part to the current Chinese foreign policy. As one of the major powers in the world, China needs plenty of tools in its diplomacy toolbox. People-to-people should be one of the tools since almost all major powers have been using it for a long time. Before the “Ping-Pong Diplomacy” and the normalisation of the China-US relationship, people-to-people diplomacy was only conducted between China and non-western countries and mainly African countries. Since the 1980s, China has had much more contact with the outside world. Its diplomatic tools are also transferring from politics and ideology to economics and trade. Becoming key economic partners of almost all countries in the world and the largest exporter, China has become more confident when dealing with negotiations. Yet, the economic growth of China is very difficult to remain on a high level. It needs to find another way when it faces the “new normal” of economic growth (Xinhua, 2015c). Therefore, enhancing the influence of people-to-people diplomacy in Chinese foreign affairs is vital in order to diversify the Chinese diplomacy toolbox.

Third, people-to-people diplomacy could influence the future generations of both China and the world. People-to-people exchanges involve activities which are mainly targeted at young people, such as academic exchange and international tourism. For example, more and more international students are coming to China to study. However, compared to Chinese students in the EU and the US who mainly study degree programs, international students in China are

normally enrolled in short-term programmes such as language programmes and culture programmes (Ministry of Education of China PR, 2015). Although it is effective for them to increase their interest in China and acquire basic knowledge about China, this is far from the idea of actually getting them to understand China better. Instead of Chinese language and culture, learning about politics, economic and society would be more useful to them. Through people-to-people diplomacy, the younger generations could acquire more information about China and not be biased due to the influence of western media alone. Again, using historical institutionalism, both short and long term study programmes could be regarded as “institutions” here. If China wants to change its image in the world, it needs to cultivate the next generations when they are still forming their impression of the international society.

Last but not least, people-to-people diplomacy between China and the EU could help the Chinese people have higher recognition towards the governing party. As mentioned above, people-to-people diplomacy is conducted by the general public. Hence, it is easier for them to form public opinion when they are participants of the diplomacy activities. The Chinese government uses its strong economic and political power to influence Europe. For example, most major European international airports, including Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris, Frankfurt Airport and Schipol Airport in Amsterdam, all provide customer services in Chinese. All of these measures can act as institutions and influence the Chinese people’s opinion towards its own country and government. Therefore, people-to-people diplomacy between China and the EU not only has impact on the European countries and people but also on the domestic society. Comparing the interaction experiences of past generations, most of the Chinese people nowadays would agree that the international prestige of China has grown significantly and a more equal partnership between China and the EU has appeared.

For the new generation of Chinese leaders, adding people-to-people diplomacy to the Chinese diplomatic strategy can complement its toolbox. It is not just a plus to the traditional diplomacy but a necessary new method that the government should employ in order to improve China’s image and provide more diplomatic options. After the new administration took office in 2012, new institutions of people-to-people diplomacy have been established. The most eye-catching institution is the high-level people-to-people dialogue between China and the EU. Since the China-EU relations have been upgraded in Chinese foreign strategy as well as the importance of people-to-people exchange in the three-pillar system of the strategic

partnership, China-EU relations will focus more on people-to-people exchanges in the near future.

### **Conclusion**

This paper reviews the development of people-to-people exchanges in Chinese history and also investigates its significance in current relations with the EU. China is not a newcomer to the technique of people-to-people diplomacy. Back in the early days of the new China, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai have paved way for future people-to-people exchanges. People-to-people exchanges have played a vital role in China's foreign affairs. However, comparing with political, military and economic measures, people-to-people diplomacy's effectiveness has been underestimated. Until recent decades, China reconsidered its international strategy and valued the importance of people-to-people exchanges. When dealing with strategic partnership with the EU, High-Level People-to-People Diplomacy has been established to boost bilateral cooperation in culture, education and youth. It even becomes the "third pillar" of the strategic partnership. In the near future, new policies and initiatives in people-to-people exchanges between China and the EU will accelerate the cooperation process.

Facing a multipolar international structure, China has to use people-to-people diplomacy and cooperate with the EU. It is no longer the era when countries competed with each other by ideology. Rather, politics, economics and people-to-people exchanges are measures more commonly used. People-to-people diplomacy is a good choice for China to improve its neighbouring environment and images abroad. In addition, since China has taken the EU as a partner to balance the power of the US, it needs people-to-people exchanges alongside political and economic dialogues to influence the European people.

Under the new leadership, both China and the EU have great potential for closer bilateral cooperation in economic and security issues. However, beyond the economic and political aspect, the need for mutual understanding and further cooperation in other fields, such as higher education, energy and environment, and civil societies, still exists. People-to-people exchange is a good way for both sides to have deeper understanding of each other and narrow the gap caused by misunderstandings in the past. If this "third pillar" could be strengthened, a more healthy and fruitful China-EU strategic partnership is foreseeable in the near future.

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