

Speech BCECC, 31 januari 2019

Ambassador,
Dear Mr. Dewit,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by wishing you and your dear ones a happy new year, a happy year of the Pig. My sincere thanks to Bernard Dewit and his team at BCECC. Not only for organising this gathering, but also for their relentless work in bringing our people, our companies and our countries closer together.

This auspicious time between the solar and lunar new year offers us a good moment for reflection. A moment to look back at the year past, to consider where we are, and to envisage where we are going. And where we would like to be going.

2018 was a good year for our bilateral relations, although the general international situation was challenging to say the least. The US and China engaged in a trade war, developing into a wider strategic competition. This situation has repercussions far beyond the protagonists themselves, not least upon the multilateral system, to which we all owe so much.

At the same time China has continued its impressive development. Notwithstanding worries about financial stability or geopolitical tensions, the transformation towards a new normal of quality- and consumer based growth seemed well on track. The Belt and Road Initiative formerly known as OBOR celebrated its fifth anniversary, getting all the more ubiquitous.

On the bilateral level, we witnessed some important high level visits. Prime Minister Li Keqiang visited Belgium in October, and State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi was in Brussels in June. Belgian Deputy Prime Minister Kris Peeters attended the first China International Import Expo in Shanghai in November, after a visit of Agriculture Minister Ducarme at the beginning of the year. And of course there were many other exchanges by MPs, governors, officials, companies, universities etc.

China was not only firmly in the picture, it also became more than before a topic of debate. Not only in Belgium but in many other countries as well. People are becoming better aware of China's rise and the opportunities this

presents, but there are also worries. Worries about market access, about technological transfers, cybersecurity, political meddling.

We should welcome this debate. We should pursue it in all openness, within our own organisations, between all Belgian actors, and with China. It offers us an opportunity for much needed strategic reflection. We need to understand China better, fill up the information gap. We need to better grasp China's developments in all its dimensions, together with its impact on the world and on our daily lives.

Based on this we all should knowingly and actively pursue the many opportunities China presents, at the same time being fully aware of and mitigating the risks. The only way to achieve this is through dialogue and constructive engagement. The opportunities for cooperation are not endless, but a long road lies ahead before we reach the limits.

We hope that China will continue its reform and opening up, which brought it 40 years of unprecedented development. A more level playing field, a robust rule of law and a strong multilateral order will generate the trust to bring the cooperation we both need to the next level. To achieve a true win-win.

The year ahead will offer ample opportunities to bring this approach into practice. There will be the Beijing Expo from April till November, with a Belgian garden showcasing our best products. Do not hesitate to make use of it. China will also organise the second BRI Summit and the second CIIE in Shanghai. At the same time we are working on our second bilateral Innovation Dialogue.

Further south, the development of the Greater Bay Area will continue. On the basis of their respective added values, Hong Kong and Macao are determined to bring their contribution to the implementation of this plan while preserving their specific status. Hong Kong, as the third International Financial Center in the world, plans to further modernise and extend its financial services. Therefore our Consulate General in Hong Kong recommends you to participate in the next annual "Fintech Week", which will be organised in the autumn of 2019.

On a more practical level, 2019 will also be the year when the construction works of a brand new embassy building in Beijing will start. This project, which has been in the making for years, will bring Belgian actors in China together in a modern, functional and sustainable work environment. Up to the level of our bilateral relationship. We will need nevertheless to accept some temporary inconveniences during the works.

The most important event, however, will be the Belgian Economic Mission headed by HRH Princess Astrid. From 18 till 23 November participants will head to Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen, and perhaps sideways to some other cities as well. The mission will offer you a great opportunity to participate in China's economic transformation. It is a testimony of Belgium's belief in the story of China, and an occasion for China as well to showcase its openness for future collaboration. I warmly invite you all to join.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These days once unshakable certainties seem to unravel before our eyes, be it through political, economic or technological developments. A firm, open and honest partnership between Belgium, the EU and China is crucial to address the challenges we face. Let us all contribute to this with further engagement and dialogue, to create more success stories, for ourselves, our partners, our organisations and our countries.

Pigs are said to be compassionate, diligent and generous. However they are not always vigilant, something which we should all avoid. So let these first qualities be the guiding principles for our personal endeavours, and for the China-Belgium bilateral relationship as a whole.

Bonne année, gelukkig nieuwjaar, chun jie kuai le!