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"Languages for an interconnected world"

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~~Seul le texte prononcé fait foi~~
~~Es gilt das gesprochene Wort~~

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尊敬的章新胜先生，女士们、先生们、朋友们，大家早上好！
(Distinguished Mr Zhang Xinsheng, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends, good morning,)

I am honoured to be with you here today to open this conference.

First, let me say that I have been in your country for just a few days. But right from the start, I felt a common bond between Chinese people and Europeans: we both feel strongly and passionately about our languages and our ancient cultures.

We both know that language is at the root of our personal and social identity and the most complete expression of our cultures.

We also share something else: China and Europe maintain a deep-rooted respect for the cultural and linguistic diversity on which our worlds are based. We both appreciate the need to preserve this richness.

Second, Europe and China are both feeling the effects of the global economic crisis. The crisis has brought home just how much our world is interconnected and interdependent. And it has shown us how quickly the world can change. Policymakers around the globe must do all we can to equip people with the skills to adapt to change, and to

take advantage of the new opportunities that will come as we leave the crisis behind. Skills in languages can provide a real advantage.

Languages – the expression of unity in diversity, of harmony in difference

In Europe, languages are central to Europe's social and cultural life. We have 23 official languages in the EU and many more regional or minority languages. I am committed to preserving and promoting languages as a key feature of the "Unity in diversity" that underpins the entire European project.

Of course this principle is not ours alone. Throughout the ages it has found expression in many different civilisations. Since arriving here, I have heard comparisons between the European model and the old Confucian ideal of *harmony in differences*. Again we share the same principles.

New European strategy on multilingualism

Just recently the European Commission adopted my new strategy on multilingualism. This strategy is built on the conviction that languages build bridges, not barriers; give us opportunities, not obstacles. It emphasises that languages are a tool for social cohesion and for dialogue between different cultures. It also analyses the more tangible

rewards of language learning, such as greater employability for individuals and greater competitiveness for businesses.

Our strategy also underlines how important it is to understand each others' languages and cultures to strengthen the bridges between different continents. We identified China as a strategic European partner for achieving this goal.

Languages for an interconnected world – intercultural dialogue

In today's global village, where technology can put us in almost instant contact with virtually anyone anywhere, learning a foreign language is the best way to know about other cultures, other values and ways of thinking.

Multiculturalism is not a new phenomenon. History is populated with metropolises, trade routes and border regions and other places of meeting and exchange. But never before have so many of us been surrounded by so much difference. Never before has it been so widespread, so immediate.

Multilingualism constantly forces us to look at things from a different perspective – another person's perspective. This is the root of tolerance, understanding and openness. These are the attitudes on which cohesive and sustainable societies are founded.

These attitudes and the values they represent are crucial for our present and future. We live in an age of globalisation. China and Europe have both reaped its benefits. And we have both witnessed its

power to transform. Our challenge now is not to try and stop globalisation; but to strive to give it a human face; to protect and nurture our distinct cultures and identities.

Languages can help us. They are not just expressions of culture and identity, to be protected in the face of globalisation; they are also concrete instruments we can use to draw the best out of globalisation.

Languages for an interconnected world – skills and competitiveness

As the knowledge society develops, the nature of work changes. We are moving from a 'job-for-life' perspective to one where people will change job, and even career, several times. We have to prepare people for jobs that themselves are changing. People don't just need technical skills – increasingly, employers look for a range of cross-cutting skills that especially focus on communication and language skills.

Our young people need to be equipped with language skills when entering the labour market. We need choice and opportunities to learn languages, starting with our education systems and fanning out into lifelong language learning.

Languages are good for business, too.

European companies recognise that better language skills mean better business opportunities. Not only European languages – world languages such as Mandarin, or Russian, are ever more in demand.

Nor is English alone enough. While English is still the "lingua franca" for international business, demand for other languages is growing. Globalisation brings trade opportunities across Europe and around the world. As we all know: with English you can buy anything in the world. But if you want to sell, you had better learn your client's language...

China and the EU – partners in languages exchange

This is why I am particularly pleased that language teaching in China covers as many as 17 of our 23 official languages. And why I am also very pleased that China is an enthusiastic partner in Europe's top-class university exchange programme, Erasmus Mundus, where participants get the opportunity to improve their skills in two European languages.

In fact, initiatives between us continue to grow. The Chinese government has set up an excellent 'China-EU language exchange project' for bringing European students, teachers and school principals to China. And on Wednesday I will be launching a European initiative for immersing top European researchers in Chinese culture and language here!

Conclusion

It is very clear that we share a strong desire to learn from each other.

My new strategy outlines how multilingualism can be a basis for cooperation with our partners across the world. I am delighted to bring this to fruition, having signed last Thursday a **Joint Declaration on multilingualism with China**. The joint declaration will bring about exchanges of information and best practice. It should stimulate seminars, expert meetings between stakeholders and conferences like this one. I for one know we can learn much from your unique experience. And we hope that we have knowledge and experience to share with you too.

We should see our mission as learning about each other; how we are alike; how we are different; so that we can respond to the common challenges that both our societies face.

Today's Conference will bring us one step closer to this goal.

Thank you.

