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# CHINA COMPETENCE IN EUROPE: WHY IT MATTERS AND HOW TO ACHIEVE IT

Gebhard, Christian Alexander

<sup>a</sup> *Ansbach University of Applied Sciences, Residenzstr. 8, 91522 Ansbach, Germany.  
(c.gebhard@hs-ansbach.de)*

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**ABSTRACT:** *The MERICS Institute thoroughly depicted the state of the art of China competences in Germany at the beginning of 2018. The report explained why it was important to strengthen these competences and made detailed suggestions on how to do so. This article takes a look at recent developments regarding China competences in Germany and sheds light on the current image of China among mainly small and medium-sized enterprises in Franconia, Northern Bavaria, by means of surveys and two interviews. Suggestions are made on why and how to improve language skills, touching upon the situation in Spain.*

**KEY WORDS:** *China, Competence, Chinese language skills, SMEs, Franconia.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: CHINA'S GRIP ON POWER

The number of countries that are part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, also known as One Road, One Belt initiative, OBOR, or New Silk Road) is growing and put at 139 on all continents by the Council of Foreign Relations<sup>1</sup>. This excludes both Germany and Spain who are more or less affected by the BRI since end points of trade routes are located in Hamburg, Duisburg and Madrid. Both countries have close economic ties with the People's Republic of China (hereafter "China"), facing a trade deficit. China's economic clout on the world stage has long been growing. However, recent political tensions have had economic repercussions. In light of the US-Chinese trade war, some countries may be inclined to question their economic ties with China. Given these developments, China's image in the West seems to be shifting and a focus on politically controversial issues within China and debates over Human Rights have gained more and more attention. Does this trend affect economic ties in general? How is the overall cooperation with China affected? Not only the economy, but also environmental issues are of great concern in dealing with China on a global level.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/blog/countries-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-whos-and-whos-out>.

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In contrast with the Chinese economic strategy that is heavily state-driven and thus steered by political interests, conflicting interests can be observed on the European side. Political disagreement between the EU and China is obvious: European views critic of China, although not shared by some member states, are commonly pronounced and mutual sanctions have led to the momentary freezing of the ratification process of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) between the EU and China. The interest in economic ties with China seems to remain strong though: 60% of 585 European companies are looking to intensify their China business due to recent numbers of growth, according to a MERICS report<sup>2</sup>. This is particularly important to know against the backdrop of the Chinese government's strategies for the coming years, explained in its current Five-Year Plan (FYP). China plans to become more and more innovative and turn into the world leader in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other technological key areas. The goals of FYPs are generally thought to be realistic since the government boast with the structures to steer the country's economy, science and technology towards its goals according to China politics expert Sebastian Heilmann.<sup>3</sup>

### **China and the EU, Germany and Bavaria**

A report on Chinese FDI in Europe shows that China overtook the US as the EU's biggest trading partner and Germany's exports make up the biggest share of EU exports to China (48%). Germany also receives a considerable amount of China's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, the share of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) is growing, intensifying a direct reflection of state interests in China's presence in the country. China has been Germany's most important trade partner in 2019 for the fourth consecutive year (Besser et al., 2020) and Chinese businesses are reaching beyond the main international business hubs such as Frankfurt and the like. Mergers and takeovers are common even in less urban areas (Midea acquiring Kuka of Augsburg in 2016 and FCCA Castle Brewery merging with Schlossbrauerei of Au in 2019 are only two of many examples). China going global through its Made in China 2025 strategy may offer chances to gain access to the still restricted Chinese market through Chinese takeovers (Welfens, 2017)<sup>5</sup>. Back in 2019, Bavarian Secretary of Commerce Aiwanger pointed out the key role of Bavarian medium-sized construction companies in the Bavarian-Chinese cooperation.<sup>6</sup>

### **Expertise on and interest in China: The Franconian Case**

Gebhard 2020 looked at small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Middle Franconia (MF, a region in northern Bavaria) to identify current trends in the context

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<sup>2</sup> <https://merics.org/de/briefing/eu-us-summits-economic-relations-international-procurement-instrument>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://merics.org/en/interview/sebastian-heilmann-ccps-next-century>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://merics.org/en/report/chinese-fdi-europe-2020-update>.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.boeckler.de/pdf/p\\_mbf\\_report\\_2017\\_36\\_ci\\_welfens.pdf](https://www.boeckler.de/pdf/p_mbf_report_2017_36_ci_welfens.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.mittelstandinbayern.de/bayerns-wirtschaftsminister-in-china-chance-fuer-kmu/>.

of the BRI. 486 enterprises from different fields of business, industry and trade sectors were invited, with a reminder, to take part in an online survey about the BRI, its image and importance. The low participation rate of 6.3% serves as a first indicator to understand how little interest in the topic and expertise in the field is to be found in SMEs in MF. A look at some of the main findings may help to underline the lack of understanding for China's economic penetration of local markets. 38.7% of respondents indicated that their enterprise was not at all familiar with the BRI. 58.1% did not reply to the question whether the BRI was relevant for their enterprise and 64% were unable to assess the influence of the BRI on their business, whereas a quarter of participants (25.8%) evaluated the consequences of the BRI as positive. When asked whether they would take measures to cope with the BRI, 58.1% did not reply, followed by 32.3% of enterprises indicating that they would not take any measures. At least some interest in the topic can be deduced from the replies to the question whether they would like to learn more about the BRI: 48.4 gave an affirmative reply. Irrespective of whether SMEs in MF will be affected by China's reach for economic influence on the world stage in the long run, the development of the recent years seems to make it plausible to learn about China and its strategic plan.

## **Interviews**

As with online survey, only a small fraction of enterprises replied to the request for an interview. Of three enterprises that did reply positively, only two finally agreed on an appointment for a teleconference interview to talk about China competence at the enterprise. Four main questions for discussion were raised about the company's management of China competence and China's image with the enterprise.

The first of these enterprises with 400 employees is based in a rural area in South-Eastern Franconia and exports raw materials such as natural construction material to China. A small number of employees have had training in intercultural competence with no special focus on China, but are encouraged to take part in courses that deal in particular with Chinese culture and business behavior. There is no formal strategy for enhancing China competence since the enterprise puts no special focus on trade with China at this moment. None of the employees has any knowledge of the Chinese language and correspondence is exclusively dealt with in English. The company sees no necessity to recruit staff with knowledge of Chinese but would rate this positively among future applicants. There is knowledge of the BRI and several employees follow political and economic news about China, but this is happening in no formal context. The BRI is not part of the enterprise's official business strategy. When asked about future prospects of economic ties given political tensions, a desire was pronounced for the CAI to be signed since this would ease trade transactions. The enterprise seeks closer ties with China but is afraid that personal contact is of utmost importance to reach this goal and hopes for less restrictions regarding the pandemic situation in the not-too-distant future.

## The second enterprise

So far, it can be summarized that no strategy for China competence is discernible among smaller enterprises in Franconia although these are facing an ever-growing dependency on China; traces of a higher awareness for this topic seems to be found among larger enterprises.

## 2. CHINA COMPETENCE

The 2018 MERICS report on China competence demanded a strategic promotion of knowledge about China and the 2020 annual report of the Expert Commission for Research and Investigation (EFI) outspokenly reiterated this demand, backed up with data from Germany's economy and joint research projects<sup>7</sup>. Germany, i.e., its enterprises and its people, needs to understand whom it is dealing with. The country sees itself as a location for science. The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) initiated a strategy in 2017 and seeks to enhance its promotion of China competence<sup>8</sup>, also by means of additional funding programs<sup>9</sup>. One of its declared aims is to bring together expertise on China in a European context. Federal Research Minister Karliczek explains that she wishes to rule out Chinese political interference on German society and research<sup>10</sup>, enforcing the general trend to push out Chinese language institutes which have traditionally fostered Chinese language skills around the world and are under the central rule of the Chinese Ministry of Education. Voices that have been accusing Confucius Institutes of carrying out Chinese political propaganda often do not indicate alternatives of how to build up cultural and linguistic expertise from within Germany. At the same time, the Confucius Institute of Nuremberg, the metropolitan center of Middle Franconia, has shown a successful modernizing strategy during the Covid pandemic and has increased the number of cultural activities offered, has raised its number of language course participants to 1693 and HSK (a standardized Chinese proficiency exam) test takers to 108 in the year 2020 (personal communication), in which so many exchange programs organized by German governmental institutions have been cancelled for at least two years. It seems that this institute, in part funded by a German association and offering workshops about controversial topics (see homepage<sup>11</sup>), has a successful route map for promoting knowledge about Chinese language and culture under extraordinary circumstances.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.kooperation-international.de/aktuelles/nachrichten/detail/info/efi-gutachten-2020-deutschland-braucht-mehr-china-kompetenz/>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/shareddocs/pressemitteilungen/de/karliczek-wir-brauchen-mehr-un-china-expertise-in-deutschland.html>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bmbf.de/foerderungen/bekanntmachung-3684.html>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/shareddocs/pressemitteilungen/de/karliczek-wir-brauchen-mehr-un-china-expertise-in-deutschland.html>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.konfuzius-institut.de/veranstaltungsprogramm/veranstaltungsueckblick/2021.html>.

Aims of projects to foster China competence supported by the BMBF include cooperation with Chinese players in research and educations and an assessment of the existing China competence in Germany. The measures pursue a promotion of the following skills and knowledge, whose compound it defines as China competence: Knowledge about China's history, its culture, economy, and society as well as language skills and intercultural competences<sup>12</sup>, yet different sources put language skills first or last in similar descriptions. These language skills seem to be a particular challenge given the typologic distance between German (or any other Indo-European Language) and Chinese (cf. Guder, 2005a, 2008). The first topics remain marginal at German schools and offers of more in-depth knowledge as well as extracurricular activities related to China are dependent on teachers' personal interests, knowledge, and commitment (Stepan et al., 2018). The following section takes a look at the latter, Chinese language skills, in Germany and other European countries before an outlook is given at the end. Since Spain has declared a strategic association with China (see below), the following thoughts gain relevance in its school curriculums as well.

### **Chinese Language Skills**

Guder (2005b) shows convincingly how it takes more time and effort to study Chinese compared to other (Indo-European) languages due its linguistic typologic difference but also the cultural difference between learners and the target language or culture. Given these differences, it is highly controversial to apply the description of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages to the Chinese language from the perspective of a European learner. This is why Guder and colleagues have worked out the European Benchmarks for the Chinese Language (EBCL)<sup>13</sup> and made detailed suggestions on a curriculum for Chinese, at least for the first levels of language learning. Reaching an advanced level of Chinese may take up to more than 3000 teaching periods, so we can easily reach the following conclusion: The earlier you start, the better.

In 2018, 5,170 students learned Chinese at general schools in Germany (Stepan et al., 2018), compared to 38,000 in France. Klöter (2016) mentions 25 German universities that offer Sinology as a major, with decreasing numbers of students, and seven universities offer Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language as a major<sup>14</sup>; however, the number of normal universities and universities of applied sciences that offer courses of studies related to China is growing. In their summary of a survey among 26 higher education institutes Guder & Burckhardt (2021) show enormous differences in Chinese language training offered in the framework of Chinese studies and that in a bachelor's program it is unlikely to become proficient in various language skills. What also becomes clear from suggestions from the BMBF, the EFI and Guder's publications is how much cultural and area studies as well as knowledge on modern China are intertwined and dependent

<sup>12</sup> cf. <https://www.chin-kobe.de/index.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://refubium.fu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/fub188/15346/EBCLxinklxxAppendizesx23Juni2015.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.fachverband-chinesisch.de/chinesisch-als-fremdsprache/lehrausbildung>.

on language skills: It is only through access to sources from within a nation that this nation can be truly understood. Whereas several European countries include Chinese in strategies for their national curriculum, such as the Mandarin Excellence Programme in England, the China Strategy in Scotland, and similar plans in Ireland, the Netherlands and Italy (cf. Fundació Institut Confuci de Barcelona, 2018)<sup>15</sup>, Spain seems to be rather hesitant in including fostering Chinese language skills in a national plan. The Ministry of Education mentions a rather blurry general concept of developing language skills, didactic material, and education of language instructors ([lamoncloa.gob.es](http://lamoncloa.gob.es), 2018)<sup>16</sup>. There seems to be a preference for early age education: While the Confucius Institute of Barcelona summarizes with regret that no universities offer Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language as a course of study (Fundació Institut Confuci de Barcelona, 2018), more than 200 primary and secondary schools offer elective courses in 2019, according to the People Daily<sup>17</sup>. The total number of students enrolled in Chinese courses at official language schools was 2,345 in the year 2018-2019 (Ministry of Education of Spain, 2020)<sup>18</sup> and the overall figure of people who learn Chinese in Spain is put at over 50,000 by the Chinese embassy (personal communication). In Germany, in contrast, only 18 primary schools are listed in the most recent publications of the Chinese Language Association FaCh<sup>19</sup> ([fachverband-chinesisch.de](http://fachverband-chinesisch.de), 2020). In summary, both countries might seem a bit behind in international comparison as far as teaching Chinese at state schools is concerned, and they seem to go down different strategic lines with Spain focusing more on early age education. Further numbers for European and other countries can be obtained from Shahar-Büchsel & La Mela, 2019.

### 3. SUMMARY, SUGGESTIONS AND OUTLOOK

The German government seems ambitious about building up general China competence to deal with its strategic partner in science and research. A mismatch with attitudes among small, medium, and even large enterprises in less urban Middle Franconia is obvious, as these boast with ignorance of the topic. Given a growing economic dependency, understanding China makes sense, and funding programs aimed at dealing with the coming superpower on a level playing field are promising but are not (yet) showing effect in a top-down process. Spain seems to be working out its detailed strategy on how to deal with China, and has a much more promising start as far as building up language skills is concerned. It seems that the experiences and positions of the two countries can be combined into an advantageous handling of China's rise: Given Guder & Burckhardt's

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.confucio-barcelona.es/images/La%20ense%C3%B1anza%20del%20chino%20en%20el%20entorno%20europeo.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.lamocloa.gob.es/presidente/actividades/Documents/2018/281118-Declaraci%C3%B3n%20Conjunta%20Espa%C3%B1a%20-%20China.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> <http://spanish.peopledaily.com.cn/n3/2019/0118/c92122-9539304.html>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://ntic.educacion.es/cee/informe2020/i20cee-informe.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.fachverband-chinesisch.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Chinesisch\\_als\\_Fremdsprache/Chinesisch\\_an\\_Schulen/2020\\_ChaF\\_Grundschulen.pdf](https://www.fachverband-chinesisch.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Chinesisch_als_Fremdsprache/Chinesisch_an_Schulen/2020_ChaF_Grundschulen.pdf).

(2021) results and the target of the BMBF to over-regional cooperation in research on and with China, we conclude that Germany must learn from Spain and commence Chinese language training at an earlier stage. At the same time in Spain, the formal study of Chinese at secondary and tertiary level may be broadened through formalized education of Chinese language teachers such as it is beginning to materialize in Germany and other European countries. Staying competitive with a rising power will only be achieved through transfer of knowledge and sharing experiences among European nations. This appears even more important against the backdrop of harsh entry restrictions into China and a drastic decrease in in-person exchange opportunities since the pandemic in at least the medium term. Several European meetings, reports and events of the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European Council might shed some light on the future route map before the EU-China summit at the end of 2021.

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## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The sole author of this paper is head of the China Competence Center of Ansbach University of Applied Sciences. He is also the representative of Ansbach's Sister City Jingjiang, Jiangsu, People's Republic of China, in Ansbach.

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