



CHINA IN CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

## Mixing business and politics

The CCP's influence networks in Brussels

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## Executive summary

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) influence activities targeting decision-making élites in Brussels, the centre of EU and Belgian politics, exploit a grey area between diplomacy and espionage, avoiding media and law enforcement scrutiny. This study explores little-known PRC-aligned entities in Brussels to show how the use of low-key proxies allows CCP agencies to cultivate Brussels stakeholders and build PRC-aligned narratives as the background of policy debates.

CCP influence operations in Brussels have no single vehicle. We tackle their complexity adopting Weber's rhizomatic approach, originally applied to the Swiss case. We traverse ramified personal and institutional links starting from one prominent actor — the Belgium-China Chamber of Commerce (BCECC) — to identify others that stand out for their connectedness to Brussels and PRC entities. From BCECC's business promotion focus, links lead to clusters of organisations at the intersections of business and politics — through the One Belt One Road Committee, a grouping of MEPs that survived the demise of the China Friendship Group — and of academia and policy think tanks — through the Brussels Academy for European Studies (BACES), supported by PRC and Belgian universities.

Navigating this rhizome uncovers partnerships with PRC party-state agencies, often resembling their known operations elsewhere. BCECC, e.g., is but one node in a global network of partners of the state-controlled China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT). Other PRC agencies linked to this network include united front groups, propaganda organs such as state media and Confucius Institutes, the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), and the Ministry of State Security (MSS), China's main civilian intelligence agency. While the network's business and academic focuses reflect themes of contemporary CCP influence work, it institutionally links back to CCP-friendly organisations established in the Mao era. Our rhizome thus grows from the CCP's external influence apparatus, rather than as opportunistic local actors.

The impact of these agencies' work relies on their local partners' position as legitimate sources of local China expertise. BCECC-linked entities have conducted exchanges with PRC's organs with an official mandate to represent EU and Belgian interests. A cluster of organisations in this network, anchored in academia, cooperates with narrative-shaping institutions such as the College of Europe, an international relations school, and the Egmont Institute, Belgium's main foreign policy think tank. Through this rhizome, CCP influence organs thus leverage the interests of Brussels stakeholders — in business, academia, politics and the civil service — to shape Europe's policy options into alignment with the PRC's goals.

**Cover picture:** *The Mayor of Brussels celebrating the EU-China Tourism Year and the Chinese New Lunar Year in 2018.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>“Europe poised to receive more Chinese tourists”, Xinhua, 25th June 2019.



## Disclaimer

This paper uses open-source information in Chinese and other languages to describe activities undertaken by a set of organisations and individuals in Europe and China, as reported by the sources cited. While it is argued that some of these activities by organisations and individuals may directly or indirectly benefit CCP influence operations, this paper makes no allegation that any of these activities are necessarily illegal, improper, ill-intentioned or politically motivated. The core of the research presented in this paper was chiefly conducted between May and October 2020 and does not represent the views of the author's past or current employers.

## 0 Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP, 中国共产党) objectives to maintain its power at home and to enshrine its legitimacy abroad motivate its use of a broad range of influence activities whose success relies on a network of centralised and decentralised political bodies. The People's Republic of China's (PRC) influence effort to expand its global footprint involves activities that range from the spread of disinformation narratives to information suppression, as well as the use of economic incentives and disincentives, and any means enabling access to democratic decision-making processes. Understanding this threat requires, beyond studying the activities themselves, viewing in the context of interactions between China's central institutions and their network of proxy organisations located abroad.

### 0.1 Growing concerns over Chinese influence operations

The disinformation and manipulation involved in China's "mask" and "vaccine diplomacy" during the COVID-19 pandemic helped bring attention to the PRC's influence operations in foreign countries. These operations take place in a context where the PRC, now more than ever, promotes itself as a global and normative power and as the guardian of multilateralism, while the United States has lacked the diplomatic capacity to lead on the international stage.

At the European level, this growing awareness translates into a tougher attitude from decision-makers. European discourse on China is shifting towards a more assertive approach, recognising the PRC's global aspirations and acknowledging the existence of the Chinese Communist Party's political interference activities. Xi Jinping and Chinese officials have been called out at the highest levels on the repression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, on cyberattacks and information operations. New information on espionage and interference in European external and internal affairs also confirms to the public and decision-makers that, perhaps, the CCP's vision of multilateralism and projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the original "16+1" cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe are designed to mainly benefit China.<sup>2</sup>

In its "new era" (新时代) under General Secretary Xi Jinping, the PRC has intensified policies that aim to reshape the global order into one where China's values stop being the exception and become the ruling principles. Economic hegemony and the control of global narratives are complementary aspects of this goal. Notions of human rights and universal values, which remain obstacles to the global expansion of the CCP's power, can be undermined by installing instead the party's own propaganda concepts

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<sup>2</sup>Martin Hála & Jichang Lulu, "Lost in translation: 'Economic diplomacy' with Chinese characteristics", Sinopsis, 11th Mar. 2019.



and vision in the discourse of international organisations and the EU.<sup>3</sup> Concepts such as “mutual understanding”, “win-win cooperation”, the “community of shared destiny” and “non-interference” seek to redefine “multilateralism” as a set of Beijing-led exchanges predicated on “economic (and vaccine) diplomacy”, free from values-based questioning of the party’s authoritarian rule and human rights abuses.<sup>4</sup>

Influence operations aim at aligning foreign elites with the PRC’s global narratives present unique challenges to democracies. Their activity spans a broad spectrum between the conventionally understood extremes of traditional diplomacy and hostile action. Actions within this spectrum are often deployed in combination. Through typically legal, overt activity, they repurpose mechanisms of democratic societies, such as a free media environment, to pursue goals contrary to democracy and expand the power of authoritarian systems.<sup>5</sup> Some of the PRC’s influence operations in Europe fall under the “hybrid threats” category as defined by the Council of the European Union, meaning “a wide range of methods or activities used by hostile state or non-state actors in a coordinated manner in order to target the vulnerabilities of democratic states and institutions while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare”.<sup>6</sup>

The asymmetry between the PRC’s access to information on Europe’s politics and the EU institutions’ understanding of the PRC’s foreign influence apparatus is a key vulnerability to these hybrid threats. This lack of reciprocal understanding also benefits China’s ability to exert influence unchecked at the most local levels.

As a strategic target, Belgium hosts some of these proxy organisations whose classification, according to the system in which they interact, indicates the CCP’s influence strategy for the country. For instance, the prominent role of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade in connecting companies with the Chinese economic system signifies the CCP’s intention to deepen Belgium’s economic exchanges with China. Behind the genuine economic gains that can result from these interactions, it also establishes leverage that can be used to achieve political and propaganda objectives.

In an attempt to illustrate the PRC’s multi-sector strategy for Belgium, this paper takes as its starting point the Belgium-China Chamber of Commerce, a major catalyst of China’s economic influence in the country. The chamber is involved in a network of China-friendly organisations and individuals whose aspirations and willingness to gain relevance complement China’s strategy for increasing its footprint in Europe. This network, which further links to the Belgium-China Chamber of Commerce, therefore emerges as a likely channel of influence, through its deep connec-

<sup>3</sup>“Connecting Europe and Asia: seeking synergies with China’s Belt and Road”, EEAS, 25th Apr. 2019.

<sup>4</sup>Nadège Rolland, “China’s Vision for a New World Order”, NBR, 1st Jan. 2020.

<sup>5</sup>Jichang Lulu, “Repurposing democracy: The European Parliament China friendship cluster”, Sinopsis, 26th Nov. 2019.

<sup>6</sup>“Countering hybrid threats: Council calls for enhanced common action”, European Council, 19th Dec. 2010. This strategy, qualified as “political warfare” by Mark Stokes, relies on the manipulation of existing institutions, norms and mindsets to achieve foreign policy goals. It differs from public diplomacy in the sense that it seeks to alter the perception of a targeted audience for the sake of greater political objectives. This effort is concealed behind a positive narrative exposing China as an ideal economic partner and an unavoidable rising power inclined to share its millennial culture with the world (Mark Stokes, “Chinese Authoritarian Influence in the United States”, *Insidious Power: How China Undermines Global Democracy*, ed. by Hsu Szu-Chien & J. Michael Cole, Eastbridge, 2020).



tions to a PRC institutions active in advancing foreign political and economic objectives through influence operations.

By building personal contacts to the Brussels decision-making elite, this network creates privileged channels to convey messaging that aims to improve China's image, serving the greater purpose of associating sympathy towards China with sympathy toward the CCP while dissociating it from its authoritarian nature and creating further opportunities to manipulate attitudes towards China. As these operations gradually make European discourse on China less critical, they help the CCP garner influence over Europe's political and economic spheres, by generating less scrutiny, greater willingness to collaborate and more time to integrate Chinese proxies into local stakeholders.

## 0.2 Influence channels identified in Belgium

The network described in this paper is linked to PRC agencies in the CCP's economic, foreign affairs, propaganda, united front and intelligence systems.<sup>7</sup>

The first organisation studied in this paper is most directly connected with the CCP's economic system. This group of Chinese agencies complements political influence efforts by increasing China's economic cooperation with Belgium while co-opting business partners, intermediaries and lobbyists into the promotion of China-friendly narratives. What is at times referred to as "economic diplomacy" in fact primarily works as propagandistic cover for low-cost political influence: an attractive presentation of relationships with CCP-controlled agencies suggesting trade and investment opportunities can result in partners' consistent alignment with CCP initiatives, even if the promised economic benefits fail to materialise.<sup>8</sup> Such co-opted partners then act as proxies, for instance presenting the party's geopolitical schemes, such as the BRI, as "multilateral" projects.

The **China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT, 中国国际贸易促进委员会)**, linked to the PRC Ministry of Commerce, is the main tool of external influence in the CCP's economic system.<sup>9</sup> Working in parallel to state-to-state trade relations, sometimes to compensate for a lack of, incentivise or initiate economic exchanges, the CCPIT establishes agreements and cooperation with local private and governmental stakeholders. Its typical partners abroad include private businesses and chambers of commerce as well as sub-national governments, law firms and lawyer associations.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the central organisation, the CCPIT is represented in China in subnational jurisdictions and also benefits from an extensive network of national offices abroad, including in Belgium.<sup>11</sup> The CCPIT maintains substantial partnerships with business associations abroad. In the long term, these chambers of commerce may potentially become CCPIT satellites that facilitate local actors' access to party officials. While these connections contribute to the achievement of the organisation's original goals (facilitating economic opportunities between local and Chinese actors), the relationship may induce the chamber to act as a beacon for the CCP's political

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Jichang Lulu, "Confined discourse management and the PRC's localised interactions in the Nordics", Sinopsis, 22nd Oct. 2018; Håla & Lulu, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup>Lulu, "Repurposing democracy".

<sup>10</sup>For more on the CCPIT's efforts to connect with local elites in Australia and New-Zealand, see Geoff Wade, "CCPIT", Twitter.

<sup>11</sup>"CCPIT Global", CCPIT, 15th Sept. 2016.



agenda by engineering an environment where China is first and foremost depicted as a bearer of economic opportunities. The positive framing of local interest-driven initiatives under the guidance of the CCPIT and the lack of understanding from the authorities also contribute to minimising potential scrutiny, therefore leaving more room to pursue the effort.<sup>12</sup> This is illustrated, for instance, by the case of the China Chamber of Commerce in the United Kingdom, deeply involved in events related to the BRI under the CCPIT's patronage, to the point of becoming itself a vector of promotion for the PRC's project.<sup>13</sup>

While such partnerships often happen at the sub-national and national levels, some also take place at the supranational level. The CCPIT was one of the initiators of the China–Central Eastern Europe Business Council (中国–中东欧国家联合商会), under the “17+1” framework, a regional influence initiative subordinate to the larger BRI.<sup>14</sup> The CCPIT also supervises a global BRI-themed chamber, the Silk Road Chamber of International Commerce (SRCIC, 丝绸之路国际总商会), which has claimed to have members in 75 countries and for which the PRC once attempted to obtain consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council.<sup>15</sup>

Chinese foreign affairs organs are also featured in this paper. The centre of power of the foreign affairs system lies in the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, led by Xi Jinping, which oversees the work of party-state bodies. The **Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA, 外交部)** is the most public such body, overseeing traditional diplomacy, including the network of Chinese diplomatic representations. As a state body, the ministry is further from the party's authority than party departments and therefore acts as a tool for policy enforcement rather than a decision-making centre.

The main party body devoted to foreign affairs is the **International (Liaison) Department (ILD, 中央对外联络部)** under the Central Committee. Once focused on liaising with communist parties abroad, the ILD now targets the entire political spectrum, exploiting diverging ideologies to unite elites under common interests. Keeping a lower profile than traditional diplomatic bodies, the ILD is also involved in various types of non-state relations, involving civil groups, private companies and foreign opinion leaders.<sup>16</sup>

This paper also highlights the role of the **Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC, 中国人民对外友好协会)** in shaping Belgium's landscape as the main “people's diplomacy” organisation. Managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the CPAFFC facilitates the CCP's foreign policies — such as the Belt and Road Initiative — while liaising with sub-national and non-governmental entities.<sup>17</sup> As such, it allows party officials to gather information on the personnel of the state with which it engages at an early stage and then connect local representatives with relevant officials within the CCP's apparatus in order to secure high quality

<sup>12</sup>Lulu, “Confined discourse management...”

<sup>13</sup>Nadège Rolland, “Mapping the footprint of Belt and Road influence operations”, Sinopsis, 12th Aug. 2019.

<sup>14</sup>Lukasz Sarek, “The CPAFFC as the party-state's guardian of Polish regions' relations with China”, Asia Explained, 7th Dec. 2020.

<sup>15</sup>Rolland, *op. cit.*; Andréa Worden, “The CCP at the UN: Redefining development and rights”, Sinopsis, 17th Mar. 2019.

<sup>16</sup>David L. Shambaugh, “China's “Quiet Diplomacy”: The International Department of the Chinese Communist Party”, *China: An International Journal* 5.1 (1st Mar. 2007).

<sup>17</sup>Lulu, “Repurposing democracy”.



relations at the individual level.<sup>18</sup> The Polish example shows that the CPAFFC is able to organise high-level forums on a regular basis that allow the party-state to influence a political agenda that shapes both parties' relations.<sup>19</sup> In Belgium, the identified CPAFFC operations focus on a bottom-up approach.

These organisational systems work in tandem with Chinese propaganda, which is instrumental in improving China's image abroad as well as domestically. With the convergence of the external and domestic narratives, many attempts to influence can be used and framed both for European and PRC audiences. Even activities targeting specific stakeholders abroad and often escaping mainstream coverage in the target countries can be communicated to domestic audiences through Chinese-language state-controlled media, presenting selected statements by European actors endorsing China's vision of the relationship as a representative of the EU as a whole. Coordinated by the Central Propaganda Department and overseen by a leading small group headed by a Politburo Standing Committee member, the propaganda system includes governmental bodies such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, state media, such as the Xinhua (新华) news agency and propaganda outlets targeting foreigners (e.g., *China Daily*), and cultural and educational agencies such as Confucius Institutes.<sup>20</sup>

The CCP's united front system's apparatus enhances the party's control over various sectors of Chinese society and the diaspora. Institutionally, the system has been overseen since 2015 by a leading small group chaired by a Politburo Standing Committee member.<sup>21</sup> The top-level united front body is the **Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC, 中国人民政治协商会议)**, which comprises representatives of the CCP, satellite political parties, businesses, overseas Chinese and other constituencies.<sup>22</sup> The system's coordinating agency is the **Central United Front Work Department (UFWD, 中央统一战线工作部)** under the party's Central Committee.<sup>23</sup>

The CCP's technology transfer and talent recruitment activities are an increasingly important component of the united front system, and co-opted diaspora organisations also play a significant role in united front work abroad, ensuring the alignment of community leaders with party narratives, participating in talent recruitment and technology transfer activities, and at times becoming involved in political influence efforts.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, Chinese intelligence agencies directly participate in political influence operations such as the cultivation of political figures and other stakeholders, often with hybrid agencies like the ones described above as cover. The **Ministry of State Secur-**

<sup>18</sup>Sarek, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>Stokes, *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup>Alex Joske, "The Central United Front Work Leading Small Group: Institutionalising united front work", Sinopsis, 23rd July 2019.

<sup>22</sup>Gerry Groot, *Managing Transitions: The Chinese Communist Party, United Front Work, Corporatism, and Hegemony*, Routledge, p. 318.

<sup>23</sup>Peter Mattis, "The Center of Chinese Influence: the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference", *Insidious Power: How China Undermines Global Democracy*, ed. by Hsu Szu-Chien & J. Michael Cole, Eastbridge, 2020; Alex Joske, "The party speaks for you: Foreign interference and the Chinese Communist Party's united front system", ASPI, 9th June 2020.

<sup>24</sup>Idem, "Hunting the phoenix: The Chinese Communist Party's global search for technology and talent", ASPI, 20th Aug. 2020; "Threats to the U.S. Research Enterprise: China's Talent Recruitment Plans", Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the United States Senate, 18th Nov. 2019.



ity (MSS, 国家安全部), China's main civilian intelligence agency, has a dedicated "social investigation" bureau focused on cultivating foreign politicians and other elite figures, as well as a separate one engaged in operations presented as think-tank exchanges.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the MSS itself, its equivalents at the provincial and city level are active in operations abroad, including influence work.<sup>26</sup> An operation exposed in late 2023 by European media illustrates this. According to the media investigation, an officer with the Zhejiang Province State Security Department (浙江省国家安全厅) who used the name "Daniel Woo" recruited Frank Creyelman, a former Belgian MP with the far-right Vlaams Belang party, to provide information on European political figures such as European Council President Charles Michel and gain access to high-level sources in the European Commission, while receiving payment and travel invitations from PRC counterparts.<sup>27</sup>

The operation extended beyond one former MP, and beyond Belgium. Creyelman's brother, Steven, is a sitting MP and chaired the parliament's lower house's defence procurement committee until resigning following the revelations.<sup>28</sup> The state security officer's contact network reportedly also reached Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), Germany's largest far-right party.<sup>29</sup> Woo reportedly first attracted the attention of European intelligence services as the recipient of information provided by Mateusz Piskorski, a Polish politician arrested in 2016 and later charged with espionage for Russia and China.<sup>30</sup> Released under bail, Piskorski resumed public activities: in 2022, he acted as the Polish president's wife's Russian-language interpreter during a visit to Ukrainian war refugees.<sup>31</sup>

Another recent revelation points to the overlap between intelligence activity and overt propaganda and influence operations such as "mask diplomacy". In December 2023, it emerged that the Belgian security service identified Shao Changchun 邵常淳, a PRC citizen expelled from Belgium in 2017 accused of interference activities, as the partner in a 2020 mask donation arranged with Vlaams Belang leader Filip Dewinter.<sup>32</sup> According to a Belgian media report, Shao and Daniel Woo are "linked", a fact "known to the [Belgian] security services".<sup>33</sup> If accurate, the claim extends the influence operation's target beyond the far right: years before his expulsion, Shao met with mainstream figures, including then deputy prime minister (now Flemish

<sup>25</sup>Alex Joske, *Spies and Lies: How China's Greatest Covert Operations Fooled the World*, Hardie Grant, 2022, pp. 26 sqq.

<sup>26</sup>Idem, "State security departments: The birth of China's nationwide state security system", *Deserepi* 0 (2023).

<sup>27</sup>Lucas Minisini & Thomas Eydoux, "L'espion chinois, le député belge et les institutions européennes", *Le Monde* (15th Dec. 2023).

<sup>28</sup>Rik Arnoudt, "Steven Creyelman (Vlaams Belang) treedt af als voorzitter Kamercommissie Legeraankopen", VRT, 21st Dec. 2023.

<sup>29</sup>Maik Baumgärtner et al, "Chinas Stasi, ein belgischer Handlanger und Spuren zur AfD", *Der Spiegel* 51 (2023).

<sup>30</sup>Minisini & Eydoux, *op. cit.*; "Akt oskarżenia przeciwko Mateuszowi P. - przewodniczącemu partii Zmiana", Prokuratura Krajowa, 23rd Apr. 2018.

<sup>31</sup>"Sąd: Mateusz Piskorski może opuścić areszt po wpłaceniu 500 tys. zł kaucji", *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna* (24th Jan. 2019); "Oskarżony o szpiegostwo na rzecz Rosji tłumaczem pierwszej damy Agaty Kornhauser-Dudy", *Wirtualna Polska*, 12th Mar. 2022.

<sup>32</sup>Clive Hamilton & Mareike Ohlberg, *Hidden hand: Exposing how the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the world*, Hardie Grant, 2020, p. 212; Jeroen Bossaert, "Filip Dewinter in opspraak in spionagezaak", *De Tijd* (12th Nov. 2018); Pieter Lesaffer & Jef Van Hoofstat, "Tienduizend mondmaskers die Filip Dewinter uitdeelde, "kwamen van Chinese spion", *Het Nieuwsblad* (21st Dec. 2023).

<sup>33</sup>Hannes Heynderickx & Werner Rommers, "Ook Vlaams Belang-parlementslid Filip Dewinter wordt gelinkt aan Chinees spionagenetwerk", *Het Nieuwsblad* (15th Dec. 2023).





minister-president) Jan Jambon, also the mayor of the town where Shao's Belgian organisation was domiciled.<sup>34</sup>

### 0.3 Belgium as a target of influence operations

The systems and bodies intervening in Belgium are indicative of China's interest in the country. Brussels, as Belgium's capital and home to the EU's institutions and NATO headquarters, holds unique strategic value as a target of influence operations.

Two key characteristics of Belgium's stakeholder landscape translate into some of Europe's major vulnerabilities to foreign influence. The first characteristic is that Brussels has a strong lobbying culture and thus concentrates representations of civil society organisations and media agencies. Overlapping (and at times conflicting) interests generate restless activity, which manifests itself in the organisation of conferences, lectures, workshops, luncheons and other advocacy meetings. Generating support — be it public or behind closed doors — requires the establishment of coalitions and dependency networks amongst policymakers and influential figures able to provide political weight. These collaborations can be sporadic, systematic, or even embedded in the very structure of some organisations.

To the CCP's advantage, activities and opinions that appear as neutral, such as promoting multilateralism or value-based journalism, contribute to framing political objectives as opinions worthy of consideration but with Chinese characteristics, gradually incorporating them into the general narrative on China. The CCP's discourse benefits from a relative lack of understanding of China, resulting in a "knowledge asymmetry" that enables the instrumentalisation of EU decision-makers, Belgian private actors and other PRC "partners" who often understand neither the Chinese political system nor the actual nature and mission of their Chinese interlocutor.<sup>35</sup>

In this context, Belgium's second characteristic is that it makes an ideal target for Chinese interests. Often presented as being the "heart" of Europe, the country possesses assets of strategic importance for China, namely the port of Zeebrugge, now owned by the BRI-active company COSCO, and Liège airport, seen as a key hub for commerce and projects like the Belt and Road Initiative. In addition to prospective thriving economic opportunities from China to Belgium, top-ranked Chinese universities have already implemented numerous academic cooperation programmes with Belgian universities. Nurturing good relations with Belgium offers, ultimately, the advantage of facilitating relations with the national authorities and information services, ensuring more freedom for Chinese activities and less scrutiny when allegations of influence arise.

### 0.4 Structure of the paper

This paper seeks to contribute to research on Chinese influence operations in Belgium by providing a basis for further research on the country, as well as to identify wider patterns of Chinese influence throughout Europe. While part of the identified activities fall under traditional public diplomacy efforts, this paper aims to highlight the

<sup>34</sup>“邵常淳拜会比利时副首相 Jan Jambon”, 北京和平之旅文化交流中心, 6th Jan. 2015; Fabien Van Eeckhaut, “Le leader d'extrême droite flamande Filip Dewinter, un espion pour le compte de la Chine ?”, RTBF, 12th Nov. 2018.

<sup>35</sup>Lulu, “Confined discourse management...”; idem, “Repurposing democracy”.



combination of legitimate and less legitimate activities as well as the magnitude of China's efforts to strengthen its presence in Belgium's economic, academic and political spheres, the number of organisations involved, and the grey area in which some of these operations take place, under the supervision and guidance of CCP bodies that are instrumental in China's foreign influence apparatus. As of early 2021, only a handful of research papers have scrutinised the role of the CCP in coordinating influence efforts in Belgium.<sup>36</sup>

A few papers and articles have undertaken a more thorough study of Brussels-focused influence<sup>37</sup> but did not analyse it in the scope of the CCP's institutionalised influence machine and country-specific political goals.<sup>38</sup> However, some voices in Belgium, including researcher Vanessa Frangville via media interventions and the work of the Centre for East Asian Studies (EASt) at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, have shone a spotlight on some of China's problematic activities.<sup>39</sup> Other publications like *Politico*, *De Standaard* and *La Libre* have also done so.<sup>40</sup>

Through illustrative case studies, and based on open source information and media reports in Chinese, English, French, Dutch and other languages, this study mainly focuses on Brussels as the home of the main European institutions and NATO headquarters, but also as Belgium's capital. On the one hand, the cases studied in this paper have been selected in order to document a representative sample of the diversity of CCP agencies and tactics involved in influence operations. On the other, the network of organisations and individuals that play a key role in these operations indicate a rhizomatic pattern as described in Switzerland by Ralph Weber, in which selected actors form a node from which unified messaging and incentives can spread within a given society.<sup>41</sup>

First, the Belgium-China Chamber of Commerce illustrates a case of economic influence with a strong connection to the CCPIT, the economic system's key influence agency. Then, the chamber's involvement in the formation of an informal alliance at the European Parliament and the cluster of organisations that formed around the actors involved allow for more in-depth scrutiny of the chamber's political role. Third, the Belgium-China Association, whose origin is linked to that of the chamber, shows links with the foreign affairs and propaganda systems through regular meetings and the organisation of cultural activities in Brussels. The last part extends the scope of our study with a focus on the Brussels Academy for China and European Studies, exemplifying PRC attempts to co-opt scholars in Brussels.

<sup>36</sup>Idem, "Repurposing democracy"; Thorsten Benner et al., "Authoritarian advance: Responding to China's growing political influence in Europe", MERICS and GPPi, 1st Feb. 2018.

<sup>37</sup>François Godement & Abigaël Vasselier, "China at the gates: A new power audit of EU-China relations", European Council on Foreign Relations, 1st Dec. 2017.

<sup>38</sup>"Follow the New Silk Road: China's growing trail of think tanks and lobbyists in Europe", Corporate Europe, 8th Apr. 2019; Quentin Genaille, "How to evaluate the Chinese interference in the EU: Mapping China's Influence Strategy in Brussels", *Monde Chinois* 60 (2019).

<sup>39</sup>"EASt", Facebook; "La Chine cherche à s'implanter en Europe pour y imposer ses normes", *La Libre* (21st Jan. 2016); "Liberté académique sous pression en Belgique: le long bras de Pékin", *Le Soir* (20th Oct. 2003).

<sup>40</sup>Jack Parrock, "Voice of China's European ambitions", *Politico*, 8th Sept. 2020; "Hoe België China niet-vermoedend hielp in zijn strijd tegen dissidenten", *De Standaard* (21st Mar. 2020); "Comment la Russie et la Chine manipulent les Belges en période de Covid-19", *La Libre* (13th Feb. 2021).

<sup>41</sup>Ralph Weber, "Unified message, rhizomatic delivery: A preliminary analysis of PRC/CCP influence and the united front in Switzerland", Sinopsis, 20th Dec. 2018.



## 1 BCECC as an economic influence tool

The Belgium-China Chamber of Commerce (BCECC, 比中经贸委员会) was founded in 1987 and resembles other similarly named organisations partnered with the CCPIT, pointing to a pattern in the CCP’s foreign influence framework.<sup>42</sup> The Austrian-Chinese Business Association (奥中商业协会, ACBA), the German-Chinese Business Association (德中经济联合会, DCW) or the Netherlands-China Business Council (荷中商务理事会, NCBC), members of the EU-China Business Association promoting economic and trade relations with the PRC might serve as further examples of CCPIT-aligned organisations in Europe.<sup>43</sup> One of these members, the Polish–Chinese General Chamber of Commerce (“SinoCham”, 波中国总商会), is one of the subjects of a recent study on CCPIT influence activities.<sup>44</sup>

Establishing BCECC’s profile based on its history and leadership is crucial to understanding why it has become one of China’s privileged channels of influence in Belgium. The chamber’s leading position in Belgium and its objective of creating productive bridges between Chinese and European businesses fit with a pattern observed in the CCPIT’s global activities: BCECC offers expertise on Belgium’s business environment, operational means on the ground and trusted access to Belgian authorities. The CCPIT, on the other hand, provides privileged access to high-level Chinese officials enabled by the signing of partnerships.<sup>45</sup> While these activities are relatively transparent, the real nature of the Chinese actors’ aspirations that they reflect are harder to discern, which brings into question the reciprocity of the benefits perceived on the Belgian side. CCP agencies such as the CCPIT use the proximity with their partners to reinforce the party-state’s footprint in a given territory, to the point that the partners themselves can become proxies of the CCP’s political objectives. This is made possible by empowering the leaders of local organisations who can help shape

<sup>42</sup>“Conseil économique et commercial Belgique-Chine - Chambre de commerce Belgique-Chine”, Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises.

<sup>43</sup>“Members”, EU-China Business Association; “Our Partners”, DCW; “Zusammenarbeit mit der ACBA”, ACBA; “About NCBC”, NCBC. Belgium is home to other organisations similar to BCECC. The Flanders-China Chamber of Commerce focuses on the Northern Dutch-speaking region. The EU-China Business Association (EUCBA, 欧盟中国贸易协会) is nominally based in Brussels but has been operating as an umbrella organisation of European China chambers of commerce. These two organisations are structurally intertwined and share some employees (“Board of FCCC”, FCCC; “Representatives”, EUCBA). While the FCCC and the EUCBA are active organisations and collaborate with the CCPIT (although the CCPIT is not listed as an official partner in either case), BCECC’s level of activity and close relationship with the CCPIT make it a more illustrative example for the purposes of this study (“Participants”, EU-China Business Summit, 2nd June 2018; “比利时法兰德斯中国商会与我会商谈企业家理事会事宜”, CCPIT Qingdao, 13th July 2014). There is another organisation that shares similar goals with a European dimension, the lobby China-EU Digital Association (known as ChinaEU, 中欧数字协会), which also deserves attention. (Genaille, *op. cit.*) Its chairman, Luigi Gambardella, whom *Politico* has called “Mr China”, nurtures influential relationships like that of Viviane Reding, a former vice-president of the EU Commission, EU Commissioner and MEP who gave a heartfelt speech on the occasion of Huawei’s 2020 new year event in Brussels (Nicholas Hirst, “Europe’s Mr. China”, *Politico*, 31st May 2017; “Remarks by Viviane Reding, Former Vice-President of the European Commission, at the Chinese New Year Celebration”, Huawei Europe, 4th Feb. 2020). Gambardella has expressed his support for the BRI and further EU-China cooperation on digital issues, praising, for instance, China’s global leadership in the future of 5G (涂恬, “中欧数字协会主席: 中国将成为 5G 时代的全球领跑者”, *China Daily* [17th Nov. 2016]; “中欧数字经济合作的现状、不足与启示”, *互联网经济杂志* via 赛迪网, 25th Mar. 2020; Hamilton & Ohlberg, *op. cit.*, p. 213). Such advocacy contrasts with the increasing concerns about the security implications of the presence of PRC technology in Europe’s digital networks and sensitive infrastructures.

<sup>44</sup>Lukasz Sarek, “CCPIT in Poland: Economic cooperation in the hands of a party-state actor”, *Sinopsis*, 5th May 2023, pp. 10 sqq.

<sup>45</sup>“BCECC Newsletter May 2017 35”, BCECC, 1st May 2017; “BCECC Newsletter December 2013 29”, BCECC, 1st Dec. 2013.



Figure 1: Bernard Dewit receiving a Friendship award from Chinese Vice Premier Ma Kai 马凯 in 2017. Source: BCECC.

the European discourse on China while being used as tools for domestic propaganda efforts in China. In this sense, BCECC is an excellent example of such tactics.

This chapter will first provide a profile of BCECC and some of its leaders in order to explain why the chamber is Belgium's ideal partner for Chinese influence operations. The second section will show how BCECC's position in Belgium translates into concrete actions through which China and governmental proxies gain potential shares of influence in Belgium.

### 1.1 Profiling BCECC's activities and leadership

Since its establishment, BCECC has worked to enhance economic opportunities between Chinese and Belgian companies in Europe, experience through which the organisation gathered useful assets, namely a network and consequent membership. The chamber's chair is a long-time Sinophile who gained recognition in China and in Belgium for his advocacy, allowing BCECC to further strengthen its range of action thanks to the intervention of Chinese officials who see in BCECC's work a legitimate way to approach Belgium's decision-makers.

Since 1996, BCECC has been chaired by Bernard Dewit, a Belgian lawyer who in 1983 published a book titled *China Trade Law*.<sup>46</sup> He is also the CEO of the Dewit Law Office, which used to have a representative office in Beijing (比利时德威特律师事务所驻北京代表处) until it was closed in 2017.<sup>47</sup> The Dewit Law Office offers services to private and public entities, and is also a member of the Federation of Belgian Chambers of Commerce as part of the Steering Committee of the Belgian-Luxembourg Chambers of Commerce abroad.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup>“贝尔纳·德威特 - 比中商会主席”, 安特卫普论坛; François de Bauw & Bernard Dewit, *China Trade Law*, Bruylant.

<sup>47</sup>“司法部关于注销比利时德威特等 19 家外国律师事务所驻华代表处的通知”, 中华人民共和国司法部, 28th Sept. 2017.

<sup>48</sup>“The team behind the Federation”, Federation of Belgian Chambers of Commerce.



Bernard Dewit and BCECC are involved in traditional lobbying activities, for instance by participating in and organising conferences, lectures and networking events.<sup>49</sup> While some of his activities may be seen as forms of lobbying, Bernard Dewit is registered neither as a parliamentary assistant nor as a lobbyist in the EP's Transparency Register, which would allow him to access the premises of the European Parliament. BCECC itself is or has been affiliated under PA Europe's umbrella (the Belgian chamber is, however, no longer referred to as an affiliate).<sup>50</sup> PA Europe, part of the PA International Foundation, is a consultancy established in 1993 and chaired by the former Belgian Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Finance Minister Mark Eyskens, whose estimated lobbying budget approached €800,000 in 2018.<sup>51</sup> The company works as a consultancy, helping other companies and interest groups achieve advocacy goals through the organisation of meetings with political stakeholders and communication strategies. PA Europe focuses on topics that include EU-China trade, and has two other branches located in the Middle East and Asia (PA Asia). PA Asia's capacity to reach high-level officials is illustrated by a meeting the company organised with the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2016. However, details on most of PA's activities in Brussels are not available from public sources.<sup>52</sup>

Bernard Dewit's long history of experience and engagement with China can explain his role as an advocate. Since his graduation in 1978, Dewit has been an active and important actor in Belgium-China relations, and is considered an expert in Chinese affairs.<sup>53</sup> Early in his career, he developed an interest in China and saw the investment opportunities that might arise from Deng Xiaoping's opening reforms, becoming the first Belgian to study the Chinese market from a legal perspective as his activities as a lawyer expanded to Chinese investments in Europe.<sup>54</sup> In this capacity, Bernard Dewit reportedly founded an association for Belgian and Chinese lawyers (比利时和中国律师协会), of which 50 Belgian members went on a trip to China in March 1989.<sup>55</sup>

Dewit is the face of Belgium in many Chinese press articles, he also has taken part in several official Belgian delegations alongside other China experts and stakeholders (in 1987, he went to China as part of a Belgian Ministry of Justice delegation).<sup>56</sup> Additionally, in 2017 Dewit was awarded the Friendship Award granted by the Chinese government for his services as a foreign advocate for his country's friendship with

<sup>49</sup>The EU-China Business Summit serves as a relevant illustration of these activities. The summit consists of a regular gathering between public and private stakeholders from China and the EU, whose liaison aims to facilitate the communication of interest groups' policy objectives. BCECC participated in the 2018 business summit, co-organised by BusinessEurope, the EUCBA and the CCPIT, under the patronage of the European Commission and the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, which shows that the Chinese authorities also rely on very public activities when high-level EU actors are involved, including in this case the Vice-President of the European Commission ("Participants"). On the Chinese side, officials from the foreign and economic affairs systems attended as ordinary influence actors integrated into Brussels's lobbying culture. This event was also a striking example of the common practice of naming events and organisations in a way that makes them appear generic and official while being largely driven by private interests.

<sup>50</sup>"PA Europe", Lobbying Facts.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup>"The PA team in Beijing discussing the Belt & Road Initiative with former Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs HE Zhang Deguang", PA Asia.

<sup>53</sup>贝尔纳·德威特 - 比中商会主席。

<sup>54</sup>史靖洪, "中国在国际事务中发挥着稳定器的作用——专访 2017 年度中国政府“友谊奖”获得者贝尔纳·德威特", 中国经济网, 19th Apr. 2018; "贝尔纳·德威特 - 比中商会主席".

<sup>55</sup>史靖洪, *op. cit.*

<sup>56</sup>"Belgian Economic Mission to the People's Republic of China — Participants' brochure", Belgian Foreign Trade Agency, 20th Oct. 2011.

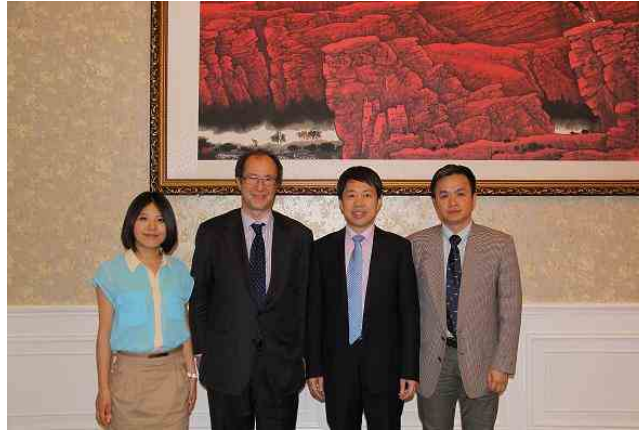


Figure 2: Bernard Dewit and Hu Sishe (centre) in 2014. Source: CPAFFC.

China.<sup>57</sup> The concept of friendship is central to China’s foreign affairs system, beyond the mandate of organisations like the CPAFFC, and is driven by the idea of “using foreign strength to propagandise China” (利用外力为我宣传). As Brady put it in 2002, political friendship “is used as a means to psychologically [neutralise] opposition and to re-order reality”. Foreigners with influence or power who assist China’s interests are known as “foreign friends”, as are those who stay on to work for the Chinese government.<sup>58</sup> “Foreign friends”, whose contribution takes the form of ideological support, investment opportunities and practical assistance, are fully integrated into the CCP’s non-official diplomacy channels that rely on “mutual benefits” as a core dimension.<sup>59</sup>

## 1.2 A beacon of China’s economic attractiveness

BCECC is a key element of China’s economic influence in Belgium and, as such, acts as the CCPIT’s most valuable proxy in the country. BCECC’s importance is evident from its role as a local entity with expertise with knowledge of the Belgian sphere, its actors and accesses.<sup>60</sup> BCECC’s partnership with the CCPIT fits into the council’s pattern of interactions with lawyers abroad. Bernard Dewit’s status as a foreign arbitrator in the **China International Economic and Trade Arbitration Commission (CIETAC, 中国国际经济贸易仲裁委员会)** under the CCPIT can be compared to that of, e.g., Jim Harrowell, a lawyer involved in the China-Australia relationship in multiple capacities.<sup>61</sup> The CCPIT also benefits from BCECC’s operational capacity to organise events, mobilise its member companies and organisations, and legitimacy as a representative of Belgium’s regional and national interests.

<sup>57</sup>“Bernard DEWIT”, Dewit Law Office.

<sup>58</sup>Anne-Marie Brady, “The Political Meaning of Friendship: Reviewing the Life and Times of Two of China’s American Friends”, *China Review International* 9.2 (2002).

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>“Networking event with a business delegation led by CCPIT Beijing”, BCECC, 3rd Apr. 2014.

<sup>61</sup>“Bernard DEWIT”; “China’s Political System by Mr. Bernard Dewit”, Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies, 10th Feb. 2015; “Board of Directors”, Australia China Friendship and Exchange Association Inc; Lucy Cormack, “Lawyer for Daryl Maguire in ICAC inquiry is also NSW Special Envoy to China”, *Sydney Morning Herald* (5th Oct. 2020); cf. Geoff Wade, “Harrowell...”, Twitter; on the CCPIT and CIETAC, “中国国际经济贸易仲裁委员会章程 (经贸仲裁第十八届委员会修订通过)”, CIETAC.



The expertise provided by BCECC is best illustrated by the meetings between high-level CCPIT representatives and BCECC. As an example, the “China-Belgium Economic and Trade Forum” was co-organised in 2015 by the CCPIT and BCECC, gathering high-level CCPIT representatives such as Chairman Jiang Zengwei.<sup>62</sup> During the visit of a Belgian delegation to China in 2019, Bernard Dewit and Liu Chao 刘超, deputy chairman of the CCPIT’s Legal Department, signed a memorandum of understanding establishing a **China-Belgium Commercial and Legal Cooperation Committee (中国—比利时商事法律合作委员会谅解备忘录)** on the CCPIT’s initiative.<sup>63</sup> As a further example, in 2019 Bernard Dewit was surveyed as part of a “research mission”. Organised and led by the CCPIT’s Development Research Department (发展研究部), the mission toured Europe to hear about the investment environment in France, Belgium and the Netherlands.<sup>64</sup> The team also visited several diplomatic posts (the Chinese Mission and embassies).

BCECC’s instrumental role across the economic system is reinforced by the organisation’s interactions with united front organisations. This is made possible through exchanges between BCECC and business groups such as the **Association of Chinese Enterprises in Belgium and Luxembourg (AECBL, 比利时卢森堡中资企业协会)**, an association supported by the CCPIT and United Investment Europe that has Huawei, ZTE and Hainan Airlines as member companies, among others.<sup>65</sup> In 2019, Chen Si 陈思—who acted as an event and project manager and as a liaison between BCECC and the CCPIT— together with Belgian local representatives, participated in a preparatory meeting organised by the China International Fair for Investment & Trade (CIFIT, 中国国际投资贸易洽谈会).<sup>66</sup> Similarly, BCECC has collaborated with the **Association of Chinese Professionals in Belgium (ACPB, 旅比华人专业人士协会)**, established in Leuven in 2003 and gathering together Chinese professionals living in Belgium, serving as a platform of cooperation among Belgium-based Chinese professionals.<sup>67</sup> The ACPB is a member of the **Federation of Chinese Professional Associations in Europe (FCPAE, 全欧华人专业协会联合会)**, an umbrella organisation for Chinese professional associations.<sup>68</sup> The ACPB organises networking events, seminars, tours and various cultural events promoting Chinese culture (Chinese New Year, Spring Festival Gala). The association also promotes exchanges in the fields of science, technologies, culture and education between China and Belgium, hinting at its role in co-

<sup>62</sup>“中比经贸论坛在布鲁塞尔召开”, CCPIT, 1st July 2015.

<sup>63</sup>“中比签署商事法律合作谅解备忘录”, 中国贸易报, 21st Nov. 2019. Bernard Dewit was contacted to answer questions during the drafting of this paper, including on the legal cooperation committee. He did not follow up after receiving our request for comment.

<sup>64</sup>In April, the CCPIT released a report on the EU investment environment (“贸促会调研组赴比利时、荷兰、法国调研 投资环境”, CCPIT Academy, 4th July 2019).

<sup>65</sup>“比利时卢森堡中资企业协会举办“比利时新冠肺炎相关法规”线上讲座”, 比利时卢森堡中资企业协会, 16th Apr. 2020; “会员风采”, 比利时卢森堡中资企业协会.

<sup>66</sup>“Europe–China OBOR Culture & Tourism Development Committee - Constitution”, Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises, 13th Jan. 2016; “BCECC - Procès verbal”, Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises, 30th Mar. 2015; “比利时企业寻找拖鞋生产商”, CCPIT Zhejiang, 12th Mar. 2020. CIFIT is an annual event in Xiamen organised by the PRC Ministry of Commerce, with the support of UN agencies and the participation of other agencies, including the CCPIT and united front organisations (“整合资源、突出实效, 合力推动中比投资合作”, 中国国际投资贸易洽谈会, 27th May 2019; “投洽会简介”, CIFIT). Chen Si studied industrial project management in France and started her career at HRD Antwerp (a company that provides diamond grading services) before joining BCECC in 2009. See “Get to know your diamond”, HRD Antwerp; “Chen Si”, LinkedIn.

<sup>67</sup>For instance, on the occasion of a workshop targeting Chinese companies based in Belgium organised by BCECC and advertised on the ACPB website (“Seminar: How to cope with Belgian social regulations? on June 7, 2012”, ACPB, 4th June 2012).

<sup>68</sup>“联合会简介”, FCPAE.



ordinating talent programmes.<sup>69</sup> Collaborations between BCECC and the ACPB have involved connections with key actors of Belgium's Chinese community, for example between Bernard Dewit and the ACPB's former chairman Song Zhiwei 宋志伟.<sup>70</sup> Song Zhiwei later became the director of the Belgian chapter of the **European (Belgium) Haizhi Innovation and Entrepreneurship Station (ACEIE, 欧洲(比利时)海智创新创业基地)** that was established in 2016 as the first of its kind in Europe.<sup>71</sup> In 2018, BCECC and the **China-Belgium Science and Technology Center (CBTC, 中国-比利时科技园)** co-organised the European chapter of the China Jinan Overseas High-level Talent Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition (中国·济南海外高层次人才创新创业大赛) under the guidance of the ACPB, the FCPAE, and the ACEIE.<sup>72</sup> United front organisations such as the FCPAE and the ACPB are instrumental in establishing local stations like the European Haizhi Innovation and Entrepreneurship Station thanks to their pre-established links within Chinese communities.<sup>73</sup> BCECC's role of local coordinator can be interpreted as similar to that of the FCPAE and the ACPB.

BCECC can also be solicited in solely diaspora-related activities in what seems likely to be a role of representation of Belgian interests.<sup>74</sup> The **Kam Yuen Supermarket (金**

<sup>69</sup>“旅比华人专业人士协会 (ACPB) 简介”, 旅比华人专业人士协会.

<sup>70</sup>“ACPB 主席宋志伟与比中经贸委 (BCECC) 主席德威特举行会谈”, ACPB, 13th Apr. 2012. Song Zhiwei has been based in Belgium since he graduated from Leuven University and was later hired by IBM (“比利时中国留学生: 我们是外国人看中国的一面镜子”, 人民日报 via 中国新闻网, 3rd Dec. 2014; “Zhiwei Song”, LinkedIn). He was active within the ACPB since its establishment in 2003 when he became the secretary general of the ACPB's first council (“旅比华人华侨专业人士协会举行成立大会”, 新闻中心, 2nd June 2003). In March 2018, Song was replaced by Xu Zhi'an 徐志安 as the head of the ACPB (“ACPB 第七届理事会圆满落幕顺利交班, 徐志安博士荣任主席的第八届理事会信心起航正式运作”, 旅比华人专业人士协会, 29th Mar. 2018).

<sup>71</sup>“ACPB 第七届理事会圆满落幕顺利交班, 徐志安博士荣任主席的第八届理事会信心起航正式运作”, ACPB, 29th Mar. 2018; “中国科协-FCPAE 欧洲(比利时)海智创新创业基地成功举办中国青岛海外人才创新创业大赛欧洲赛区预赛”, FCPAE, 14th May 2020; “基地简介”, 中国科协-FCPAE 欧洲(比利时)海智创新创业基地.

<sup>72</sup>“中国·济南海外高层次人才创新创业大赛 欧洲赛区第一轮通知”, ACPB, 7th May 2018. The ACEIE is presented as a platform for cooperation between entrepreneurs based on the advantageous knowledge of European professionals and the attractiveness of the Chinese market, “a bridgehead for excellent projects to enter the Chinese market” as described on its English website, supported by the FCPAE and the CBTC, under the leadership of the China Association for Science and Technology (CAST, 中国科学技术协会) (“基地简介”; “Profile of ACEIE”, 中国科协-FCPAE 欧洲(比利时)海智创新创业基地; “组织架构”, 中国科协-FCPAE 欧洲(比利时)海智创新创业基地). Organising talent programmes is part of the ACEIE's activities, with one such example being the Qingdao Overseas Talent Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition (中国青岛海外人才创新创业大赛) (“中国科协-FCPAE 欧洲(比利时)海智创新创业基地成功举办中国青岛海外人才创新创业大赛欧洲赛区预赛”). The programme covered highly strategic industry areas, namely integrated circuits and chip design, biomedical technologies, 5G and big data (*ibid.*). Similar talent programmes have been recently identified as part of a united front effort to gather sensitive data and foster technology transfer (Joske, “Hunting the phoenix”; “Threats to the U.S. Research Enterprise...”). Another aspect of the ACEIE is the services provided in technology transfer and finance (“Presentation of ACEIE”). The level of involvement of the Belgium-China Technology Center, the intervention of the Vice Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in 2019, and the priority given to Belgium in this case highlight the strategic appeal of the country for talent seekers (“基地简介”).

<sup>73</sup>Joske, *op. cit.* The FCPAE and CAST's involvement in united front work has been well documented. See “China's Overseas United Front Work”, U.S.–China Economic and Security Commission, 24th Aug. 2018; William C. Hannas & Didi Kirsten Tatlow, *China's Quest for Foreign Technology: Beyond Espionage*, Routledge, 2020; Joske, “The party speaks for you: Foreign interference and the Chinese Communist Party's united front system”; Geoff Wade, “The Federation of Chinese Professional Associations in Europe...”, Twitter, 5th Apr. 2020; Didi Kirsten Tatlow, “Mapping China-in-Germany”, Synopsis, 2nd Oct. 2019.

<sup>74</sup>In 2018, for instance, one day after a celebration of the Chinese liquor Moutai had been organised at the European Parliament by the EU-China Friendship Group, Bernard Dewit attended the opening of a Moutai retail store together with CCPIT Belgium representative Xu Chenbin 徐晨滨 (Lulu, *op. cit.*; “茅台广开欧洲市场渠道, 比利时首家茅台酒零售旗舰店开业”, 茅台国际, via Sohu, 30th June 2018).





**源超市**) in Brussels provides a good example of BCECC's involvement in diaspora activities. Kam Yuen is a major Asian food shop in Brussels. Liu Jingrui 刘景瑞, president of Kam Yuen and of Kam Yuen Holding that owns the supermarket, is a member of BCECC's board of administrators and founder of *Phoenix Eurasia* (凤凰欧亚网), a news website owned by the Kam Yuen group and created in 2017.<sup>75</sup> Kam Yuen itself is a "patron member" of BCECC but also benefits from the support of Huawei.<sup>76</sup> *Phoenix Eurasia*'s projects are directly related to the BRI and involve collaboration with companies like Huawei.<sup>77</sup> In 2019, Liu (through his company Kam Yuen) and the Guangdong Times Media Company (广东时代传媒有限公司) jointly founded the **Southern Media Group Europe (南方传媒(欧洲)有限公司)** in Brussels.<sup>78</sup> BCECC's chairman, Bernard Dewit, attended the company's inauguration and expressed support for the project.<sup>79</sup>

BCECC's expertise and ability to link with the CCPIT and Chinese businesses make sense when associated with the chamber's close cooperation with Belgian trade and investment agencies. Showing that China has established bridges with Belgian provinces and that the country's aspirations will contribute to regional development not only conveys that BCECC is an essential intermediary in business with China, but also provides the actors involved with better access to Belgian decision-makers. Belgium is composed of three regions: Brussels-Capital, Flanders and Wallonia. Each region

While Dewit delivered a congratulatory speech as BCECC's chairman, the seemingly informal event was also attended by high-profile diaspora representatives, such as Zhong Zhi 钟植, chairman of the European Federation of Traditional Chinese Culture (EFTCC, 欧洲中国传统文化联合会), and Yang Gaijing 杨丐镜, a restaurant owner and president of the Belgium-China International Catering Federation (比利时国际中餐业联合会) ("杨丐镜 比利时国际中餐业联合会主席", Acriusa). Yang is highly involved in the life of the Chinese diaspora in Belgium, as reflected by his status as a non-voting delegate in the CPPCC ("bceccq109", China Ministry of Commerce; Mattis, *op. cit.*). Yang was also an advisor at the European and Belgian Chinese Youth Federations. Other Chinese businesspersons and united front representatives took part in the ceremony, for example the founder and former president of the Belgium-Overseas Chinese Chamber of Commerce (比利时中华商会) Xu Jianzhen 徐坚真. Xu continued as a permanent honorary president after the 2019 appointment of his successor, Xu Yongzheng 徐雍政 ("比利时中华商会第三届理事会就职新老会长交接", 中国侨网 via 环球网, 17th Jan. 2019; "比利时中华商会隆重庆祝中华人民共和国成立70周年", 华商, 12th Sept. 2019). The organisation was established in 2012 in the presence of Zhuo Ruisheng 卓瑞生, deputy chief of mission and political attaché at the Chinese Embassy in Belgium, and other companies and representatives of diaspora organisations, such as Xinhua and the Belgian Qingtian Association ("比利时中华商会成立", 浙江省归国华侨联合会, 17th Sept. 2012).

<sup>75</sup>"Kam Yuen Holding - Démissions, nominations", Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises, 6th Jan. 2012; "BCECC - Démissions, nominations", Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises, 10th Apr. 2018; "金源集团", 凤凰时报.

<sup>76</sup>"BCECC"; "Main page", Kam Yuen. *Phoenix Eurasia*'s website mentions the *Phoenix Times* (凤凰时报) as its "sister publication", *Phoenix Times* being itself a regular attendee of the World Chinese Media Forum (世界华文传媒论坛) organised by the China News Service (中新社), a propaganda body within the united front system (Alex Joske, "Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work", *China Brief* 19.9 [2019]; Alex Joske et al., "The influence environment: A survey of Chinese-language media in Australia", *ASPI Policy Brief* 42 [2020]; Filip Jirouš & Petra Ševčíková, "Covert propaganda operations in plain sight: The CCP united front system's media network in Europe", Sinopsis, 30th July 2021).

<sup>77</sup>"金源集团".

<sup>78</sup>"助力中国文化“走出去”——南方传媒(欧洲)有限公司正式成立", 时代在线网 via TOM, 26th Apr. 2019.

<sup>79</sup>*ibid.* The project was reportedly meant to "cooperate with the Belgian government and society" (与比利时政府和各界展开全方位合作) and has the ambition to "go global" (走出去) with the help of "Kam Yuen's influence in Belgium and Europe" ("Consular CV of ZHANG Chi", The Antwerp Forum; "助力中国文化“走出去”..."). The CEO met with a delegation led by the deputy chairman of the Propaganda Department's Guangdong branch, Wang Guike 王桂科, and both were received at the Chinese embassy in Brussels ("驻比利时大使曹忠明会见广东省委宣传部代表团", Embassy of China in Belgium, 22nd Apr. 2019).



Figure 3: Bernard Dewit interviewed by CCPIT. Source: [CCPIT Academy](#).

has an agency dedicated to exports and investment: **Hub.Brussel** (formerly Brussels Invest & Export), **Flanders Investment & Trade (FIT)** and the **Walloon Export and Foreign Investment Agency (Awex)**, respectively. These agencies make ideal targets for BRI objectives as their success relies on fostered international cooperation and the signing of bilateral agreements, and bear favourable economic opportunities — confirmed by the fact that these agencies all have “welcome offices” for Chinese based in Belgium. Moreover, they are connected to local governments. For example, Awex is indirectly overseen by the Belgian Ministries of Trade and Budget, and FIT falls under the competency of several ministries, including those of Foreign Affairs and Culture.<sup>80</sup> BCECC acts as a point of contact between these agencies and the PRC authorities thanks to BCECC’s declared partnerships with the three agencies (on the same level as its partnership with the CCPIT).<sup>81</sup> To illustrate, the CCPIT and BCECC signed a cooperation agreement in June 2017 in the presence of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and former Belgian prime minister and now president of the European Council Charles Michel, and in October of the same year BCECC and FIT signed a reinforced “structural partnership” for 2017–2021.<sup>82</sup> Such partnerships are welcomed by Belgian politicians, and BCECC benefits from their engagement. For instance, in 2016 Charles Michel addressed BCECC members directly in a communication published in BCECC’s newsletter.<sup>83</sup> The presence of high-level Belgian and PRC politicians not only allows BCECC’s activities to gain endorsement, but also gives partners like the CCPIT opportunities to cultivate relationships with key decision-makers. Ultimately, this can result in the signing of more agreements and further privileged access to high-level representatives. For instance, in 2017, BCECC organised a “match-making” event, “in close cooperation” with the CCPIT, Awex, FIT and (now) Hub.Brussel.<sup>84</sup> The event involved the chairman of CCPIT and PRC vice minister of commerce Jiang Zengwei 姜增伟, and the Belgian deputy prime minister Kris Peeters, who, in his

<sup>80</sup>“Les organes de contrôle”, Awex; “Wie zijn we?”, FIT.

<sup>81</sup>“BCECC Partners”, BCECC.

<sup>82</sup>“Flanders Investment & Trade”, Flanders-China Chamber of Commerce; “BCECC Partners”; “BCECC Newsletter December 2017 36”, BCECC, 1st Dec. 2017.

<sup>83</sup>“BCECC Newsletter June 2016 34”, BCECC, 20th June 2001.

<sup>84</sup>“Belgium-China B2B Matchmaking Lunch”, BCECC, 1st June 2017.



speech, invited Chinese companies to choose Belgium and indicated that he had attended the “One Belt One Road Forum” in Beijing.<sup>85</sup>

However, BCECC’s high-level outreach is probably best illustrated by Bernard Dewit’s visibility in the establishment of the **China-Belgium Technology Centre (CBTC, 中国—比利时科技园)**, a cluster of Chinese organisations and enterprises that seek investment opportunities in Wallonia, operated by the Chinese state-owned company **United Investment Europe (UI Europe, 联投欧洲科技投资有限公司)**.<sup>86</sup> Associated with the Catholic University of Leuven (UCL) and Awex, the CBTC was established to host nearly 200 European and Chinese companies for further business and investment cooperation with Belgian actors and Chinese universities, the projects, and was presented as the “first choice for Chinese companies in the EU Market” by UI Europe.<sup>87</sup> The CBTC not only hosts companies, but also organisations such as the Association for Chinese Professionals in Belgium.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, Li Junjie 李军杰, who is the current chairman of UI Europe’s state-owned parent company,<sup>89</sup> the Hubei United Development Investment Group (湖北联合发展投资集团), is a CCP cadre who has held government posts up to deputy mayor level and who has served as deputy secretary of the company’s CCP Committee.<sup>90</sup> The initiative behind the CBTC is the result of a bilateral agreement between Xi Jinping and the former Belgian prime minister Elio Di Rupo, an agreement whose signature was attended by Chairman Bernard Dewit.<sup>91</sup>

BCECC’s involvement with recognised organisations that are part of the Chinese economic influence and united front systems, as well as the chamber’s privileged connections with Belgium’s political sphere, justify and reinforce influence work that goes beyond promoting economic opportunities. In this sense, BCECC’s legitimacy and positive role bringing economic opportunities to Belgium help portray China’s image and projects such as the Belt and Road in a better light, and provides privileged access to decision-making bodies.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.* Kris Peeters had given an interview for Xinhua a month earlier, where he reaffirmed his support to the BRI (“[Interview: Belgium eyes tapping into China's Belt and Road Initiative: deputy PM](#)”, Xinhua, 17th May 2007). A few months later, he was presiding the signing of a concession agreement between COSCO and the Port of Zeebrugge (“[COSCO Shipping Ports signs concession agreement with port of Zeebrugge and reaches MOU with CMA for strategic partnership](#)”, Port of Zeebrugge, 18th Jan. 2023). Peeters’ affinity with China dates back years before. In 2013, he participated in a FIT mission to Chengdu, endorsed by Bernard Dewit (“[Kris Peeters op economische missie naar China](#)”, *De Morgen* [13th Sept. 2006]). In 2016, he attended a new year reception organised by BCECC, in presence of the PRC ambassador to Belgium (“[Belgian PM is sole European leader invited to Boao Forum](#)”, *China Daily* [16th Feb. 2017]).

<sup>86</sup> “[About](#)”, UI Europe - CBTC; “[联投欧洲科技投资有限公司](#)”, 欧盟中国商会. The CBTC has already been labelled as a potential vector of espionage by Belgium’s intelligence services (“[China suspected of bio-espionage in 'heart of EU'](#)”, *EU Observer*, 6th May 2020). While the Chinese embassy denied these allegations, several aspects of the science park might warrant further scrutiny, especially in the light of recent research on the CCP’s use of talent recruitment programmes (“[驻比利时使馆发言人就法国有关媒体涉华不实报道的声明](#)”, 中华人民共和国驻比利时王国大使馆, 17th May 2020; Joske, “[Hunting the phoenix](#)”).

<sup>87</sup> “[中国—比利时科技园项目正式启动](#)”, CCPIT, 21st Aug. 2018; “[China-Belgium Technology Center](#)”, UCLouvain; “[About](#)”, CBTC; “[中国—比利时科技园](#)”, CCPIT Henan.

<sup>88</sup> “[ACPB Profile](#)”, Flickr, 21st Nov. 2015.

<sup>89</sup> “[公司简介](#)”, 联投集团.

<sup>90</sup> “[李军杰同志简历](#)”, 联投集团, 27th July 2020.

<sup>91</sup> “[中国—比利时科技园](#)”.



## 2 From trade promotion to political work

In this configuration, CCP actors are in a position to ensure the alignment of BCECC-linked activities with their political objectives. PRC authorities benefit from BCECC's position in the Belgian sphere while boosting this position by creating extra channels of influence through agreements and collaborations based on regional development, culture, tourism and other BRI-related byproducts that serve China's propaganda. This pattern ideally exemplifies Stokes' characterisation of Chinese political warfare: "centrality of intelligence, centralised planning and decentralised execution".<sup>92</sup> To this end, a network of organisations developed around BCECC whose main characteristic is their engagement at a more political level. Their overlapping structure of the actors involved and their high-level connections contribute to injecting legitimacy into the network that also benefits communication around the initiatives implemented within it. The role of organisations like BCECC is therefore two-fold: BCECC's declared role makes it difficult to criticise related activities and contributes to concealing the political dimension of any CCP-linked partners, molding BCECC into a long-term proxy of CCP interests embedded within Belgium's economic and political spheres. Such work is only possible because official bilateral relations echo China's desired narrative and make unofficial initiatives even more legitimate. Thus, such effort involves a strong economic legitimacy, on which political influence can be built through elements of foreign diplomacy and cultural initiatives that fall under the work of the propaganda system.

BCECC's political capacity is empowered by the chamber's good relations with PRC diplomats, who in return can easily oversee the organisation's activities in which they regularly participate.<sup>93</sup> This relationship translates into frequent encounters between BCECC's chairman and top officers of the Chinese embassy and of the Chinese Mission in various configurations.<sup>94</sup> The presence of Chinese diplomats at most events indicates their need to monitor and oversee any activities that relate to China in Belgium.<sup>95</sup> Therefore, it is vital for an organisation like BCECC to maintain friendly relations with the local diplomatic representations, at the risk of losing its capacity to do business properly. In return, BCECC receives a certain level of recognition from CCP representatives.<sup>96</sup> Likewise, Bernard Dewit has been recognised as a certified expert by the State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs (中国外国专家局外国专家).<sup>97</sup> That and meetings like the one in 2014 when Bernard Dewit was received by Hu Sishe 户思社, then vice chair of the Chinese People's Associations for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), underline the recognition of BCECC's role in China's affairs in Belgium.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>92</sup>Stokes, *op. cit.*

<sup>93</sup>"Meet & Greet with the new Chinese Ambassador H.E. Mr. Cao Zhongming", BCECC, 24th Oct. 2018.

<sup>94</sup>"Ambassador Zhang Ming Meets with BCECC Chairman Bernard Dewit and ETC CEO Eduardo Santander", Mission of the PRC to the EU, 10th Feb. 2018; "驻比利时大使曹忠明出席布鲁塞尔中国文化中心“天涯共此时”中秋音乐会", Embassy of the PRC in Belgium, 25th Sept. 2018.

<sup>95</sup>For instance, the opening ceremony of an art exhibition at the Brussels China Cultural Center was attended by the Belgian CCPT's chief representative Ye Bing 叶兵 and Li Jianmin 李建民, chief of the education section at the Chinese Mission ("Opening of the exhibition "Dynamic Life, Rainbow Colors"", China Cultural Center, 24th May 2016).

<sup>96</sup>For instance, in an interview with the Brussels China Cultural Center's current director Ge Yiyu 葛译友, Ge praised Bernard Dewit personally, helping shape Dewit's image as a friendly and knowledgeable link between Belgium and China ("访布鲁塞尔中国文化中心主任葛译友", via Sohu, 8th May 2020).

<sup>97</sup>"Bernard DEWIT".

<sup>98</sup>"户思社副会长会见比中经贸委员会主席贝尔纳·德威特", CPAFFC, 27th May 2014.



This section first introduces and analyses the OBOR Committee, an informal coalition of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) whose main goal is to promote the Belt and Road Initiative, to which BCECC contributed as a co-founder. The following section discusses the network of friendly organisations orbiting around the OBOR Committee, which share similar goals of promotion under the guidance of the CCP. The final subsection is devoted to BCECC's media presence as a sign that BCECC's engagement with China also serves PRC ideological and propaganda objectives.

## 2.1 The OBOR Committee

The Europe China One Belt One Road Culture & Tourism Development Committee (OBOR Committee, 欧中“一带一路”文化旅游发展委员会), an informal coalition of Members of the European Parliament, was established in 2016 by four individuals, including BCECC's chairman, Bernard Dewit, who has acted as its secretary-general, and Chen Si, BCECC's point of contact with the CCPIT.<sup>99</sup> Such coalitions are non-official cross-party alliances between MEPs, often created on the initiative of interest groups.<sup>100</sup> These groups seek to gain more political weight while offering visibility to MEPs who act as experts beyond their official thematic committees and regional delegations.<sup>101</sup> The OBOR Committee's very name reflects its political objectives: to promote the BRI through culture and tourism. However, the rare public interventions of the OBOR Committee question the real motivation of creating such a group. One reason could be that the committee allows Chinese domestic narratives to support the idea of an increasingly unified European Parliament that endorses the BRI (and therefore, CCP policies). Another reason could be to fulfill a longer-term objective of securing an increasing amount of MEPs friendly to Beijing, both in the scope of their voting power at the Parliament and of their potential ulterior mandate at home, as the European Parliament is first and foremost a gathering of mostly local politicians. Lastly, it could also be another aborted attempt at creating a new influence channel.

The OBOR Committee's chair, and one of its only known figures, is Hungarian MEP István Ujhelyi. His relationship with Bernard Dewit can be traced back to an event in 2015, also attended by the then MEP and Chair of the Delegation for relations with the PRC Jo Leinen.<sup>102</sup> Affiliated with the Socialists and Democrats EP Party, he has been an active member of the Hungarian Socialist Party since he joined it in 1993 (he became the vice-president of the youth wing in 1995).<sup>103</sup> At the European Parliament, Ujhelyi's involvement in issues related to foreign affairs, tourism and transport makes his profile particularly strategic for China, especially in light of the PRC's

<sup>99</sup>“*Launching ceremony of the OBOR Committee*”, China Cultural Center, 27th Apr. 2016; “*Europe-China OBOR Culture & Tourism Development Committee - Constitution*”.

<sup>100</sup>Christian D. de Fouloy, “*Parliament Friendship Groups*”, AALEP, 18th Feb. 2016.

<sup>101</sup>There used to be another informal group at the European Parliament whose purpose was to promote a positive image of China in Europe, the EU-China Friendship Group. The group's chairman, Czech MEP Jan Zahradil, announced its suspension in January 2021 (“*EU-China 'friendship group' suspended, its chair says*”, Politico, 21st Jan. 2025; “*欧中“一带一路”文化旅游发展委员会举行周年庆典*”, 光明日报, via 新华网, 9th Dec. 2016; Lulu, *op. cit.*). Gai Lin 盖琳 co-founded the Association and Commercial Council of the Natives of Dongbei of China in Belgium (Association et Conseil Commercial des Natifs de Dongbei de la Chine en Belgique) (idem, “*Repurposing democracy*”; “*Association et Commercial des Natifs de Dongbei de la Chine en Belgique*”, Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises, 7th Mar. 2020).

<sup>102</sup>付敬, “*中欧各界在中国日报研讨会上向巴黎枪击遇难者默哀*”, *China Daily* (8th Jan. 2015); “*Networking Lunch with Mr. Jo Leinen on March 21, 2017*”, BCECC, 21st Mar. 2017; “*Jo Leinen*”, European Parliament.

<sup>103</sup>“*Dr. Ujhelyi István*”, MSZP.



selling points in Belgium and Europe. Ujhelyi has been the vice-chair of the Committee on Transport and Tourism (TRAN) since his first term in 2014, during which he was also a member of the Delegation for relations with China (D-CN) and a substitute of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET). Since 2019 he has been a substitute of the Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) and of the D-CN. He was also vice-chairman of the EU-China Friendship Group at the European Parliament.<sup>104</sup>

Ujhelyi's cooperation with China goes back to before his first term as MEP. In 2012, he founded the Confucius Institute in Szeged, Hungary, to which he remains an advisor.<sup>105</sup> He used to be a member of the China advisory council for Friends of Europe,<sup>106</sup> a high profile think-tank in Brussels, of which the Chinese Mission is one of the most generous sponsors. This funding allows the think-tank to organise events that help promote Beijing's interests, such as with the CPPCC.<sup>107</sup> Ujhelyi's position towards China is visible in his media appearances. In an interview with Euractiv (one of the most popular media outlets on Brussels politics) in August 2020, written with the "support" of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, he stressed that the challenges in EU-China relations should not distract both parties from the opportunities of cooperation in fields of common interest.<sup>108</sup> The article does not disclose his role in the OBOR Committee or in the EU-China Friendship Group, but only his capacity as vice-chair of the EP's TRAN Committee.

Ujhelyi's history at the European Parliament also reflects a position on China that has at times aligned with CCP points of view, although this does not necessarily indicate a direct link between his parliamentary activity and his contacts with Chinese counterparts. For instance, on the occasion of a debate on Sino-European relations in 2015, all his inputs were favourable towards China.<sup>109</sup> Not only did he request the withdrawal of mentions of negative aspects such as China's human rights situation, he also proposed adding pro-China statements that echoed the CCP's typical vocabulary. On issues like Hong Kong's autonomy and the human rights of Uyghurs, Ujhelyi abstained from voting; he voted for the establishment of an EP special committee on foreign interference.<sup>110</sup>

In his capacity as an MEP and chairman of the EP's OBOR Committee, Ujhelyi has paid visits to China to meet with key actors from governmental structures and the

<sup>104</sup>Lulu, *op. cit.*

<sup>105</sup>"Hungarian delegation visits Confucius Institute Brussels", Ujhelyi.eu, 1st Oct. 2014; "History", Confucius Institute at University of Szeged. In 2014, Richárd Mohr became the institute's director. Mohr acts as the vice-president of the OBOR Committee and is (or was) a member of the board of the China Arts Festival in the EU ("Mohr Richárd CV", Szeged Tudományegyetem; "Agenda of the Launching Ceremony of the SRILT", CPAA Theaters, 12th Oct. 2016). Mohr is also involved in the Hungary-China Friendship Association and is present in Chinese state-media, such as CCTV and Xinhua, to promote his vision of Hungary-China friendship. See "Richárd Mohr added a new photo...", Facebook, 28th Mar. 2018; "Richárd Mohr updated his cover photo", Facebook, 19th Feb. 2017; "“魅力上海”走进布达佩斯", Xinhua, 29th June 2017; "中信银行战略合作 匈牙利、加拿大投资移民说明会圆满落幕", 浙江在线, 3rd Mar. 2014; "布达佩斯经济大学副校长来访社科院欧洲所及 17+1 智库网络", China-CEEC Think Tank Network, 14th June 2019.

<sup>106</sup>"Mohr Richárd CV".

<sup>107</sup>"List of organisations that contributed to the revenues of Friends of Europe's annual work programme (2019)", Friends of Europe; "Handlanger für Autokraten", Zeit online, 26th Feb. 2018; Hamilton & Ohlberg, *loc. cit.*

<sup>108</sup>Lin Goethals, "EU-China relations at the crossroads", Euractiv, 31st Aug. 2020.

<sup>109</sup>"46 Amendments of István UJHELYI related to 2015/2003(INI)", Parltrack.

<sup>110</sup>"István Ujhelyi", Vote Watch EU, 14th Oct. 2020.



Figure 4: István Ujhelyi in Haikou. Source: 海旅控股集团 via 美篇.

private sector.<sup>111</sup> Ujhelyi's 2019 visit to the state-owned Haikou Tourism & Culture Investment Holding Group (海旅控股集团) illustrates this relationship.<sup>112</sup> The visit was described as having been organised by the deputy secretary of the company's party committee. Ujhelyi was accompanied by his parliamentary assistants, including Wang Sihao 王思昊, described as an "advisor on China affairs" and "advisor to the chairman of the OBOR Committee".<sup>113</sup>

Since 2017, Wang Sihao has been a member of the OBOR Committee's executive board.<sup>114</sup> Wang has also worked for the Hungarian Parliament<sup>115</sup> and owns GSHK, a consultancy company founded in Szeged in 2013 (one year before Ujhelyi's first term), listed on Ujhelyi's official MEP webpage as a "service provider" (GSHK Asia).<sup>116</sup>

On the same trip, Ujhelyi and his team also visited Shenzhen's Belt and Road Research Institute for International Cooperation and Development (一带一路国际合作发展(深圳)研究院) and supported the foundation of a "Europe (Shenzhen) Centre" (欧洲(深圳)中心) under the framework of the BRI.<sup>117</sup> Later, Ujhelyi met with Li Guoliang

<sup>111</sup> As a BRI advocate and the TRAN Committee vice-chair, Ujhelyi's trips to China are inherently political and often relate to relevant policy areas. In 2015, for instance, he visited Xi'an Polytechnic University (西安工程大学) on the invitation of the Shaanxi-Hungary Friendship Association (匈牙利陕西联谊会) ("欧洲议会议员乌伊海依·伊什特万一行来访我校", 西安工程大学, 28th Sept. 2015). Accompanied by his assistant Wang Sihao, Ujhelyi discussed the BRI and a student exchange programme with the University of Szeged.

<sup>112</sup> "欧中“一带一路”文化和旅游发展委员会主席 Ujhelyi.Istvan 一行考察调研海旅控股集团", 海旅控股集团, via 美篇, 27th Jan. 2019.

<sup>113</sup> "István UJHELYI", European Parliament.

<sup>114</sup> "Europe - China OBOR Culture & Tourism Development Committee - Démissions, nominations", Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises, 28th May 2018.

<sup>115</sup> "Mr. Wang Sihao", Facebook, 14th Oct. 2018; "Géza, Szeged ikonikus kínaija", Szeged.hu, 25th Aug. 2015.

<sup>116</sup> "GSHK ASIA Kft.", E-cégjegyzék; "Wang Sihao", LinkedIn; Kuthi Áron, "Elkészítő összegek tűnnek el az Európai Parlamentben", Magyar Nemzet, 7th Dec. 2016.

<sup>117</sup> "欧中“一带一路”文化和旅游发展委员会伊什特万·乌伊海伊主席一行到访研究院并就共同建立“欧洲(深圳)中心”签订协议", 一带一路国际合作发展(深圳)研究院, 27th Jan. 2019.

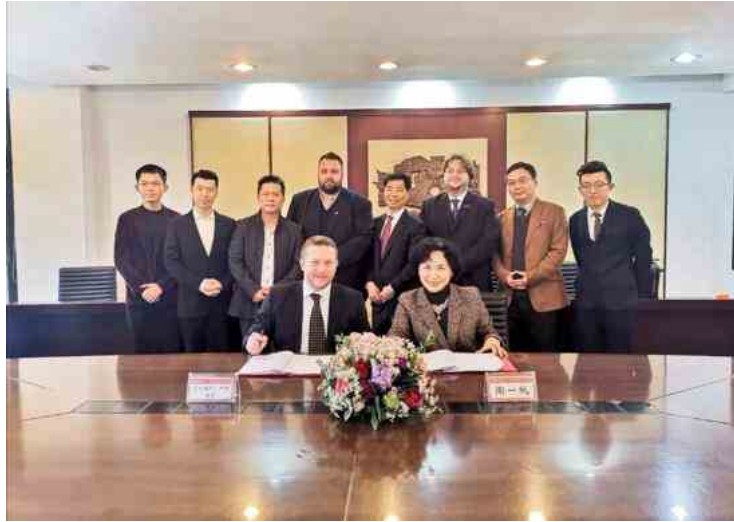


Figure 5: MEP István Ujhelyi and the director of the BRI research institute, Tao Yitao 陶一桃. Source: 一带一路国际合作发展（深圳）研究院.

李国梁, vice-chairman of the Hainan Committee of the CPPCC, to sign an investment agreement.<sup>118</sup>

István Ujhelyi has shown support for Chinese government objectives in several ways, such as his involvement in the establishment of a Confucius Institute in Hungary. The OBOR Committee's members and satellite organisations described in the following sections nurture close relations with each other as well as with CCP bodies, notably linked to the PRC Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and the Ministry of Commerce.

## 2.2 A network of BRI-friendly organisations

BCECC's political work is most evident given the chamber's role in creating the OBOR Committee. Both organisations are at the centre of a broader cluster of organisations — either recently founded or repurposed — whose declared purpose is to promote the tourism and cultural dimensions of the Belt and Road Initiative. This network of organisations also nurtures relations with Chinese governmental agencies, either through their personnel or indirectly via events and collaborations. Their connections, interactions and overlapping staff presuppose a certain level of alignment, which indicates a potential capacity to act as a powerful propaganda machine.

Propaganda based on China's cultural assets is one of the key instruments used to promote the BRI. This is an aspect of Xi Jinping's concept of national cultural security (国家文化安全), a policy paradigm reflecting Xi's obsession with preventing foreign interference: not only must the power of the CCP's discourse be amplified abroad, but it must eventually be able to secure itself, nipping any subversive discourse that might not validate Beijing's narrative in the bud.<sup>119</sup> But as Johnson put it, "culture

<sup>118</sup>“海南省政协副主席李国梁会见欧盟·中国“一带一路”文化和旅游发展委员会主席”, 中国产业经济信息网, 31st Jan. 2019.

<sup>119</sup>Matthew D. Johnson, “Safeguarding socialism: The origins, evolution and expansion of China's total security paradigm”, Sinopsis, 16th June 2020.



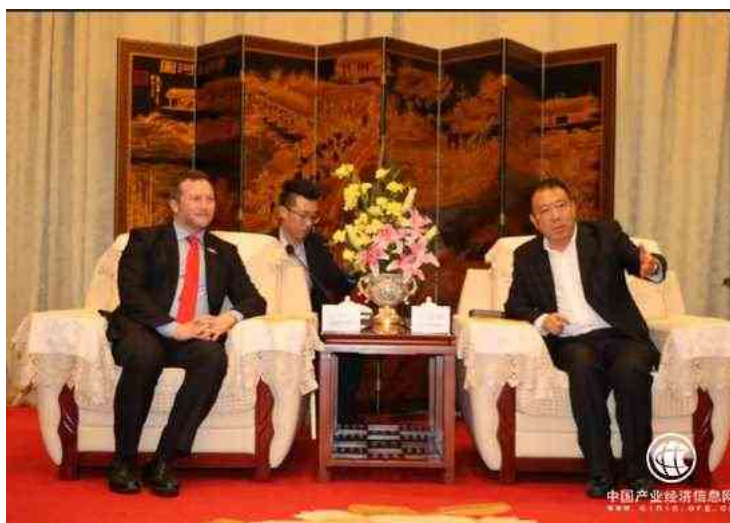


Figure 6: István Ujhelyi and Li Guoliang. Source: 中国产业经济信息网.

also became part of China's foreign policy under the guise of comprehensive national power."<sup>120</sup> In the long term, such a narrative seeks to create a world order whose dynamic would strongly depend on one's degree of allegiance to the CCP's vision of global norms.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, tourism is an important element of the propaganda apparatus: former Vice-Chairman of the China National Tourism Administration Zhu Shanzhong 祝善忠 became the executive director of the UN agency for tourism, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).<sup>122</sup> Coincidentally, István Ujhelyi was previously a special ambassador of the UNWTO to the EU.<sup>123</sup>

To understand the place of culture in China's influence operations in Brussels, one must pay attention to the **Brussels China Cultural Centre (布鲁塞尔中国文化中心)** founded in 2015 by the PRC Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Municipality of Shanghai.<sup>124</sup> The centre has become a key actor in supervising cultural activities in Brussels and acts as a tool of public diplomacy that goes hand-in-hand with the Chinese Mission and the Chinese Embassy.<sup>125</sup> BCECC is in contact with the China Cultural Center, as the Dewit Law Office was involved in the centre's legal affairs in 2016.<sup>126</sup> Bernard Dewit himself has appeared at the cultural centre, notably when the OBOR Committee organised its inauguration ceremony there, with the Chinese

<sup>120</sup>Ibid.

<sup>121</sup>Rolland, "China's vision..."

<sup>122</sup>"UNWTO 执行主任", 设街旅游城市联合会, 21st Mar. 2017.

<sup>123</sup>"István Ujhelyi becomes special ambassador of the UNWTO", Ujhelyi.eu, 18th June 2012.

<sup>124</sup>"About", China Cultural Center.

<sup>125</sup>Genaille, *op. cit.* The centre's founding members are all Chinese diplomats, namely the former Chinese ambassador to Belgium, Qu Xing 曲星, the culture counsellor to the Chinese embassy, Xiang Shihai 向世海, and Niu Hongfei 牛鸿飞, who graduated from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and has worked at the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and in the Chinese embassies to Benin and Belgium. See "Centre culturel de Chine à Bruxelles - Constitution", Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises, 3rd Feb. 2015; "驻比利时大使曹忠明视察布鲁塞尔中国文化中心", Embassy of the PRC in Belgium, 31st Dec. 2018; "IUNESCO Capacity Development Programme on the 2005 Convention for the specialists from Asia and Pacific regions", UNESCO, 10th June 2018.

<sup>126</sup>"Centre Culturel de Chine à Bruxelles - Démissions, nominations", Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises, 12th Dec. 2016.



Figure 7: OBOR Committee Chairman István Ujhelyi, European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport Tibor Navracsics, Ambassador of China to the EU Yang Yanyi 杨燕怡, BCECC Chairman Bernard Dewit and European Travel Commission Director Eduardo Santander at the launching ceremony of the OBOR Committee at Brussels China Cultural Center in 2016. Source: [China Cultural Center](#).

ambassador and former Hungarian Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, Tibor Navracsics, in attendance.<sup>127</sup>

The first organisation involved in this culture/tourism cluster around BCECC and the OBOR Committee is the **European Travel Commission (ETC)**, a lobbying group established in 1948 that represents national tourism organisations across Europe. The ETC is chaired by Eduardo Santander, who co-founded the OBOR Committee together with Dewit and Ujhelyi, although he left the committee in 2018.<sup>128</sup> He was replaced by Ujhelyi's EP assistant, Wang Sihao, as a member of the board of the OBOR Committee.<sup>129</sup> The ETC was involved in the EU-China Tourism Year (ECTY, 中国-欧盟旅游年) in 2018, a bilateral project for which the ETC received the European Commission's mandate to promote the EU as a tourist destination in China and vice-versa.<sup>130</sup> As an indication of the convergence of interests between BCECC and the ETC — illustrated by their involvement in the OBOR Committee —, Dewit and Santander met with the

<sup>127</sup>“Art master Liu Haisu is honored in retrospective exhibition”, China Cultural Center, 7th Nov. 2019; “Launching ceremony of the OBOR Committee”.

<sup>128</sup>“Europe–China OBOR Culture & Tourism Development Committee - Constitution”; ““一带一路”欧中文化旅游委员会在布鲁塞尔揭牌”, China Cultural Center, 1st Mar. 2017; “Europe - China OBOR Culture & Tourism Development Committee - Démissions, nominations”.

<sup>129</sup>“Europe - China OBOR Culture & Tourism Development Committee - Démissions, nominations”.

<sup>130</sup>“Promoting destination Europe”, EU Commission. The ETC opened a “China Operations Group” in Beijing in 2010, chaired since 2017 by Ludvine Destrée (“Promoting destination Europe”; Philippe Lawson, “Ludvine Destrée, le visage du tourisme européen en Chine”, *L'Écho* [20th Dec. 2017]). Destrée has a background in international relations and interpretation and is also a representative of the Walloon tourism agency in China (Visit Wallonia) (idem, “Ludvine Destrée, le visage du tourisme européen en Chine”; “Ludvine Destrée”, LinkedIn). In 2017, she was described by a Belgian publication as “the face of European tourism in China” (Lawson, *op. cit.*). The ETC's website lists Welcome Chinese as a partner, a company that issues quality certificates in the tourism sector, under the indirect supervision of the former China National Tourism Administration (“Associate Members”, European Travel Commission).



Figure 8: Unveiling of the ECTY's logo in presence of the chairman of the China National Tourism Administration Li Jinzao 李金早, Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang 李克强, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, and European Commissioner for Trade Cecilia Malmström. Source: ECTY2018.

Chinese ambassador to the EU, Zhang Ming 张明, in 2018 to discuss commercial and tourism cooperation.<sup>131</sup>

Even closer to the OBOR Committee, the triangle of organisations described below shows the complexity and extent of the interconnections that link Belgium's Chinese culture and tourism cluster.

First, the **China Arts Festival in the EU (中国-欧盟文化艺术节)** was a yearly series of cultural events related to China in Europe. The festival, started in 2015 and partnered with the OBOR Committee, signed a trilateral agreement with the OBOR Committee and the **China Arts and Entertainment Group (CAEG, 中国对外文化集团)**, a group of state-owned cultural enterprises funded by the State Council of the PRC.<sup>132</sup> In 2016, the festival's opening ceremony was held on the premises of the European External Action Service, a ceremony attended by Bernard Dewit, among others.<sup>133</sup> The festival was co-chaired by Julie Patterson and one of Ujhelyi's former parliamentary assistants.<sup>134</sup> Julie Patterson has a background in European law and Chinese language, and has previously worked for the Walloon Export and Foreign Investment Agency (Awex).<sup>135</sup> The festival was sponsored by Huawei, the Bank of China, Hainan Airlines, Tangla hotels and UI Europe, for which Patterson used to work.<sup>136</sup>

The secretary general of the China Arts Festival in the EU was Wang Haichen 王海晨, who is also the CEO of Atlas Hiseas, a Belgium-based PR company founded in

<sup>131</sup>"Ambassador Zhang Ming Meets..."

<sup>132</sup>"China Arts Festival to the EU - Souvenir Book 2016", China Arts Festival; "集团简介", 中国对外文化集团.

<sup>133</sup>"China Arts Festival to the EU - Souvenir Book 2016".

<sup>134</sup>Orsolya Hegedűs worked at the European Parliament as István Ujhelyi's assistant and is also presented as executive manager of the OBOR Committee. She graduated in finance and business strategies from Sciences Po Paris and went on to work for an American consultancy. See "EIAS", Twitter, 10th July 2017; "Orsolya Hegedűs", LinkedIn; "Munka az EP-ben: Rózsakirálynóból és kispályás focistából is lehet aszisztens", Délmagyar, 16th June 2017.

<sup>135</sup>"Julie Patterson", LinkedIn.

<sup>136</sup>"Sponsors", China Arts Festival; "Julie Patterson".



2012 and part of the cluster.<sup>137</sup> Originally called Global Tech Consult and later Atlas International Culture, Atlas Hiseas advertises itself as a facilitator of Europe-China cooperation through the production of content, events and business opportunities. The organisation changed its name in 2018 after having merged with **Hiseas International Tourism Group (Hiseas International, 四川远海国际旅行社有限公司)**, a conglomerate of tourism companies founded in Lausanne in 2011 and described as the largest Chinese land travel service company in Europe.<sup>138</sup> Looking at Atlas Hiseas' activities shows the reach of the organisation. Besides PR and communication activities organised for the Brussels China Cultural Center, the China Arts Festival in the EU or the Brussels-based think-tank European Institute for Asian Studies, Atlas Hiseas also facilitated the signing of an agreement between Hiseas International and Bulgaria's Ministry of Tourism, for instance.<sup>139</sup> Another relevant example is the creation of the "Sino-Belgian Alliance for creative industries and innovation", initiated by Atlas Hiseas, including the Walloon export and trade agency Awex, the establishment of which was overseen by BCECC.<sup>140</sup> However, the various hats worn by some of Atlas Hiseas' staff likely indicate a network and connections with the Chinese authorities. Both Atlas Hiseas' and Hiseas International's CEOs, Wang Haichen and Wang Wei 王威, hold high positions within the **China-Europe Association for Technical and Economic Cooperation (CEATEC, 中国欧洲经济技术合作协会)**, an organisation dedicated to the promotion of trade and commercial ties between China and Europe, directly supervised by the PRC Ministry of Commerce.<sup>141</sup> Uhelyi and Santander were present at the ceremony for the acquisition of Atlas Hiseas by Hiseas International, motivated to make Chinese culture "go global".<sup>142</sup> Part of the mission is described as aiming to develop "business and people-to-people exchanges between China and the EU in the long run" as a "non-state force" (民间力量) promoting the BRI.<sup>143</sup>

<sup>137</sup>"China Arts Festival to the EU - Souvenir Book 2016".

<sup>138</sup>"Global Tech Consult", Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises, 12th June 2012; Wang Haichen, "Atlas Hiseas: Europe-China cooperation facilitator", Awex; "中比企业携手淘金“一带一路”", Xinhua Silk Road, 5th July 2018. The travel company Hiseas lists on its website the European Travel Commission (of which it is a member) and the OBOR Committee as "friendly links", along with the China Tourism Academy (中国旅游研究院), which is directly affiliated with the PRC Ministry of Culture and Tourism. ("Associate Members"; "Hiseas International Tourism Group Cooperating with Atlas International Culture to Add Vitality to the China-EU Relations", Hiseas) Similarly, the company previously described MEP István Ujhelyi as "a friend of Hiseas" on the occasion of the company's yearly conference ("“厚积博发·融聚远海”——远海国际首场欧洲年会, 圆满结束! 返回列表", Hiseas).

<sup>139</sup>"Program of the 2017 edition", China Arts Festival in the EU; Genaille, *op. cit.*; "Towards a more open economic system: China (Shanghai) Pilot FTZ & Development of Cultural Trade", EIAS, 13th Apr. 2016; Wang Haichen, *op. cit.*

<sup>140</sup>"Cérémonie du lancement de l'Alliance sino-belge pour les Industries créatives et l'Innovation", Awex, 9th Sept. 2019.

<sup>141</sup>"协会简介", CEATEC. Wang Haichen is the chief representative of the Belgian Office of the EU Committee of CEATEC, which Atlas Hiseas lists as one of its clients ("Hiseas International Tourism Group Cooperating..."; "协会简介", 中国欧洲经济技术合作协会; Wang Haichen, *op. cit.*). Hiseas Group CEO Wang Wei 王威 is also the executive chairman of the European Union Working Committee of CEATEC ("Wang Wei (Duma)", ITIC). CEATEC's mission statement indicates a focus on the BRI, the objective to "go global" for Chinese companies and liaison with local governments, Chinese embassies and European chambers of commerce ("协会简介"). This mission echoes the individual objectives of the described cluster of organisations and individuals. In 2020, CEATEC organised a large-scale conference with foreign missions and embassies in order to create "opportunities for direct exchanges between Chinese and foreign institutions and companies", including a representative of the Belgian embassy to China ("2020 中欧协会与驻华使团新春交流会圆满召开", Ministry of Commerce of the PRC, 12th Jan. 2020).

<sup>142</sup>"Hiseas International Tourism Group Cooperating..."

<sup>143</sup>"Hiseas International Tourism Group Cooperating..."; "中比企业携手淘金“一带一路”", 新华丝路, 5th July 2018.



Wang Haichen and Julie Patterson are married, and Patterson serves as the head of Atlas Hiseas' legal and administration departments.<sup>144</sup> Together, they also established the company **Semafort International Business Development (Semafort)** in 2011, in which Wang holds 90% of the shares, and Patterson the remainder.<sup>145</sup> Semafort's activities relate to scientific and cultural exchanges as well as import/export and tourism.<sup>146</sup> Wang is also an advisor at Awex (which mandated Atlas Hiseas in 2019 to reach out to key Chinese opinion leaders).<sup>147</sup> The connections do not stop here, as Semafort has employed people from the cluster: Thùy Mai Hò Đúc, who worked for Atlas Hiseas and Awex; Tan Xuan 谭轩, who became co-manager of Semafort in 2015, acted as vice secretary-general of the China Arts Festival and was appointed as a manager of Atlas Hiseas in 2019; and Cheng Shican, a former intern at *China Daily EU* who has also worked for Hiseas International and Atlas Hiseas.<sup>148</sup>

Such a dense network and overlapping staff increases the chance that their common messages are well heard in Belgium and Europe, while nurturing connections between decision-makers and PRC official bodies. The combination of friendly narratives, concrete projects and involvement of key local figures maximises the success of the propaganda effort. A focus on BCECC's media presence confirms the more low-key political role of the chamber.

### 2.3 BCECC's media presence

BCECC's presence in the media landscape serves a three-fold purpose. First, Bernard Dewit's appearances in Chinese media feed domestic propaganda narratives that depict Belgium as a welcoming land for Chinese investments (presence of European institutions, central location in Europe, Belgium's political willingness to develop its economy). Secondly, BCECC is well placed in Belgium to figure prominently in local media and media with an EU-focused audience, in addition to having the means and the capacity to reach its own audience through its own channels. Lastly, BCECC's seemingly legitimate voice can be used to validate PRC narratives in Chinese media channels targeting domestic audiences.

Indeed, BCECC Chairman Bernard Dewit's presence in Chinese media is noticeable. Through appearances that are often characterised by a positive framing of China, he is a friendly voice presented by media outlets as representative of a unanimous Belgian or European opinion on China, beyond economic affairs.

<sup>144</sup>"Our Team", Atlas Hiseas; 竺暨元, "一对中比夫妇眼中的“一带一路”: 让各国人民增进相互了解", 上观, 12th May 2017.

<sup>145</sup>"Semafort International Business Development - Constitution", Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises.

<sup>146</sup>The company's website (unavailable at the time of writing) described a full assistance service to Chinese companies that aim to develop their business and invest in Europe ("我们的为谁提供服务", Semafort). The website also mentioned the profile of two men: Liao Liqiang 廖力强, a former official of the Chinese embassy, and Patrick Nijs, a former diplomat involved in the establishment of the EU-China Joint Innovation Centre (EUCJIC, 欧盟中国联合创新中心) and other organisations linked to the EU-China Friendship Group at the European Parliament (Lulu, *op. cit.*).

<sup>147</sup>"赴比利时中国游客激增 加强互相了解和尊重乃相处之道", 人民网, 29th May 2015; "Alibaba, la nouvelle porte d'entrée chinoise pour l'e-commerce wallon", *L'Écho* (19th Nov. 2015).

<sup>148</sup>"Thuy Mai Ho Duc", LinkedIn; "Semafort International Business Development - Démissions, nominations", Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises, 9th July 2015; "Atlas Hiseas - Démissions, nominations", Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises, 10th Dec. 2019; "Cheng Shican", LinkedIn; "China Arts Festival to the EU - Souvenir Book 2016".



Bernard Dewit has been regularly interviewed on subjects related to EU-China relations or quoted as a Belgian specialist with an opinion on specific issues.<sup>149</sup> His early admiration for China and his career have been discussed in several Chinese media articles. Events such as the awarding of his Friendship Award in 2017 presented additional opportunities to praise his contribution to Sino-Belgian relations.<sup>150</sup> While his media appearances normally praise China as an economic actor, they are also occasions to display political support for the Chinese leadership, for instance by praising Xi Jinping's achievements or by endorsing political repression in Hong Kong contrary to "leaders of many countries who do not dare to take drastic measures to thoroughly solve problems".<sup>151</sup>

BCECC's chairman also airs similar views in appearances in Europe-based media as well as at events such as public lectures. For example in 2019, he gave a presentation based on the question of whether China is a "threat" or an "opportunity" for Belgium at Mons University.<sup>152</sup> Concerning non-Chinese media, he was quoted on the news website Politico as defending the establishment of China Media Group's presence in Brussels in September 2020.<sup>153</sup> Less high-profile websites such as EU Reporter —part of "the murky world of EU lobbying dressed up as journalism", as a Politico reporter put it —or Brussels Diplomatic —which counts the China Arts Festival in the EU among its partners and has (re)published CCP propaganda —have reported on BCECC's activities.<sup>154</sup>

BCECC has also set up its own online media outlets: an online TV channel and a regular *BCECC Newsletter* in which Dewit is presented as the editor. The newsletter claims to reach BCECC's "600 members and a list of 500 top-government officials in Belgium and China" including Belgian and Chinese diplomatic representations, "trade-related ministries" and Belgian trade agencies.<sup>155</sup> The content of the newsletters usually consists of interviews and promotional articles. For example, the issue of June 2015 contained interviews with the ambassador, but also the secretary-general of the China Chamber of Commerce to the EU (欧盟中国商会) and Fu Jing 付敬, the deputy chief of *China Daily EU*.<sup>156</sup> Huawei Belgium's CEO Hudson Liu (刘浩生)

<sup>149</sup>史靖洪, *op. cit.*; 潘革平 & 庞雨薇, "专访: 中国对外投资对中国和比利时企业都是契机——专访比中经贸委员会主席贝尔纳·德威特", 人民网, 13th Oct. 2016; 刘军, "比利时人眼中的中国", 光明日报, 5th Oct. 2019.

<sup>150</sup>"德威特钟情中国文化", 人民日报, via Sohu, 28th Nov. 2006; 刘军, "中国正经历着历史性变革", 光明日报, 18th Oct. 2017.

<sup>151</sup>"很多国家领导人不敢采取激烈措施彻底解决问题" (付敬, "比利时商界领袖: 习近平给中国带来革命性变革", *China Daily* via Sina, 13th Oct. 2017; 鞠辉, "德威特: 香港青年应以身为中国人而骄傲", *中国青年报*, 18th Sept. 2019).

<sup>152</sup>"Chine : opportunité ou menace pour l'Europe et la Belgique en particulier par Bernard Dewit", MU Mons, via Youtube, July 2019.

<sup>153</sup>Parrock, *op. cit.*

<sup>154</sup>"China gets back to work after Coronavirus outbreak", *EU Reporter*, 3rd Oct. 2020; "China - The city of Shaoguan - more than a beautiful discovery", *Brussels Diplomatic*, 1st Aug. 2019; "Partners", *Brussels diplomatic*; "Economic Watch: China's industrial profits rebound as economy firms up", *Brussels Diplomatic*, 3rd Sept. 2020; Mark Scott, "Dark news: The murky world of undercover EU lobbying", *Politico*, 15th Sept. 2021. Colin Stevens, the owner of *EU Reporter*, has also presided over Press Club Brussels — an NGO that acts as a platform for interest groups — and the media advisor of the New Silk Road Institute ("Colin Stevens", LinkedIn). *EU Reporter* has published a decent amount of content promoting Huawei, some of which was written by Colin Stevens himself ("Inside a Pro-Huawei Influence Campaign", *New York Times* [29th Jan. 2021]; Colin Stevens, "Mobile operators question Belgian Government's motive for new 5G law", *EU Reporter*, 20th Dec. 2016).

<sup>155</sup>"BCECC Newsletters", BCECC.

<sup>156</sup>In 2000, Fu Jing started working for the *China Daily* newspaper. In 2010, he became the foreign correspondent of the *China Daily EU* branch, of which he later became deputy chief. He has received the China



and other Belgium-based actors were also interviewed.<sup>157</sup> The June 2020 issue, for example, included interviews with Bank of China and Huawei representatives and a piece on COSCO's positive response to COVID-19.<sup>158</sup> BCECC reinforced its communication with the 2014 establishment of its own online media outlet, **Belgium-China TV (BCTV, 中比网络电视)**.<sup>159</sup> BCTV's declared objective was to show the appeal of Belgium in terms of investments and tourism by producing and broadcasting programmes such as *Luxury Shopping* and *Travel Belgium*.<sup>160</sup> BCTV was available on the video-sharing websites YouTube (the channel no longer exists), Youku and Tudou and on the social network Weibo.<sup>161</sup> BCTV no longer appears active, as no new content has been posted since 2017.

China-friendly local figures such as István Ujhelyi and Bernard Dewit are ideal promoters of China's image and liaisons with decision-makers, which justifies their central position within a cluster of organisations whose extra-economic activities reflect China's multilevel, localised, whole-of-society approach. A look at BCECC's genesis and the Belgium-China Association in the next chapter shows how, in Belgium's case, China's different influence systems converge to intensify influence work in the long term.

### 3 BCECC's genesis and the CCP foreign affairs system

The **Belgium-China Association (BCA, 比中协会)** was founded in 1957 with the aim of promoting friendly relations between Belgium and China at a time when the two countries still had no official diplomatic relations.<sup>162</sup> The BCA is Belgium's main channel of people-to-people diplomacy with China.<sup>163</sup> Looking at the BCA's history helps in understanding the genesis of BCECC and how what started as a tool of people-to-people diplomacy gave birth to one of Belgium's main economic influence channels.

#### 3.1 Culture as support for economic interests

The BCA's founder is the Belgian journalist and socialist politician Camille Huysmans.<sup>164</sup> As secretary of the Second International decades before he became Belgium's prime minister from 1946 to 1947, Huysmans met with Sun Yat-sen during Sun's visits to Belgium.<sup>165</sup> Huysmans, who was president of Belgium's House of Represent-

News Award and focuses on EU-China relations, EU views on China's current affairs and the Chinese perspective regarding EU affairs. He also conducts interviews with major EU officials (“[付敬事迹介绍](#)”, 中国记协网).

<sup>157</sup>“BCECC Newsletter June 2015 32”, BCECC, 1st June 2015.

<sup>158</sup>“BCECC Newsletter June 2020 40”, BCECC, 1st June 2020.

<sup>159</sup>“A Belgian Web TV channel to seduce China”, Wallonia, 19th Feb. 2014.

<sup>160</sup>Frank Dirk, “Belgium China TV (BCTV) zal België promoten in China”, Chinasquare, 31st Jan. 2014.

<sup>161</sup>“Belgium-China TV 中比网络电视”, Youtube; “中比网络电视 Belgium-China TV”, 中比网络电视 Belgium-China TV.

<sup>162</sup>“À propos”, BCA.

<sup>163</sup>The BCA used to have a few branches in other regions of Belgium, namely Antwerp (closed in 2007), Hainaut and Centre (both closed in 2010). See “[BCA - Vereffening](#)”, Moniteur belge, 8th June 2007; “[BCA - Liquidation](#)”, Moniteur belge, 24th Aug. 2010; “[BCA - Liquidation](#)”, Moniteur belge, 1st June 2010.

<sup>164</sup>“À propos”.

<sup>165</sup>安藤久美子, “孙中山社会主义思想的特征——以其与苏联的差异为视角”, 孙中山宋庆龄文献与研究 3, 上海书店出版社, 2011, p. 84.



atives at the time, established the BCA in cooperation with Henri Lederhandler, a man close to the Chinese government and a long-time advocate of commercial and people-to-people relations with China.<sup>166</sup> Early in his life, Lederhandler joined the Belgium Communist Youth League where he was in charge of international liaison, during which time he befriended Wu Xueqian 吴学谦, who would become China's minister of foreign affairs and vice premier; he also met with Zhou Enlai 周恩来.<sup>167</sup> Through his high-level contacts, Lederhandler was able to start an export business with China's support in 1963.<sup>168</sup> In 2017, Lederhandler was posthumously awarded the title of Friendship Ambassador by the CPAFFC, which referred to him as "an old associate" in one of its publications, enshrining his contribution to Sino-Belgian relations in the eyes of China, both in terms of economy and diplomacy.<sup>169</sup>

The development of the BCA's structural economic missions and the normalisation of Belgium-China relations led to growing competition with another Belgian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce, pushing the latter and the BCA's economic committee to merge into the **Belgian-Chinese Economic and Trade Council**, BCECC's original name.<sup>170</sup> In spite of this merger, the BCA continues to provide services and assistance to businesses interested in China through a dedicated department.<sup>171</sup>

Currently, the BCA's activities are mainly centred on cultural awareness, organising language classes, exhibitions, workshops and film screenings. Nevertheless, some of the BCA's current staff has economic interests related to China. Hans Van Duysen has been the president of the BCA since 2002. Less involved in Belgian politics as his predecessors, Van Duysen is the CEO of Matrafoam and the managing director of Somnis Bedding (part of the Matrafoam group), companies that manufacture mattresses and bedding.<sup>172</sup> Somnis Bedding's CEO is Ivan Van Duysen, who has also been a member of the BCA's board of administrators since 2017 and pays visits to China as CEO of the Germany-based company Schwarzwald Schlafsysteme GmbH (also called Hn8), in which Hans is a partner.<sup>173</sup> Additionally, Van Duysen is publicly known as the owner of the Sporting Club Lokeren-Temse, a football club that he acquired after the merger of two other clubs (Sporting Lokeren and KSV Temse) following Sporting Lokeren's bankruptcy in April 2020.<sup>174</sup>

The establishment of the Confucius Institute at the BCA in 2005 marks the continuation and formalisation of the BCA's prior activities. As of 2020, the directors were Wang Zhu 王助 (who used to work at the Beijing Foreign Studies University) and Koen De Ridder, also an administrator of the BCA who worked for the Chinese desk

<sup>166</sup>“多年来，他坚持在与中国发展贸易关系的同时积极推进民间外交”（付敬，“比中友谊开拓者李德汉葬礼在布鲁塞尔郊区举行”，*China Daily* [3rd Jan. 2014]）。See Fu Jing, “Belgian friend of China passes away in Brussels”, *China Daily* (25th Dec. 2013); “李德汉”，CCPIT, 29th Aug. 2014; “驻比使馆临时代办卓瑞生出席李德汉回忆录首发式”，中华人民共和国驻比利时王国大使馆, 20th Mar. 2013.

<sup>167</sup>“Two motherlands”, *China Daily* (11th Apr. 2022).

<sup>168</sup>Frank Willems, “In memoriam Henri Lederhandler”, Chinasquare, 31st Dec. 2013.

<sup>169</sup>Fan Lily, “Never forget old friends while making new ones”, *Voice of Friendship* 191 (2018).

<sup>170</sup>Willems, *op. cit.*

<sup>171</sup>“Business”, BCA.

<sup>172</sup>“Hans Van Duysen”, LinkedIn. In 2006, Hans Van Duysen also registered a textile company (海伊特纺织工业有限公司) under his name in Shenzhen. The company is focused on the production of mattresses, pillows and bedding for the European market (“海伊特纺织工业(深圳)有限公司”, 51job).

<sup>173</sup>“Zij slaan de handen in elkaar tegen de mondkaskernood!”, Unizo, 12th Aug. 2020; “Association Belgique-Chine - Vereniging België-China”, Welipro; “Hans Van Duysen”; “bcaqg8”, Facebook, 10th Apr. 2014.

<sup>174</sup>“Nieuwe voorzitter fusieclub: “We zullen Temse niet opslokken””, Sporza, 22nd Apr. 2020; “Sporting Lokeren failliet verklaard - De Vries: “Ik zit diep in de put””, HLN, 20th Apr. 2020.





of Deloitte from 2011 to 2017 and currently serves on the board of directors of the Flemish investment and trade agency FIT.<sup>175</sup> In January 2020, the BCA's Confucius Institute participated in the annual meeting of the Confucius Institutes Council, with Hans Van Duysen and Koen De Ridder in attendance.<sup>176</sup> Among others, Wim De Groeve and Fernando Ungaro were also present. First, both are members of the board of directors of Somnis Bedding.<sup>177</sup> Second, Wim De Groeve is the BCA's vice-chairman and a former foreign chairman of Brussels's Confucius Institute, as well as a "contact person" of the Sporting Club Lokeren-Temse owned by Hans Van Duysen.<sup>178</sup> Third, Fernando Ungaro, administrator of the BCA since 2015 and presented as the institute's former director, was involved in the production of medical masks initiated by the company in March 2020 through his role at Somnis Bedding and thanks to the support of Unizo.<sup>179</sup>

The BCA's long history of contacts with the communist regime granted the organisation an inherent political role, mainly through the nurturing of close relations between CCP officials (mostly from China's foreign affairs system) and the BCA's managers. The BCA's high profile can inspire trust and curiosity while cultivating the apparent apolitical image of a culture-focused organisation. The BCA's early support for the communist cause gives weight to its interaction with PRC bodies, with the development of the BCA's own distribution channel for publications and its integration of a Confucius Institute. All these elements make the BCA an effective component of China's propaganda operations in Brussels, empowered by its links to the foreign affairs system.

### 3.2 The BCA: A diplomatic tool designed for propaganda purposes

As the BCA hosted the Chinese Academy for several decades, it was considered natural that the BCA should open Brussels's first Confucius Institute in 2005, an inauguration that was celebrated at the Egmont Institute.<sup>180</sup> Similarly to BCECC, the BCA's activities act as a nexus between Chinese domestic propaganda objectives and the promotion of China's discourse abroad.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, while the BCA's activities in Brus-

<sup>175</sup>"Our Teachers", BCA; "布鲁塞尔孔子学院理事会 2019 年年会召开", Hanban, 13th Jan. 2020; "Association Belgique-Chine..."; "Masterclass China Business", Unizo. Up until 2013, BCA's first Chinese director was Zhang Guoxian 张国宪 ("上海交通大学艺术团在比巡演获得成功", Embassy of the PRC in Belgium, 25th Jan. 2012). At the time, Zhang worked as a teacher at Mons University and director of the Chinese department of the university's Translation and Interpretation School. He organised an exhibition on the Belgian diaspora in China in 2018 that was attended by Belgian Socialist Party leader Elio Di Rupo ("天下一家"2018 汉语桥比利时赛区纪实", Yellow Vitamines, 1st May 2018; "比利时蒙斯市举办《旅行笔记中的中国》展览(图)", 中央广电总台国际在线, 23rd June 2018).

<sup>176</sup>"布鲁塞尔孔子学院理事会 2019 年年会召开". The exhibition was attended by Yan Guohua 闫国华, a representative of the Beijing Foreign Studies University (北京外国语大学), with which the BCA began cooperating more over fifteen years ago, as well as by Jin Limin 金利民, an official from the Confucius Institute Office.

<sup>177</sup>"Somnis Bedding", Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises, 21st Feb. 2010.

<sup>178</sup>"布鲁塞尔孔子学院理事会 2019 年年会召开"; "布鲁塞尔孔子学院师生一行 19 人参访北京龙泉寺", 菩萨在线, 25th July 2015; "SC LOKEREN-TEMSE", Voetbal Vlaanderen.

<sup>179</sup>"Association Belgique-Chine..."; "布鲁塞尔孔子学院理事会 2019 年年会召开"; "Zij slaan de handen..."; "AB Inbev and Somnis partner to produce 500,000 face masks a month for workforce and customers", AB InBev, 20th July 2013. Unizo is a Belgian professional association with which Hans Van Duysen has also been sporadically involved as a speaker in masterclasses on business in China, organised by Koen De Ridder, who is himself is involved with Unizo ("Masterclass China Business").

<sup>180</sup>"Confucius Institute in Brussels", Belgium-China Association.

<sup>181</sup>As an example of the BCA's domestic political efforts, it holds crucial symbolic value also as a channel to nurture local relations by representing the Sino-Belgian friendship. For example, in 2019 Hans Van



Figure 9: The Tengrootenhuysen sisters with Li Jianping and Belgian Ambassador to China Michel Malherbe. Source: CPAFFC.

sels target a local audience with limited visible effects, the leadership of the BCA's long-standing relations with CCP foreign affairs figures and bodies indicate the underlying political and symbolic nature of the organisation, which benefits from these connections to increase its operational capacity to serve China's foreign propaganda goals.

Awareness about China's culture is at the core of the BCA's activities. The BCA has published its own magazine, *Contemporary China* (*China Vandaag / Chine actuelle*), since 1983, initiated by the BCA's vice-president Carolina Tengrootenhuysen and her sister An Tengrootenhuysen, two retired elementary school teachers.<sup>182</sup> Their work was recognised by the PRC authorities in 2014, when both sisters were awarded a Cultural Exchange Contribution Award by vice premier Liu Yandong 刘延东.<sup>183</sup>

The BCA is also host to the BCA's Bookstore (formerly **Great Wall bookstore**), which distributes books, magazines and newspapers such as *China Daily*.<sup>184</sup> The organisation's bookstore is said to be the only Chinese bookstore in Belgium and is jointly operated by the **China International Publishing Group** (CIPG, 中国国际版集团).<sup>185</sup>

Duysen attended an event promoting the Sichuan province that was also attended by the Chinese ambassadors and the vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the Sichuan People's Congress, Ye Zhuang 叶壮, helping to improve the visibility of national and local-level CCP officials ("Ambassador Cao Zhongming Attends Event Presenting Sichuan Province", Embassy of the PRC in Belgium, 1st Nov. 2019).

<sup>182</sup>"比中協會副主席：對華矛盾心態源自不了解", Xinhua via 香港商報, 6th Oct. 2014. According to their story, they were dissatisfied with the Belgian press's criticism of China and a lack of understanding of the country from Belgian people ("Deux soeurs belges n'ont qu'une ambition : "donner une image réelle de la Chine" (reportage)", Xinhua France, 30th Sept. 2019). In order to inform the Belgian public about the "real China and its ordinary people", they started the magazine. They are depicted as long-term sinophiles who have always worked pro bono to spread Chinese culture and values ("比中協會副主席：對華矛盾心態源自不了解").

<sup>183</sup>"Deux soeurs..."

<sup>184</sup>"Librairie : changement d'horaire", BCA, 30th Sept. 2020; "Périodiques", Grande Muraille.

<sup>185</sup>"长城书店 (布鲁塞尔)", CIPG. This is confirmed by the appointment of Meng Xiangjie 孟祥杰 as president of Great Wall in 2011 by the board of administrators, then composed of Hans Van Duysen and the Tengrootenhuysen sisters ("Grande Muraille - Démissions, nominations", Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises, 22nd Aug. 2011). Meng Xiangjie is also the CEO of the China International Book Trading Corporation and describes his strategy of "going global" in 2011, the same year he became involved with the bookstore ("书刊公司论文 打造新闻出版“走出去”的“高速公路”——访中国国际图书贸易集团有限公司总经理孟祥杰", 论文网, 7th Sept. 2020). Meng claims, for instance, that one of the objectives is



Figure 10: Hans Van Duysen (third from the left) and the Tengrootenhuysen sisters (on the right) receiving their Friendship Award from Xie Yuan at the Chinese embassy in Belgium. Source: Embassy of the PRC in Belgium.

CIPG — formerly called the China Foreign Language Publishing and Distribution Bureau (中国外文出版发行事业局) — is the CCP's biggest distribution channel for foreign-language books.<sup>186</sup> As the CCP's oldest channel of external communication, CIPG is overseen directly by the Propaganda Department.<sup>187</sup> CIPG itself oversees China International Book Trading Corporation (CIBTC, 中国国际图书贸易集团有限公司), a state-owned company with which BCA chairman Hans Van Duysen has interacted in the past, together with Hanban and Beijing Foreign Studies University, on the occasion of a meeting between Van Duysen and CPAFFC vice chair Song Jingwu 宋敬武.<sup>188</sup>

Hans Van Duysen's official interaction with the CCP began no later than 2005. Van Duysen and his wife Huang Wenfang 黄文芳 (also an administrator of the BCA) visited Lhasa and met with former President of the CPAFFC Chen Haosu 陈昊苏.<sup>189</sup> During this visit, they were also received by former CPAFFC vice chair Liu Zhiming 刘志明 as well as Ju Jianhua 巨建华, vice director of the Tibet Foreign Affairs Office and vice chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries.<sup>190</sup> In 2007, Chen Haosu and the head of the Beijing Foreign Studies University attended a ceremony linked to Brussels's Confucius Institute, or-

to create regional and local distribution centres to foster the globalisation of Chinese publications; CIPG also has a branch in Belgium and focuses on the distribution, import and export of books and periodicals (*ibid.*).

<sup>186</sup>“孟祥杰: 从中国期刊海外发行历史看未来机遇和挑战”, 中国网, 15th Sept. 2013.

<sup>187</sup>“历史沿革”, 中国外文出版发行事业局.

<sup>188</sup>“宋敬武副会长会见了比中协会主席范汉斯”, CPAFFC, 16th Feb. 2017.

<sup>189</sup>“Belgium-China Association President Van Duysen Hans Visits China”, 王敏 via Doc88; “Association Belgique-Chine...”; 左凤强, “比中协会主席范·汉斯访华”, 友声 1 (2006).

<sup>190</sup>*idem*, “比中协会主席范·汉斯访华”. In 2016, Ju Jianhua praised the work of the EU-China Friendship Group of the European Parliament and its contribution to the CCP's propaganda effort (Lulu, *op. cit.*).



ganised by the embassy and attended by Van Duysen.<sup>191</sup> In 2014, a delegation of BCA members visited China on the CPAFFC's invitation. Wim De Groeve met with Hu Sishe 户思社, then vice-chair of the CPAFFC, as the latter was part of a delegation that toured Europe in April of that year.<sup>192</sup> Hu Sishe was received at that time, following the invitation of the BCA and VUB, and met with BCECC chairman Bernard Dewit as well as with EU representatives, such as President of the European Committee of the Regions Herwig van Staa.<sup>193</sup>

One month later, BCA vice president Carolina Tengrootenhuysen met with CPAFFC former vice chairman Li Jianping 李建平 in Beijing after having been invited to China by the organisation.<sup>194</sup> Both parties called for further cooperation, and Tengrootenhuysen invited the CPAFFC to Belgium again. As further evidence of the BCA's close relations with the CCP foreign affairs system, in 2017 Hans Van Duysen, Carolina Tengrootenhuysen and her sister An received an award for their contribution to the development of the friendship between China and Belgium on the occasion of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the BCA.<sup>195</sup>

The CPAFFC's initial connection to the BCA was first and foremost ideological, and this remains the case nowadays. In 2018, the CPAFFC and the BCA co-organised celebrations for the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx's birth in Brussels; both organisations were represented by (CPAFFC vice chair) Song Jingwu and Hans Van Duysen, who stressed that "Marxism is not out of date, and the Chinese model might help Western countries overcome possible crises in the future".<sup>196</sup>

The BCA's endorsement goes beyond political ideologies, as Hans Van Duysen, just like Bernard Dewit, has supported the CCP publicly to feed China's domestic propaganda. For instance, in 2004 Hans Van Duysen was interviewed by Xinhua and praised Deng Xiaoping and showed support for the "one country, two systems" doctrine.<sup>197</sup> In 2005, he also raised his voice to defend the Chinese textile business following restrictions imposed by the EU on Chinese exports.<sup>198</sup> But the use of Hans Van Duysen's voice for political purposes is most evident in the case of the Hague Permanent Court of Arbitration's decision on the conflict between China and the Philippines in the

<sup>191</sup> "比中协会举行成立五十周年庆典暨孔子学院结业仪式", Embassy of the PRC in Belgium, 26th June 2007.

<sup>192</sup> "户思社副会长率团访问法国、德国、比利时", CPAFFC, 2nd Apr. 2014.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> "Vice President Li Jianping Meets with Delegation of Belgium-China Association", CPAFFC, 20th May 2014.

<sup>195</sup> "驻比利时使馆举办比中协会成立 60 周年暨比利时友人士颁奖招待会", Embassy of the PRC in Belgium, 20th Nov. 2017 This ceremony was jointly organised by the CPAFFC and the Chinese embassy in Belgium, and speeches were given by Van Duysen, Chinese Ambassador to Belgium Qu Xing and CPAFFC vice president Xie Yuan 谢元. This anniversary was also attended and commented on by former BCA chairman Frank Willems (Frank Willems, "Vereniging België-China 60 jaar", Chinasquare, 21st Nov. 2017). Willems has continued to contribute to the work of the BCA, e.g., delivering a lecture on EU-China relations in 2019 and as an editor of the website Chinasquare, where he promotes his vision of China as well as the work of other organisations like BCECC ("Conferentie door Dhr. Willems Frank...", Belgium-China Association & Confucius Institute in Brussels, via Facebook, 12th Nov. 2019; Frank Willems, "Hoe organiseert China de exit uit de lockdown?", Chinasquare, 22nd Apr. 2020). Willems was a guest at the celebrations organised in Brussels for the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx's birth, where he gave a lecture on Marxism ("《马克思主义在中国的实践》研讨会在布鲁塞尔成功召开", CPAFFC, 5th May 2018).

<sup>196</sup> "《马克思主义在中国的实践》..."; 左凤强, "《马克思主义在中国的实践》研讨会在布鲁塞尔成功召开", CPAFFC, 5th May 2018.

<sup>197</sup> "邓小平先生是位了不起的中国领导人!" 一访比中协会主席范汉斯先生", Mission of the PRC to the EU, 21st Aug. 2004.

<sup>198</sup> "一个欧洲商人眼中的贸易设限", 深圳特区报 via Sina, 20th Aug. 2005.



Figure 11: From left to right: Tamás Lajos Szalay, Wang Sihao, Richárd Mohr, István Ujhelyi, Hans Van Duysen, and two unidentified individuals. Source: [Facebook](#).

South China Sea. Hans Van Duysen wrote a letter addressed to Li Xiaolin 李小林, then president of the CPAFFC.<sup>199</sup> In his statement, which was made in his capacity as the BCA's chairman and part of the Brussels Confucius Institute, Van Duysen expressed his support for China and accused the United States of “stirring the pot”, relying on arguments usually seen in the CCP's rhetoric to question the legitimacy of the court.<sup>200</sup>

The BCA is Belgium's most illustrative case of “friendship” as a justification for political rapprochement. Based on the model of other “foreign friends”, the organisation's leadership is in regular contact with CPAFFC officials, a relationship used to feed information on the Sino-Belgian friendship to Chinese media but also to support the Chinese regime when there is a need for external support for its preferred narrative. In addition, the BCA also works actively as a propaganda proxy through its cultural activities, its Confucius Institute and the distribution of CCP-approved books in Brussels's unique Chinese bookshop. In the end, the BCA's role is less that of a cultural centre than of a proxy designed to promote the CCP's political agenda in Brussels.

## 4 A case of academic influence

In order to illustrate the scope of China's influence strategy in Belgium, this case appears as the most prominent and illustrative attempt to reach the academic sphere in a landscape where China's economy and culture are already well promoted. The academy presented in this chapter nurtures loose but existing links with BCECC and complements the work of other China advocates in Belgium by bringing a scientific background and, through it, legitimacy to China's narratives.

<sup>199</sup>“比中协会主席范汉思致函李小林会长声援我在所谓南海仲裁案上的立场”, CPAFFC, 14th July 2016.

<sup>200</sup>*Ibid.*

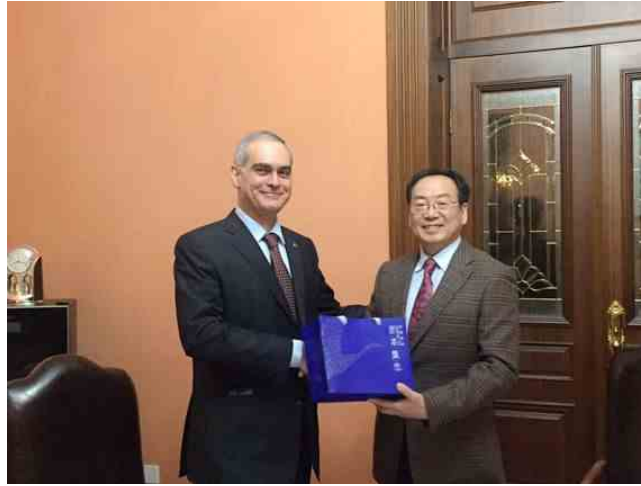


Figure 12: Hans Van Duysen meets Song Jingwu in 2017. Source: CPAFFC.

The Brussels Academy for China and European Studies (BACES, 布鲁塞尔中欧研究院) was officially launched in 2014 in Beijing, in the presence of Vice Premier Liu Yandong and EU Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth Androulla Vassiliou, with the support of Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Brussels's main Dutch-speaking university, and three PRC universities: Renmin University, Sichuan University and Fudan University.<sup>201</sup> BACES's activities include master-level and PhD programmes, seminars and courses. Research on contemporary China and the China-EU relationship are its central focus. The academy's four main projects relate to investments, technology transfer, governance and competitiveness. BACES also organises all sorts of conferences and seminars, where the most discussed issues relate to China and the country's relations with third parties, mainly the EU. BACES's approach to these issues reflects their saliency in the CCP's political agenda: China's economic growth, its role and influence as an international actor, and the implementation of the BRI, among others. While these projects are supported by the China Scholarship Council (overseen by the Chinese Ministry of Education), they also match some of the discernible European goals of Huawei, which has supported BACES through the sponsorship of a chair.<sup>202</sup>

Several elements justify BACES's presence in this paper. First, Huawei's role in the establishment and the company's lobbying efforts in Belgium and globally shows how advanced and sophisticated Chinese lobbying operations in Belgium are. Second, BCECC's sporadic intervention and collaboration with the academy indicates a convergence of interests for both organisations and presupposes a mutual endorsement that can only benefit both parties, and ultimately, China. Third, the academy has the capacity, network and legitimacy to integrate itself in Brussels's academic sphere and

<sup>201</sup>“VUB delegation in Beijing: Opening of Brussels Academy of China and European Studies - BACES”, BACES, 5th Sept. 2014; “About”, BACES. Since its establishment, BACES has partnered with more universities, including the University of Ghent, Lancaster University, Sofia University, the University of Bucharest and Deakin University in Australia, showing the academy's aspiration to create a pan-European and international network of universities.

<sup>202</sup>“VUB delegation in Beijing...”



Figure 13: The launching ceremony of BACES in presence of Androulla Vassiliou and Liu Yandong. Source: BACES.

become an equal voice whose value is to be considered among other senior research centres and think-tanks.

This section will first focus on how BACES took advantage of VUB's keenness to collaborate with China and strong pre-existing collaboration with key Chinese actors. The partnerships, staff and activities of two platforms for exchange on and with China integrated into VUB illustrate a long-term engagement with CCP-controlled entities and narratives, of which BACES is only one manifestation. The second part will demonstrate how BACES was able to build and develop its visibility, making the academy a complementary element of China's strategy to connect with Belgian and EU decision-makers.

#### 4.1 From academic cooperation to influence

China's capacity to involve or co-opt teachers from the highest levels of VUB's hierarchy — people who are well embedded in Belgium's academic circles and research institutions — was key to BACES's establishment. It relied on the personal recognition of some of the most prominent actors, for example through media attention, visits to China, sponsorships and strengthened academic cooperation that contributes to building VUB's international reputation.

In parallel, Huawei's 华为 support is consistent with its other activities in Brussels, which include setting up research centres, sponsoring pre-existing platforms and a well-funded lobbying effort.<sup>203</sup> Huawei's efforts to support the company's opportunity to integrate Belgium's 5G market also included a short-lived disinformation operation supported by paid publications on the *EU Reporter* website.<sup>204</sup> It also fits a pattern of engagement with Brussels schools and universities, including VUB, that

<sup>203</sup>Genaille, *op. cit.*

<sup>204</sup>"Inside a Pro-Huawei Influence Campaign".



co-founded BACES.<sup>205</sup> For example, in 2015, Huawei signed a memorandum of understanding with VUB and the Belgian telecommunications company Proximus for the modernisation of the university's campus, the deployment of 5G infrastructure and the establishment of a "Learning and Innovation Centre", as part of a ULB/VUB science park project (ULB, the Université Libre de Bruxelles, is VUB's French-speaking counterpart).<sup>206</sup> Under its Seeds for the Future talent programme, launched in 2008, Huawei selected students from Belgian universities, including VUB, to send them on a two-week study trip to China.<sup>207</sup>

VUB might have seemed an ideal local partner for BACES's establishment, given the university's long-lasting engagement with China. VUB's China-related academic activity is coordinated under the umbrella of the **VUB China Network (VUB 中国合作部)**, made to enhance classic university-to-university collaboration with China through the support of the China Scholarship Council (CSC, 国家留学基金委), the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange (CSCSE, 教育部留学服务中心) and the China Education Association for International Exchange (CEAIE, 中国教育国际交流协会).<sup>208</sup> VUB claims to be the first Belgian university to have signed a co-operation agreement with the CSC in 2005, leading to a now well developed range of scholarships and bilateral academic programmes.<sup>209</sup> The inauguration of a Confucius Institute on VUB's campus in 2016 was merely a continuation of that legacy.<sup>210</sup>

Under the VUB China Network, two entities that attest to the expansion of VUB's China-related activities and their pre-existing intertwinement with Belgium's academic sphere co-exist.

First, the **Brussels Institute of Contemporary China Studies (BICCS, 布鲁塞尔当代中国研究所)** is Europe's first China-foreign institution dedicated to the study of contemporary China and functions as an academic hub that focuses on topics such as foreign and security policy, law and civil engineering.<sup>211</sup> Founded in 2006 in cooperation with Renmin University, it is thanks to BICCS' success and because of VUB's plan to invest in technology and knowledge transfer that BACES was launched after Xi's visit to Belgium in 2014.<sup>212</sup> Gustaaf Geeraerts, a senior associate fellow at the prestigious **Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations (Egmont Institute)** and a VUB teacher (and former dean of VUB's Faculty of Economic, Social and Political Sciences and Solvay Business School), is the founder of BICCS.<sup>213</sup> As stated in

<sup>205</sup>"Huawei's mobile classroom visits schools across Europe", Huawei Europe.

<sup>206</sup>"Huawei will provide 5G infrastructure for the "campus of the future" in Brussels", VUB, 24th June 2015; "Proximus 和华为携手合作", Flanders Investment and Trade, 29th Sept. 2015.

<sup>207</sup>"What Is Seeds for the Future", Huawei; "Belgian students gather in Brussels to kick-off Huawei's 'Seeds for the Future 2018' training program in China", Huawei Belgium via prezly.com, 5th July 2018; "Seeds for the Future - Belgium 2016", VUB, 2nd Jan. 2017. For more on the Seeds for the Future programme and the participation of military university students, see Łukasz Sarek, "Arresting Huawei's march in Warsaw", Sinopsis, 2nd Feb. 2019; Jichang Lulu, "If an excursus may be countenanced on Huawei's "Seeds" programme...", Twitter, 2nd Feb. 2019.

<sup>208</sup>"Partners", VUB China Network.

<sup>209</sup>"VUB / CSC Scholarship Programme: going together for excellence", VUB.

<sup>210</sup>Unlike ULB's Confucius Institute, which was mainly dedicated to cultural events, VUB's Confucius Institute was heavily focused on academic activities. During a seminar organised between BACES and Renmin University in Brussels, Song Xinning even praised the institute's ability to attract other VUB scholars ("Workshop on EU-China-US Trilateral Relationship in an Uncertain World - 28 September 2017, Egmont Palace, Brussels - Final report out", BACES, 12th Oct. 2017).

<sup>211</sup>"布鲁塞尔中国研究所", 传播招生网; "Officiële inhuldiging van het Brussels Institute of Contemporary China Studies", VUB.

<sup>212</sup>"Summer 2013 - No 26", 走进比利时; "VUB delegation in Beijing..."

<sup>213</sup>"Gustaaf Geeraerts", Egmont Institute.





his profile on the Egmont Institute's website, Geeraerts holds guest professorships at Renmin University and Sichuan University and has collaborated on a publication with Fudan University, where he acts as co-director of the Center for China-EU Relations.<sup>214</sup> Several BICCS articles resulted from collaboration between Geeraerts and other experts, including Duncan Freeman, a Belgian China scholar who is also identified as a research fellow at BICCS.<sup>215</sup>

Second, the **Brussels Diplomatic Academy** was established in 2013, based on a memorandum of understanding signed between VUB, the Institute of World Politics (a US-based school that offers programmes on statecraft, security and foreign policy) and the **Shanghai University of International Business and Economics (SUIBE, 上海对外经贸大学)**, which operates directly under the PRC Ministry of Commerce.<sup>216</sup> The school provides training and education on economic diplomacy and business. It also has a Chair of Asia-Pacific Studies, targeting students and young professionals from outside VUB.<sup>217</sup> The Brussels Diplomatic Academy is also partnered with other organisations that have business and/or strategic interests with China, such as BCECC, the **Flanders Chambers of Commerce and Industry (Voka, Vlaams netwerk van ondernemingen)**, the **Flanders-China Chamber of Commerce (FCCC, 法蘭德斯中國商會)**, and the **Hutong School (上海靜安區胡同語言進修學院)**.<sup>218</sup> The original team included VUB faculty and individuals with previous experience with China, such as Jean-Pierre De Greve, an astrophysics teacher at VUB, former vice-rector for international relations and research fellow at the Egmont Institute, who was the first director of the Brussels Diplomatic Academy.<sup>219</sup> Gunter Gaublomme's former roles as BICCS

<sup>214</sup>"Gustaaf Geeraerts"; Gustaaf Geeraerts, "Europe and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Growing Concerns, More Strategy", *Egmont Institute Security Policy Brief* 118 (1st Nov. 2019). The oldest publication retroactively attributed to BICCS dates back to 1977: it is an article on the concept of civilian defence written by Gustaaf Geeraerts ("Brussels Institute for Contemporary China Studies", VUB). When looking at the research output attributed to BICCS from 1977 to 2016 (year of the last listed publication), it appears that almost all the publications published under the institute's name are signed by Gustaaf Geeraerts, making him a prolific source of articles on China ("Brussels Institute for Contemporary China Studies", VUB).

<sup>215</sup>"Duncan Freeman", Brussels Diplomatic Academy.

<sup>216</sup>"Welcome to the BDA", Brussels Diplomatic Academy; "Specialised studies in economic diplomacy and international business", Brussels Diplomatic Academy; "学校简介", 上海对外经贸大学.

<sup>217</sup>"Welcome to the BDA".

<sup>218</sup>The Hutong School is a foreign Chinese language school founded and operated by Europeans, approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education ("独特优势", Hutong School). The school counts among its partners the Beijing Benelux Chamber of Commerce (北京比荷卢商会), itself partnered with BCECC, Benelux embassies and Belgian trade agencies ("Partner Organizations", 北京比荷卢商会). Another partner is the Shanghai Center for Global Trade and Economic Governance (SC-GTEG, 国际经贸治理与中国改革开放联合研究中心), a think tank under SUIBE whose chair, SUIBE teacher Zhang Lei 张磊, is China's chair holder at the World Trade Organization (WTO), head of SUIBE's WTO research centre and an intellectual property rights expert for the Chinese Ministry of Commerce ("Partners", Brussels Diplomatic Academy; "张磊", 上海对外经贸大学, 15th July 2014; "Lei Zhang", Brussels Diplomatic Academy). According to his LinkedIn profile, Zhang Lei currently works at VUB on projects relating to technology transfer and has worked as a lecturer on Chinese Law and the legal framework of EU-China relations ("Lei Zhang", LinkedIn). He has also worked for China Central Television Station CCTV (a central propaganda organ) (*ibid.*). Established in 2013 by the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, the centre cooperates with domestic and foreign entities such as the WTO, the UN Conference on Trade and Development, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and other research institutions ("国际经贸治理与中国改革开放联合研究中心", CTTI 中国智库索引). The SC-GTEG focuses mainly on China's economic and trade governance as well as on topics related to foreign trade and economics (*ibid.*). In 2016, the research centre launched a Review of the International Economic and Trade Governance in order to include foreign actors in its discussions ("国际经贸治理评论" 约稿启事, 上海对外经贸大学贸易谈判学院, 22nd May 2020).

<sup>219</sup>"Opening Conference of the Brussels Diplomatic Academy", VUB, 13th Dec. 2011; "依托欧洲中心优势 推进教育国际化战略——访布鲁塞尔自由大学副校长何瑞鹏", 搜刊网, 12th Sept. 2003. In 2012, Lei



head of education and current director of the Brussels Diplomatic Academy also illustrate early signs of the overlap of staff within VUB and Belgium's China-related activities.<sup>220</sup> Jan Cornelis, the chairman of the Brussels Diplomatic Academy's advisory board, is another key figure in VUB's relations with China, with academic cooperation with a defence-linked university going back to the 1990s.<sup>221</sup> He is VUB's vice rector for international policy, and a professor specialised in electronics, informations and communications technologies, and biomedical technology. While Cornelis' work for VUB's international policy justifies his participation in developing international exchanges, he has assumed the role of an advocate for ensuring quality cooperation with China and support of the country's increasing presence in VUB's activities. At the academic level, Jan Cornelis began to cooperate with the **Northwestern Polytechnic University (NWPU, 西北工业大学)** in Xi'an in 1992, becoming a visiting professor in 1998, which helped him initiate partnership agreements between NWPU and VUB.<sup>222</sup> The Australian Strategic Policy Institute's database of defence universities has designated NWPU as "very high-risk" for its proximity to state-owned military companies, espionage activities and high implication in defence issues.<sup>223</sup> NWPU is overseen by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, responsible for the software industry, communications and content regulation on the Chinese internet.<sup>224</sup> Jan Cornelis's influence is valuable. In 2011, for instance, he played a role in the signature of a memorandum of understanding between the Belgian Ministry of Finance, Budget and Foreign Affairs and the Xi'an municipal government.<sup>225</sup>

attended the China Study Abroad Forum (中国留学论坛) — a platform overseen by the PRC Ministry of Education to promote international academic exchanges — to give a presentation on academic exchanges between Belgium and China and promote such exchanges in the field of higher education ("Jean-Pierre DE GREVE Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 9th China Study Abroad Forum", Cupdf, 12th Aug. 2003; "依托欧洲中心优势 推进教育国际化战略——访布鲁塞尔自由大学副校长何瑞鹏").

<sup>220</sup>"Specialised studies in economic diplomacy and international business". The BICCS also organised events such as a "lunch causerie" with Chinese Ambassador Qu Xing in 2015, advertised on VUB's website and involving internal actors like Gunter Gaublomme and Voka — a target of CCPIT operations under the framework of a 2015 Guangdong-Flanders regional partnership ("Lunch Causerie with the Chinese Ambassador in Brussels, H.E. Qu Xing", VUB, 30th Oct. 2015; "Zakendelegatie Jiangsu ontdekt medische en transportsector Limburg", Voka, 5th May 2017; "Delegatie Guangdong op bezoek", Voka, 8th July 2017). Another event organised by BICCS and promoted by VUB was a conference with a panel composed of Gustaaf Geeraerts, presented as BICCS's director, Duncan Freeman, and Jiang Shixue, deputy director of the Institute of European Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS, 中国社会科学院) ("BICCS presents: China's Investment in the EU: A Win-Win Game?", VUB, 28th Feb. 2013). CASS operates directly under the PRC State Council and has collaborated with foreign partners to promote projects such as the "16+1" (Lulu, "Repurposing democracy").

<sup>221</sup>"Jan Cornelis", VUB.

<sup>222</sup>"荷语布鲁塞尔自由大学阳·科诺理教授荣获中国政府“友谊奖”，中华人民共和国驻比利时王国大使馆，27th Oct. 2014; (Wang Juan, "Prof. Jan Cornelis Won Chinese Government Friendship Award", NWPU, 13th Oct. 2014. The "white-haired wizard" (白发精灵) — as NWPU's website has referred to Cornelis — is said to "have visited the China Scholarship Council, the National Natural Science Foundation of China, the Ministry of Science and Technology of China and others to bridge the gap in talent training and scientific and technological cooperation between China and Belgium" (王凡华, "丝路使者" 阳·科诺理: 中比教育交流的“白发精灵”, NWPU). In 2013, both NWPU and VUB signed an agreement on academic and cultural cooperation (学术与文化合作框架协议) and the 3+2 Undergraduate Joint Training Agreement (本科 3+2 联合培养协议) for Chinese students in 2014 (*ibid.*). Also in 2014, VUB and NWPU signed off on a "Privileged International Partnership", an in-depth partnership involving joint events, staff and student exchanges, knowledge transfer, business opportunities and interregional development ("VUB launches Privileged International Partnerships (PIPs)", VUB, 7th Feb. 2014). This model of collaboration was co-initiated by Cornelis during already on-going negotiations with NWPU (*ibid.*).

<sup>223</sup>"Northwestern Polytechnical University", ASPL.

<sup>224</sup>"学校简介", NWPU.

<sup>225</sup>王凡华, *op. cit.*; "比利时荷语自由大学 (VUB) 希加强对华科技合作", Embassy of the PRC to Belgium, 16th Feb. 2015; 王凡华, *op. cit.*



The Brussels Diplomatic Academy's partnerships materialised in relation to concrete projects. One worthy of attention was the academy's joint initiatives with VUB's Confucius Institute, the LEAD projects, which consist of training programmes in academic governance and leadership co-funded by the European Commission and sponsored by the Chinese Mission as well as multiple Chinese universities (Renmin University of China and Sichuan University being co-founders of BACES), BCECC and the EU-Asia Centre.<sup>226</sup> These projects have produced several papers for publication, contributing to its normative dimension in the field of higher education, on which topic VUB has a dedicated platform for cooperation with China.<sup>227</sup> Zhu Chang 朱畅 is the founder of the EU-China Higher Education Research Centre (ECHE, 中欧高等教育研究中心), a platform and research group focusing on cooperation between China and the EU on issues related to higher education, such as promoting a "mutual understanding about educational systems, policies, governance, innovations, practices, and cultural issues".<sup>228</sup> In parallel, Zhu participates in VUB academic projects involving European and Chinese universities, as well as other PRC organisations such as the CEAIIE.<sup>229</sup>

## 4.2 Cultivating legitimate academic voices

The individuals discussed above are actors of choice for the PRC, as they represent well connected legitimate advocates for enhanced research and academic cooperation. The capture of such individuals by China plays an important role in keeping them involved in the process and ensuring the continuity of the project, for example through the attention given to prominent VUB staff in the publication *World Education News* (世界教育信息), managed by a PRC ministry, and the local Chinese-language news outlet *Enter Belgium* (走进比利时).<sup>230</sup> Other kinds of rewards described in this section include visits to China, sponsorships and strengthened academic cooperation that contribute —among other things— to building VUB's international reputation.

<sup>226</sup> "LEAD project and VUB-CI jointly organised the EU-China Seminar on Research Collaboration: Collective Leadership", LEAD Project; "Partners and Network", LEAD2 Project.

<sup>227</sup> "LEAD2 项目介绍", LEAD2 Project; "LEAD2 Deliverables, Reports & Publications 项目报告及出版成果", LEAD2 Project. For example, a collective special LEAD publication includes a comparative study by Zhu Chang and Jan Cornelis, who state that it is "necessary for Chinese and EU universities to learn from each other's governance structures" ("Proposed Special Issue Theme: Comparative perspectives and cases in academic leadership and governance in European and Chinese Higher Education", LEAD2 Project, 1st July 2020). In this sense, the LEAD projects are motivated by the idea that "[u]niversity governance and academic leadership constitute a solid ground for higher education cooperation for Europe and China" ("LEAD2 Comparative Study Plan presentation", LEAD 2 Project, 1st Mar. 2019). While the topics raised under the framework of the LEAD projects are of no special political value, the projects indirectly promote in-depth academic coordination with China, involving visits to "Chinese top universities" and joint events in institutions such as the National Academy of Educational Administration (NAEA, 国家教育行政学院) — a partner of the projects and the most prominent school for academic staff, directly operated by the Chinese Ministry of Culture that subscribes to Xi Jinping's thought and guidance (Liu Liusheng & Zhang Yuting, "The Value, Challenges, and Practices of University Internal Governance Reform", LEAD 2, 1st Jan. 2020; "Partners and Network"; "学院简介", NAEA).

<sup>228</sup> "About ECHE", VUB.

<sup>229</sup> Zhu is involved in bilateral academic projects such as the VUB Online Learning and Blended Competence Center, the LEAD projects and the EU-China DOC (for doctoral-level cooperation), a project supported by BCECC and co-funded by the EU Commission ("Online and Blended Learning Competence Center", VUB; "LEAD project and VUB-CI jointly organised the EU-China Seminar on Research Collaboration: Collective Leadership"; "Partners", EU-China DOC). In 2014, she explained that the ECHE also involved European and Chinese universities as well as the CEAIIE ("访比利时荷语布鲁塞尔自由大学中欧高等教育研究中心主任朱畅教授", 设街教育信息, 总第 359 期 2014 年第 23 期, pp. 21-24, 30th Dec. 2014).

<sup>230</sup> "Press & Interview", VUB China Network.



For instance, Gustaaf Geeraerts was part of the VUB delegation that attended BACES's inauguration in Beijing.<sup>231</sup> When he was part of BICCS, Gunter Gaublomme met with CCPIT Zhejiang representatives Li Xinshi 李欣时 and Lu Yujia 吕雨葭 to promote training projects as director for education and research fellow at BICCS.<sup>232</sup> Gunter Gaublomme, who worked for the Asian affairs department of the Flemish trade agency FIT for several years, later became a board member at BACES.<sup>233</sup> Additionally, the Brussels Diplomatic Academy is described as “closely working” with BACES since its establishment, for instance through events — realised with the support of the Huawei Chair.<sup>234</sup> Jan Cornelis and Zhu Chang took part in VUB delegations to China to sign cooperation agreements.<sup>235</sup>

Jan Cornelis, who is one of BACES's board members and a signatory for the establishment of VUB's Confucius Institute, was awarded the Chinese government's friendship award in the year of the establishment of BACES, just like Bernard Dewit and Hans Van Duysen.<sup>236</sup> In 2019, Cornelis defended Song Xinning following espionage accusations in a statement published on Chinese news websites such as *The Global Times*.<sup>237</sup>

BACES China Director Song Xinning 宋新宁, loosely involved in BICCS, was research director at the Centre for European Studies at Renmin University of China and the Chinese director of VUB's Confucius Institute, to whose establishment he contributed.<sup>238</sup> In 2019, Song was accused of recruiting individuals to assist China's intelligence services, leading to the closing of VUB and ULB's Confucius Institutes later that year. Song admitted being in contact with a former minister of the PRC

<sup>231</sup>“Europe, China and Expectations for Human Rights”, VUB; Geeraerts, *op. cit.*; “VUB delegation in Beijing...”

<sup>232</sup>“布鲁塞尔自由大学当代中国研究所业务发展总监高恒德来访”, CCPIT Zhejiang, 27th June 2008.

<sup>233</sup>“Gunter Gaublomme”, LinkedIn.

<sup>234</sup>“Brussels Academy for China and European Studies”, VUB; “SEMINAR ON LEGAL ASPECTS OF DOING BUSINESS WITH CHINA”, VUB, 15th Feb. 2026. Similarly, the Brussels Diplomatic Academy co-organised a “VUB China Day” in 2014 with BICCS and BACES's Chinese university sponsors, featuring Song Xinning as well as staff from the PRC Embassy in Belgium as panellists (“CHINA DAY AT VUB”, VUB, 14th Sept. 2030). A series of lectures on China have also mentioned “cooperation” between BACES and BCECC.(“GUEST LECTURES”, Brussels Diplomatic Academy)

<sup>235</sup>In 2015, Cornelis and Zhu were among VUB representatives who joined a delegation to China led by Belgium's King Philippe to sign new cooperation agreements (“VUB delegation joins State Visit to China”, VUB, 16th June 2015). On this occasion, Cornelis and Zhu organised an event for Chinese alumni and potential VUB students. Cornelis was also part of a VUB delegation to China in 2017, organised by the VUB China Network to sign an agreement on further student exchanges in the field of European studies with Renmin University, and in 2019 to visit Beijing Jiaotong University and foster cooperation in the field of communication, energy and science (“VUBToday: VUB and ULB Rectors on Successful Joint China Mission”, VUB, 29th May 2017; “IES signs new cooperation agreements with Fudan University and Renmin University of China”, IES; “Delegation from VUB, Belgium Visited BJTU”, Beijing Jiaotong University).

<sup>236</sup>“Jan Cornelis”, Brussels Diplomatic Academy; “VUB to Open Confucius Institute”, VUB, 15th June 2030; 王凡华, *op. cit.*

<sup>237</sup>“比利时高校关停孔院，前副校长写了一封信”，环球网，20th Dec. 2019. In its article, the state-controlled media outlet mentioned the doubts of many “VUB scholars” such as Bruno Coppieters — invited by BACES to speak on the Taiwan issue in 2017 — who stated in a Flemish newspaper that the move was a product of Western propaganda (“The Taiwan Issue and EU-China Relations”, BACES, 4th May 2017; “Staatsveiligheid gaat haar boekje te buiten”, *De Standaard* [4th Nov. 2019]). Cornelis praised the effective collaboration of professors Song Xinning and Zhu Chang, who made VUB's Confucius Institute “one of the most active he had seen” (“比利时高校关停孔院，前副校长写了一封信”). He also “regretted” not having been consulted on the matter as a co-founder of the institute (*ibid.*).

<sup>238</sup>“Understanding China's “soft power” and influence”, Friends of Europe, 21st Nov. 2017; “Officiële inhuldiging van het Brussels Institute of Contemporary China Studies”; “比利时布鲁塞尔自由大学朱畅博士来访”，北京师范大学教育学部，16th Apr. 2010; “比利时布鲁塞尔自由大学（弗拉芒语区）外事副校长访问中国人民大学”，中国人民大学国际交流处，29th June 2015.



Figure 14: Jan Cornelis receiving his Friendship Award from Ma Kai in 2014. Source: [NWPU](#).

Ministry of State Security.<sup>239</sup> Song Xinning, a renowned scholar specialised in EU-China relations, was very proactive in linking his activities and BACES with Brussels's academia, himself participating in events promoting China's image and the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>240</sup> He also initiated a **Belgium-China Studies Network**, one of whose rare publicised activities was a two-day conference hosted by the European Institute for Asian Studies, a think tank that has organised events that promote CCP-aligned views.<sup>241</sup>

As integrated into VUB as it is, BACES is able to work as a hub that engages with speakers affiliated with a group of recurring organisations which have organised activities that contribute to promoting the CCP's voice in Brussels and have an established presence in Brussels. Some of the most prominent ones deserve closer attention. First, the **European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS)**, which was founded in 1989 and has benefitted from the support of the China Arts Festival in the EU, was chaired by Axel Goethals, who in addition to being one of BCECC's board members,

<sup>239</sup>“Waarom de Chinese directeur van het Confuciusinstituut aan de VUB ons land niet meer binnen mag”, *De Morgen* (19th Oct. 2029); Lulu, *op. cit.*; “Brussels university to close Chinese-funded institute after espionage accusations”, *The Brussels Times*, 11th Dec. 2019; “The VUB will not continue its cooperation with the Confucius Institute”, VUB, 10th Dec. 2019; “L’ULB aussi cesse sa collaboration avec l’Institut Confucius”, *L’Avenir* (17th Dec. 2019).

<sup>240</sup>Such as in Krakow, in the presence of Shen Wei 沈伟 from Deakin University in Australia (Geoff Wade, “Song Xinning 宋新宁...”, Twitter, 29th Oct. 2019).

<sup>241</sup>“China’s Future: Domestic and International Contradictions and Challenges”, EIAS, 20th June 2019; Genaille, *op. cit.*; “Belgium Court Reverses Schengen Entry Ban on Chinese Professor Accused of Espionage”, *Schengen Visa Info*, 23rd Apr. 2020; “Understanding China’s “soft power” and influence”. The event was hosted by Song and gathered a large amount of Chinese scholars from BACES’s partner universities, including Duncan Freeman (BACES, College of Europe), Men Jing from the College of Europe, and Jeanne Boden in charge of China Conduct, a consultancy (“BCECC Newsletter June 2015 32”). Another event in 2017 gathered a similar panel of Chinese scholars as well as a representative from the China Association of NGO Cooperation (CANGO, 中国国际民间组织合作促进会), a GONGO overseen by the Ministry of Commerce that cooperates with European NGOs (“The 19th National Congress of CPC and China’s Development”, VUB, 29th Nov. 2017; “简介、宗旨、愿景”, CANGO, 26th Aug. 2020).



Figure 15: Zhu Chang (right) in presence of VUB's Vice-Rector for Internationalisation Roman Meeusen (second from the right) on the occasion of the integration of Deakin's University into BACES in 2019. Source: BACES.

also co-founded the (seemingly dormant) Europe–China Institute for Education and Culture together with a senior EIAS associate; a former FIT employee, Atlas Hiseas and EIAS; and a Xinhua journalist from Xinhua — all organisations that have appeared in this mapping exercise.<sup>242</sup> Lin Goethals, programme director for Asia at EIAS, was the one who interviewed Ujhelyi on Euractiv.<sup>243</sup> EIAS employs recurring researchers who have played a role in organisations studied in this paper, such as Erik Famaey, BCECC's vice chairman, who has, in the past, attended events on behalf of Bernard Dewit and promoted the BRI.<sup>244</sup> EIAS has also organised conferences on topics aligned with the CCP's interests while involving familiar organisations such as BACES, VUB's Confucius Institute, BCECC, the College of Europe or the Egmont Institute, to name a few.<sup>245</sup> A second organisation involved in PRC academic influence is the **College of Europe**, a postgraduate institute for European studies and international relations. For China, developing its footprint within the College could be critical, as the school benefits from a prestigious reputation in the EU sphere and trains many future EU staff.<sup>246</sup>

<sup>242</sup>“BCECC - Procès verbal”; “Diao Ze”, Muck Rack; “Inter-regionalism, Sustainability and African Development: Promoting an EU-Africa-China Dialogue”, Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, 3rd Oct. 2019; “Alberto Turkstra”, EIAS; “Hannes Dekeyser”, LinkedIn.

<sup>243</sup>Goethals, *op. cit.*

<sup>244</sup>“比利时举办“一带一路”中国邮票国际交流展”, Hanban, 30th Sept. 2017; “ACPB 隆重庆祝 2014 中秋佳节”, FCPAE, 8th Oct. 2014.

<sup>245</sup>Genaille, *op. cit.*; “Europe-China Institute for Education and Culture - Constitution”, Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises, 2nd Aug. 2017; “Lunch Meeting with AIIB Vice-President Thierry de Longuemar”, EIAS, 23rd May 2018; “EU-China Cultural and Science Diplomacy Workshop”, EIAS, 30th Nov. 2017.

<sup>246</sup>The former head of the European External Action Service (the diplomatic arm of the European Union), Federica Mogherini, has served as rector of the College (“Federica MOGHERINI is appointed Rector of the College of Europe from 1 September 2020”, College of Europe, 26th May 2020).



In 2014, Xi Jinping himself gave a speech at the school during his visit to Belgium.<sup>247</sup> In the same year, an EU-China Research Centre was established within the Department of EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies (based in Bruges), which ceased to exist in September 2020 with no public explanation.<sup>248</sup> The centre regularly published the *EU-China Observer* (55 issues from 2009 to 2020), a selection of articles written by experts and students under the supervision of Men Jing 门镜 who was the director of the EU-China Research Centre and chairholder of the Baillet Latour Chair of EU-China Relations that funds the centre.<sup>249</sup> The objective of the structure, besides research itself, was described as the promotion of policy dialogue on both sides and between decision-makers and the academic community.<sup>250</sup> Men is particularly active in the Brussels academic sphere and has represented the College of Europe at events organised by BACES and the Egmont Institute as well as by the Belgium-China Studies Network at the European Institute for Asian Studies.<sup>251</sup> The centre and Men have also organised multiple conferences attended by European stakeholders such as Jo Leinen and Duncan Freeman.<sup>252</sup>

An example of the intertwining within this network of organisations was provided by a 2016 conference coorganised by BACES and VUB titled “The Chinese approach to public diplomacy — a clash of ideas?”<sup>253</sup> The programme included speeches by Song Xinning and Duncan Freeman.<sup>254</sup> The same year, BACES organised an informal debate conducted by Song Xinning following the publication of the “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on Elements for a new strategy on China” by the European Commission and the European External Action Service.<sup>255</sup> Several events have involved the same organisations and representatives while covering topics such as CCP politics, connectivity, diplomacy and the economy.<sup>256</sup>

<sup>247</sup>“习近平在布鲁日欧洲学院的演讲”，新华网。

<sup>248</sup>“EU-China Research Centre”，College of Europe.

<sup>249</sup>“Issue 2.20”，*EU-China Observer*, 31st Aug. 2020; “Baillet Latour Chair of European Union-China Relations”，College of Europe.

<sup>250</sup>“Mission statement”，College of Europe.

<sup>251</sup>“Europe-China Institute for Education and Culture - Constitution”；“China’s Future...”

<sup>252</sup>“BACES - VUB Workshop: The Chinese approach to public diplomacy - a clash of ideas?”，BACES, 4th May 2016; “Duncan Freeman”；“International conference: The EU and China: Climate change and energy diplomacy”，College of Europe, 2nd May 2016. In 2015, the Madariaga-College of Europe Foundation, chaired by former EU diplomat Pierre Defraigne, was accused of receiving funding from the Chinese Mission and the Beijing Peace Tour Cultural Exchange Center. While he confirmed the origin of the funds, he denied his foundation was subject to political bias (“Letter by Pierre DEFRAIGNE in response to the article by James PANICHI entitled ‘China-backed think tank exits Brussels’”，College of Europe; Hamilton & Ohlberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 212 sq.). In 2016, Defraigne attended the Belgium and China Cooperation Forum on the Belt and Road Initiative co-organised by BCECC and the Chinese embassy (“Belgium & China Cooperation Forum on Belt and Road”，BCECC, 21st Oct. 2016).

<sup>253</sup>“BACES - VUB Workshop: The Chinese approach to public diplomacy - a clash of ideas?”

<sup>254</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>255</sup>“Informal discussion on new EU policy paper on China”，BACES, 29th June 2016. Another example is the conference “15 Years of EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”，co-organised by BACES, the Egmont Institute, VUB’s Confucius Institute and the EU-Asia Centre in 2018. Song and Freeman were panellists at the conference (“15 Years of EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”，Egmont Institute, 18th Oct. 2002). A 2017 workshop that followed the same pattern of organisations was also attended by the director of the EU-Asia Centre, Fraser Cameron, a former European Commission official and British Secret Intelligence Service agent who, in September 2020, was investigated by the Belgian authorities for having allegedly provided Chinese journalists with sensitive information (Barbara Moens, “Belgium probes top EU think-tanker for links to China”，*Politico*, 18th Sept. 2020; “Invitation -Workshop on EU-China-US Trilateral Relationship in an Uncertain World”，BACES).

<sup>256</sup>“杜鹏副校长应邀赴比利时参加系列活动”，北京市港澳台侨学生教育管理研究会, 6th Dec. 2017; “Workshop 19th National Congress of CPC”，VUB; “EU-China relations and connectivity”，Egmont Institute; “The EU, China and Central Asia: Global and Regional Cooperation in A New Era”，UNU-CRIS;



The added value is that most of these actors are linked to other research institutions, which provides BACES with privileged access to Belgium's entire academic sphere — as long as senior organisations are willing to collaborate. The fact that Chinese universities and Huawei managed to establish a new channel of influence — BACES and the Confucius Institute — in VUB's sphere, which is already saturated with China-orientated initiatives (VUB-NWPU privileged partnership, BICCS, the Brussels Diplomatic Academy, ECHE...), reflects the importance of the role of internal actors who rely on the prestige and the attractiveness of collaborating with China to justify increasingly close relations. The engagement and cultivation of Chinese and Belgian teachers, VUB's visibility in China and privileged links with high-level CCP officials through the support of joint projects like BACES reinforce the idea that optimal co-operation comes from further openness, and that from openness comes international recognition and the potential to thrive. In this sense, BACES's case shows how such fertile ground allows for cooperation to be pushed to academic extremes, somehow foreshadowing the potential to convey biased messages and harm a university's reputation in the long term. The controversy surrounding Huawei and the termination of the VUB's Confucius Institute illustrate this aspect.

## 5 Conclusions

This paper has used a network of organisations to explore strategies the CCP uses to gain access to and influence on Belgian and EU decision-makers based in Brussels.

A key node of this network, the Belgium-China Chamber of Commerce, shows how China's economic significance can provide an uncontroversial entry point for the CCP's influence agencies to cultivate decision-making élites. Our first case study has established that BCECC is, rather than an ordinary business association, a close partner of CCPIT, a global influence organ subordinated to the party-state. The fact that similar CCPIT partners exist in multiple states points to CCPIT's primary agency in shaping this organisation.

BCECC's activities in Belgium show that CCPIT partners can play a more political profile than suggested by their official trade-promotion mission. BCECC acts as a point of contact between Belgium's trade and investment agencies and the PRC authorities. However, interactions with united front groups (such as Chinese professional associations) and PRC propaganda agencies (such as state media) are signs of BCECC's association with PRC interests beyond business promotion.

This political role becomes clearer by following BCECC's connections to a larger network of entities. The OBOR Committee, an informal grouping of MEPs that senior BCECC figures helped establish, is a key example. Like the (now defunct) EU-China Friendship Group, the OBOR Committee has sought to align MEPs with CCP-friendly viewpoints. Its leader, active in European Parliament foreign affairs, tourism, transport and China relations bodies, co-founded a Confucius Institute and has espoused positions favouring the PRC in parliamentary debates and comments to EU-focused media. Despite a relatively low-profile role as a parliamentary grouping, the OBOR

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*“INVITATION: Academic Debate on China's Grand Strategy - 22 March 2018”, BACES; “INVITATION: Academic Debate on China's Grand Strategy - 22 March 2018”, BACES, 1st Mar. 2018; “Inter-regionalism, sustainability and African development: promoting an EU-Africa-China Trialogue”, Egmont Institute.*





Committee, together with other linked Belgium-based entities, has partnered with PRC state agencies to organise cultural and tourism exchanges.

This cluster of entities, composed of political groupings, associations representing business interests and Belgium and China-based companies, with personal and institutional links to Belgian, EU and PRC agencies, has effectively mediated EU exchanges with PRC organs. The cluster's organisational flexibility gives legitimacy to to act in multiple capacities — representing European and Belgian interests with an official mandate, advocating for PRC-friendly positions in political and media forums, promoting BRI in tandem with PRC state-supervised entities — while its interconnectedness — with multiple personal links to both sides' institutions — facilitates access.

This network's multifacetedness — reflecting the Belgian and EU institutional landscape with which it partners — may suggest it is an opportunistic grouping doing business that Xi's CCP's policies incentivise. By chasing the rhizome back in time, this study has disproven that view, linking today's cluster to Belgian CCP-friendly organisations active since the Mao era. BCECC was born in the 1980s as "reform and opening" policies raised the importance of business exchanges in a normalised Belgium-China relationship, merging business-themed associations that included the economic committee of the Belgian-Chinese Association. The BCA was established in 1957 as the Belgian node of the CCP's network of "friendship associations" that cultivated contacts with foreign élites at a time when the PRC was diplomatically isolated from the West. From the CCP's point of view, interactions through BCECC and its network thus continue its influence operations in Belgium, started as soon as Mao left Moscow's orbit. The BCA lives on, as the senior Belgian partner of the CPAFFC (the centre of today's friendship-association network, managed by China's MFA), with a focus on CCP-aligned cultural theme — it set up a Confucius Institute in 2005 and runs a bookstore in cooperation with a PRC propaganda agency. BCA's profile has shifted from the Mao era, from drawing its leadership from Maoist-friendly elements in Belgium's socialist and communist politics to overlapping with the China-linked business world.

The shift reflects how CCP influence operations exploit their targets' views on what exchanges are legitimate. When these operations began, apolitical cultural exchange (and Maoist politics) served as the label. The friendship association system — run by a party-state agency disguised as a non-government entity — found partners in senior China-friendly figures from Belgium's left. Today, our cluster has a business focus. Its most visible partner is CCPIT, a state-run, outwardly non-state trade-promotion agency. As the cooperation with EU and Belgian institutions described in this paper has shown, this business theme allows the CCP to cultivate Brussels élites far beyond what the hostile climate of the 1950s allowed.

Beyond business, China's attractiveness allows the CCP to coopt figures and institutions in Europe's academia, opening further avenues for technology transfer and shaping narratives that influence policy-makers' views on China. BCECC's network of partners leads to another cluster of organisations, which emanates from VUB's cooperation with PRC entities — itself grown, to some extent, from a PRC defence-focused university's cultivation of a VUB scientist in the 1990s. This cluster includes partnerships between VUB and PRC universities — the Brussels Academy for China and European Studies, the Brussels Institute of Contemporary China Studies and the Brussels Diplomatic Academy — as well as BCECC-linked groups like the European



Institute of Asian Studies. The academic anchoring gives this network the legitimacy it needs to cooperate with mainstream Belgian and European narrative-shaping institutions, such as the College of Europe, a postgraduate international relations school, and the Egmont Institute, Belgium's main foreign policy think tank.

Through the BACES-centred academic-themed cluster, rhizomatic links lead from BCECC's business focus to entities able to influence policy debates and the training of Belgian and European public servants. By analysing personal and organisational links between these clusters of entities, the rhizomatic approach in this study attempts to reproduce channels the CCP exploits to influence Brussels élites. If these connections are ignored, individual nodes of this network — such as BCECC — appear to be run-of-the-mill organisations representing interest groups in Brussels. This study has shed light on the entire network's role as a key instrument of CCP influence operations in Belgium and the EU.

This study has not focused on measuring the impact of CCP influence operations mediated by this network. While these entities' direct impact on Brussels high politics may be limited — e.g., the OBOR Committee has hardly affected the European Parliament's views on China —, they are capable of building soft, but durable, links to Brussels élites at a lower level, away from media and political attention — and of staying largely immune to the scrutiny it does attract.

Thanks to its decentralised structure on the European side, the network has been able to resist Belgian intelligence's espionage allegations on key individuals in this network — such as the academic Song Xinning, who has publicly declared a “good relationship” with a former head of China's main civilian intelligence agency — were well publicised and temporarily resulted in Song's banning from Europe. However, these developments do not appear to have significantly affected the network's continued success in Brussels.

The rhizome's adaptability and resilience shows the CCP's ability to maintain durable influence networks moulded by the specificities of Brussels — the centre of European politics — as an institutional environment. The substructure analysed in this paper indicates that CCP influence efforts complement each other. Their existence and design are indicative of what has been observed in most European countries (and beyond), meaning an attempt to coordinate influence efforts across different levels, from the sub-national to the trans-national — thus extending those that have been observed in earlier country studies.

By securing the trust and support of prominent figures in the political, academic and business spheres, networks such as the one outlined in this study give the CCP the ability to significantly impact European decision-making processes, one of whose biggest flaws is the lack of understanding of Chinese politics and CCP influence operations. In the long term, influence activities targeting EU policy-making give the CCP normative power, nurturing belief on a “mutual understanding” based on frameworks designed by the CCP, while PRC activities remain opaque. Democratic processes — Europe's ability to craft and debate its own China policies — are eroded as a result.



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