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Time waits for no one

By Edouard Tetreau | China Daily | Updated: 2019-03-25 08:11



China is showing that countries that invest in their own future will own the future

Two weeks before President Xi Jinping's state visit to France this week, I had the chance to visit Beijing and Shanghai and reconnect with the fast-changing reality of China.

Probably more than my previous official and business visits to China, this visit was an eye-opener. Here are the seven wonders, surprises and sometimes shocks that I experienced during my stay that I would like to share.

First, during the two weeks of the sessions of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Beijing was under an unfamiliar pristine blue sky. Chinese friends explained to me that this is a combination of an act of will by the government, which shut down factories around the city, and the wind of Beijing.



Here is a take-away for world leaders: the global and local fight against pollution is not beyond reach. It is a political act to stop pollution and to promote alternatives to fossil fuels.

France and China are aligned in this active ambition since the Paris Agreement. We would like other major countries such as India, the United States, Russia, Brazil and coal-rich Germany to understand it more actively.

Second, I was amazed by the sophistication of Beijing and Shanghai's daily life. Mobile payments are used everywhere. Cash and credit cards were hardly accepted in certain places. I cannot think of another world city having reached that level today.

China is becoming a digital-cash nation just like Israel is the startup nation. It is not about the happy few benefiting from this technological progress. It is shared by the masses.

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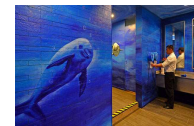
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Connecting 1.4 billion people and accessing their data in a centralized and organized way will also provide China with an ever-growing lead in data-driven industries, starting with AI.

The West will have to innovate even more, be even more creative, to be able to compete.

Third, it may sound simple but it speaks volumes: unlike in Paris and other major cities of the Western world, Beijing motorists and cyclists wear no helmets, and extensively use electric power, not fossil fuels.

Two take-aways for a French citizen whose country is obsessed by the self-limiting "principle of precaution": One, there is in China a shared sense of environmental protection, not only for the happy few; Two, there is a culture of risk, and confidence in being able to shape one's own destiny.

It is more important to move ahead and go fast, rather than to take extreme precautions which limit your speed and efficiency.

Fourth, during my discussions I strongly sensed that China was a partner "ready, willing and able" to engage in various forms of alliances.

The United States and Russia might be unwilling to try and see eye-to-eye with the EU, but that is part of China's diplomacy.

France has long tradition of multilateralism and independence vis-à-vis dominant powers, dating back well before Charles de Gaulle. So, we can expect a very fruitful dialogue and a number of initiatives in this domain when President Xi visits France.

China and France are here together to build bridges. Not walls.

Fifth, a growing number of French companies and entrepreneurs are increasingly contributing to China's development, and are here for the long-term. In the fields of satellite communications (Eutelsat); smart energy (EDF, Total); new mobility (SNCF, RATP); industrial digitalization (Dassault Systèmes) and, last but not least, hospitality, culture and entertainment (Accor, GL Events).

France is clearly ahead of other European countries such as Germany in these new strategic sectors. Sino-French groups like Aden Services China are key enablers of these successful integrations here in China, serving one of China's key priorities, which is to improve the productivity and competitiveness of domestic companies.

Sixth, the 13th NPC delivered an "open for business" signal - which is jaw-dropping for a European - with a reform agenda that includes tax cuts for businesses and individuals, reducing red tape bureaucracy for more efficiency, subsidies for small companies as well as creating a level-playing field for foreign entrepreneurs.

We can expect that it will create reservoirs of structural growth for China in the coming years. And it could provide inspiration for low-growth Western European countries burdened by excessive taxes and bureaucracy.

Seventh: "This country is about the future. What are you afraid of? What are you waiting for?" a senior official says.

Indeed, countries which invest in their own future will own the future. This is China's vision for the 21st century. This is President Emmanuel Macron's ambition for France. Fifty years ago, a famous essay called for Europe to rise up to the US challenge. That was the 20th century.

The 21st century is about rising to the China challenge. President Macron has this ambition for my country. Both this challenge and this ambition met on March 24 in Paris. A shared success is within reach.

The author is an adviser to the senior executives of a number of organizations and he is a columnist with French newspaper Les Echos and Le Figaro. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

(China Daily 03/25/2019 page13)

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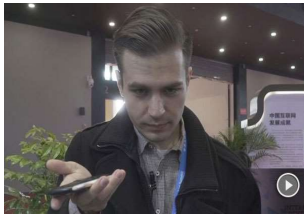
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