



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at Sichuan University
on 7 December 2018
in Chengdu, China**

Thank you very much for your kind invitation! I can assure you that it is a very special honour for me to address you today at this highly renowned university, which is steeped in tradition.

I am delighted to be in Chengdu again this year. This is not my first visit here. The last time I was here was in 2008, under very different circumstances. It was in the aftermath of the terrible earthquake. Tens of thousands of people lost their lives at the time and hundreds of thousands were injured. The quake marked a profound watershed for millions of people. I myself have still not forgotten my encounters and experiences from that time.

Today, ten years later, I am full of admiration for how wonderfully Sichuan is flourishing once again. Chengdu has developed at a breathtaking pace in these ten years. And tomorrow, I will travel to Dujiangyan and visit a school that has been rebuilt.

I admire the will with which this city and the entire region have overcome the disaster and are facing the future.

On previous visits, I found Sichuan to be a region where we can learn a great deal from one another. This province gave rise to important techniques – from the art of printing to the invention of the paint brush to artificial irrigation, which was perfected here.

And, conversely, your region played an important role as far as transporting new ideas from abroad into China and putting them to good use were concerned. This is manifested to this day in the cultural richness and diversity of Sichuan – not to mention its marvellous cuisine. I am glad to be back in this city in this year of all years in which your country is calling to mind four decades since embarking on the path of economic reform or opening-up. Chengdu has always been a gateway to the outside world and has always stood for curiosity about other, including foreign, ways of thinking.

And, if I may add, Chengdu was my own very personal gateway to China! Almost 20 years have elapsed since my first big trip to China.

Since then, I have visited your country many times, have spoken to Chinese people around the world and become better acquainted with your culture – and I have never stopped learning from and about your wonderful country.

And so I am visiting your country again on my trip today – and, incidentally, also travelling to Beijing and Guangdong, the same destinations as back then during my first visit to China. It is no coincidence that this visit is the longest trip abroad that I have embarked on as Federal President so far. This trip is a reflection of the particular intensity of Chinese-German relations and their diversity.

It is impossible to put one single label on the complex relationship between our two countries. Unfortunately, it is becoming customary in the world once again to paint relations between countries and peoples only in black-and-white terms. But this does not reflect what has developed between China and Germany over the course of decades. Thousands of Germans and Chinese travel back and forth between Germany and China each month. The Chinese represent the largest group among international students in Germany – and I can see a number of German students in this room who have travelled to China. Many of our companies are partners, and many are tough competitors. China and Germany have both benefited from the liberal international order that made our ascent to prosperity and security possible for both countries in the first place. We have similar interests in many issues of the future and are working together, for instance to combat climate change and its impacts. Our countries enjoy closer ties than ever before.

However, it is precisely this increasing level of interconnectedness that makes differences apparent. When we consider the make-up of our societies and the role of the individual, we sometimes discern clear contrasts. Dealing with this complexity and this tension requires both sides to exercise particular caution. The more often I come to China, the more I am aware of the diversity of our relations – and the need to approach this as openly and constructively as possible. I would like to talk about all of this today – about what I have learned and my questions, and about my own long journey to China.

The great Chinese philosopher Laozi once wrote that “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”. Indeed, China and Germany are separated by far more than a thousand miles. Back then, many years ago, when I took my first step, your country was still an almost unknown world to me. Many Germans shared this sentiment – China appeared to be far away, and much further still than a thousand miles on foot. I recently got my trusty old atlas of the world off the

shelf. Imagine, if you will, a bulky book, published in the 1990s, with a host of maps of the entire world, including individual maps of the US and Russia, of course, as well as of Europe and many of its countries, and also pages dedicated to India, Australia and Canada. Even the Arctic and Antarctica are there in all their cold splendour. But searching for a page with China "at a glance" yields nothing.

Today it is a completely different story. In a nutshell, one could say that China has moved from the perimeter to the heart of global political interest – and the driving force behind this change was, first and foremost, the economy. When I first set foot in China, the decision to embark on the process of economic liberalisation had been taken 25 years previously. Back then, China was already Germany's biggest trading partner in Asia. Today, China is our biggest trading partner worldwide. And Germany is China's biggest trading partner in Europe. Our economies are very closely intertwined. In fact, it goes further than that – the Chinese and German economies now depend on each other.

This is why we Germans see very clearly what China has achieved in the past four decades since commencing economic reforms. Your Sichuan compatriot Deng Xiaoping brought this country onto the path of reform with boldness and foresight back then. "I'm like an Uighur girl with many pigtailed," is what he is reputed to have once said, by which he was probably referring to how it is worthwhile to remain bold and seek pragmatic solutions in the face of criticism and in the most difficult situations. Since then, your country has managed with precisely this industriousness and ambition to lift many hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. Many Chinese enjoy prosperity and health care, infrastructure and education today. In the years since my first visit alone, the Chinese economy has grown more than sevenfold in nominal terms! You have been the principal beneficiaries of this development. However, China's historically unprecedented growth has also contributed to prosperity in Germany.

The path towards interconnectedness has not always been straightforward, nor has it been free of conflict. We are also competitors in international markets time and again, especially in the high-tech sector. This sometimes puts German companies and employees to a difficult test. A few years ago, two large solar technology companies were forced to close within a short space of time in the region that I represented as a member of parliament, in eastern Germany, because they could no longer withstand the competition from China. Today, German high-tech companies are sometimes bought for prices that no German company would be prepared to pay. And quite often, some executive boards of German companies run up against difficult market access in China and encounter conditions that we do not have in Germany for market players from other countries. All of this happens against the backdrop of difficult yet important

questions of mutual fairness. I firmly believe that only those who talk to each other will find answers that are in the interests of both sides. This is why it is good that our countries are flanking their strong economic ties with both political and social measures. We now have over 80 regular dialogue formats between our governments, far in excess of 1000 cooperative partnerships between our universities and an intensive exchange between non-governmental organisations.

I would like in particular to emphasise the German-Chinese Rule-of-Law Dialogue, which we established a good 20 years ago. This dialogue is not easy, but I know from many encounters that both sides hold it in high regard. The rule of law is a concept that has a wealth of connotations for us Germans: the reliability and predictability of state action, society's trust in the rules of coexistence, and, last but not least, our own historical experience of tyranny and injustice. And we also see that the more diverse China's society and private economy become, the greater the need for legal certainty and rule-of-law proceedings that remain free from arbitrary influence from outside. We may come from different worlds in this area, too, and still see many things differently. However, this Rule-of-Law Dialogue is one of the most productive forms of exchange that we have managed to instigate.

Even though I have been here so often already, I feel like so many of my compatriots every time I visit your country. Any German who comes to China and takes a look out of the window spends a while staring in amazement. We see how entire cities appear to grow out of nowhere, how railway lines are built at unimaginable speed and over unimaginable distances, how motorways and airports are constructed deep in the provinces, and how a giant country is being supplied with state-of-the-art infrastructure. Let me assure you that we Germans are following all this with enormous respect.

And sometimes, and this is also true, we Germans are overcome by a sense of unease. What is happening here is changing not only China, but the entire world. China is changing the world that we grew up in – and at tremendous speed! So perhaps you can understand that our admiration is tinged with a certain amount of concern. This concern manifests itself in a question that I have often heard asked in Germany: "Where will it all end?"

Where will it all end? No one knows the answer to this question, not even I. And I suspect that hardly anyone in China knows where the dynamism that was once triggered and fostered by Europe and the West, but more so by China today, is taking us.

But one thing is clear, which is that if we Germans think about the path that lies ahead of China, then we should first seek to understand the path that lies behind this China.

And sometimes we even encounter ourselves again in the process. After all, the question “where will it all end?” is one that we not only ask today, but one that the people here in China have asked, often enough with a view to the West. One example was a century ago, another period of profound upheaval. We are calling this period to mind on a frequent basis in Europe at the moment. Just last month I commemorated the end of the First World War in November with our British and French friends – and in Berlin we marked the proclamation of the first German republic, the abolition of the monarchy and the introduction of the first democracy in Germany.

Back then, 100 years ago, “where will it all end?” was a question your forefathers probably asked themselves with a view to Europe. In the May Fourth Movement, the first major political mass movement in China, people at universities and on the streets wanted to learn from the mistakes of the western Great Powers in order to avoid repeating them – turning away from excessive nationalism, which led to the Great War, and towards China’s opening, towards a cosmopolitan attitude. At the time, Chinese thinkers and decision-makers surmised that the nation’s ascent accompanied with sabre-rattling and national egoism could not be sustainable. I believe that this lesson applies just as much to the whole world today as it did back then.

The great Ba Jin, who also hailed from Chengdu, described that volatile age of 100 years ago in his wonderful novel “The Family” – the conflict between modernists and traditionalists and the dawn of a first period of intellectual globalisation.

Allow me to be quite honest when I say that I have been impressed not only by this example, but on each visit to this country also by the curiosity, the eagerness to learn and thirst for knowledge here in China. And I would like many more people in Germany to study China still more intensively – its history, culture and language. Only those who are familiar with the diversity of the other cannot be one-sided or simplistic in their judgement.

From my own experience, I would like to add that my view of China has changed and expanded every time I have had a conversation or read something about the country or come here on a visit. I have learned that we often stand corrected or must revise our views when it comes to our mutual expectations. Accordingly, I find it all the more important that both sides want to understand each other – for instance, to understand the reasons why the other side may not behave in a way that conforms to our own expectations and why China and Germany have remained strangers to each other in some ways despite being ever more closely interwoven in others.

For a long time in Germany, we expected that China would become increasingly similar to the West on its path to prosperity, the market economy, and openness at home and abroad. We expected

that China's path would one day cross with ours – a path we believed was historically predestined, namely that of liberal democracy. These expectations have not been met.

Despite all our connections and collaboration and despite being bound to the same international order, we have different histories and we continue to have very different ideas about how we want to live as societies. In view of our German history, which brought so much suffering to our neighbours and ultimately to our own country in the last century, human dignity is enshrined right at the start of our constitution in Article 1. When we look at China's economic rise, we do so with respect and admiration. We Germans in particular, who had to rebuild our country from the ruins after 1945, are able to judge what it took in China to give many, many millions of people living in the most abject poverty prospects for the future. No one has the right to disparage this achievement. If it is achieved for hundreds of millions of people, that is a lot – a truly huge achievement. But still the question remains – is it enough? Or to put it in a better way – does it meet people's expectations of us?

Our own history tells us that in the long term, people's needs are not confined to material goods alone. Germany's history was marked for many years by dictatorship and repression. Perhaps this makes us particularly sensitive to and aware of what happens to those who do not share the prevailing opinion, belong to a minority, want to practise their religion or campaign non-violently and peacefully for their ideas and beliefs. That is why we are worried and alarmed whenever personal freedoms are curtailed.

I have an inkling that this is sometimes perceived as condescending or interfering here in China. However, I want to point out that our attitudes derive from an experience that did not only have a profound impact on Germany. In the end, the lessons of two world wars and of the unparalleled crimes committed in my country's name were something we all learned together – renunciation of violence rather than the law of the strong; rules rather than arbitrary decisions; cooperation rather than confrontation; and the dignity and equality of the individual as an inalienable right. These are the principles for co-existence in our world. And despite all our differences, it remains our joint responsibility to keep this world, where we live together, a peaceful and good place to live. We want to work with you on achieving this.

I last visited China two years ago. As always, I learned something new, namely that people are reading Marx more often again in China. We are commemorating the 200th anniversary of his birth this year. And to mark this occasion, his birthplace, the city of Trier, was even given a golden statue of its famous native as a gift from the People's Republic of China.

In this anniversary year, it seems to me that Germans and Chinese can have very different views not only on current issues, but also on the same historical and intellectual ideas. There is no doubt that Karl Marx was a great German intellectual. He was an influential philosopher, economist, historian and sociologist, and perhaps a rather less successful educator and workers' leader

However, there is also no doubt that Marx was a passionate humanist. He demanded freedom of the press, humane working conditions, universal education, political rights for women and, even back then, environmental protection. His passion came from his empathy, from his feelings for the dignity and freedom of the disenfranchised.

But it is also the case that Marxism did not remain theoretical – it did not only fill bookshelves and provide material for university courses. We Germans cannot talk about Marx without also thinking of the havoc wrought in his name in eastern Germany and Europe – the depressing time of the Iron Curtain, which lasted over 40 years, when Marxism was everything and the individual counted for nothing; the cynicism with which families were torn apart, neighbours pitted against each other, people confined behind walls and people who attempted to flee murdered. The experiences of the East German surveillance state have also affected how we think about human dignity, freedom, privacy and autonomy.

We are affected by these experiences to this day. That is why we Germans are perhaps more cautious than others as regards freedom and autonomy in the digital world. We see the huge opportunities of digital transformation for the future. And we want to be and will be part of technological development. But we also grapple with the question of how digital transformation can be ethical, particularly when personal data and surveillance are involved. Naturally, Karl Marx knew nothing about big data, artificial intelligence or social media. That makes it all the more astounding that some of the questions he posed are more pressing than ever today. Alienation or liberation? More surveillance and control? More power for the few or more equal opportunities thanks to ideas that are freely accessible all over the world because of digital technology?

We in Europe need our own convincing answers to these questions. In my opinion, our direction should be as follows: we want answers that lead to greater self-determination and less alienation, to greater participation and less inequality. We want answers that place a higher value on the individual's privacy than on companies' economic interests in data-based advertising and corporate models; answers that give our citizens control over their own data; and finally, answers that strictly curtail the authority of the state in digital space, that always define the state's tasks and legitimate security interests on a clear

legal basis, and that continue to ensure that individuals enjoy freedom, privacy and self-determination, including with the protection of independent courts in the future. All this should form the cornerstones of ethical digital transformation.

I can state the following for Germany and Europe – the European Union will continue to define and apply the legal framework for data collection and data use on this basis in the future and it will expect everyone who wishes to trade with Europe and its over 500 million citizens to respect this framework. At the same time, however, I know that these questions are often answered very differently in China today. That is precisely why I would like to discuss them during my visit here. I already had my first meeting with Chinese experts. For that I am most grateful. because I want to continue learning and understanding, even if I do not ultimately agree with everything I see.

The definition of regulations for the digital era is just one example of the many existential questions that we need to answer. This includes the case of human germ-line engineering, which is currently being discussed in China and all over the world. This discussion is necessary. I am pleased that it is being conducted openly here, too.

The world around us is changing. New opportunities are arising and old certainties are now less sure. In many cases, we do not even know what is just around the next corner. To be able to navigate at all under these conditions, we need one thing in particular – assurance about our own viewpoint and role in the world. Even as far back as 100 years ago, the most important question for some Chinese intellectuals, such as Hu Shi, the cultural reformer and philosopher was:

“What does it mean to be in the world?”

What does it mean to be in the world? Every country primarily thinks about this question on the basis of its own experiences in the past – on the basis of its achievements, yes, but also its mistakes. A key lesson of the May Fourth movement, the upheavals of a century ago, can be that we should take our countries’ surroundings, our neighbourhood, into account, not only as regards competition and hierarchy, but also as regards shaping our shared future. During the 20th century, we Germans learned to include our neighbours’ interests and perceptions in the definition of our national interests. One can no longer define one without the other. That is what European integration made possible in the first place and what makes it so precious to us to this day.

Those in Germany or China who are serious about understanding the other country’s history soon realise that both our countries’ paths

to the future seldom lay in our own hands alone and were never predetermined.

I am certain that this is still the same today. The future is open – perhaps more so than ever before.

That is why our discussions cannot focus on who is right. This is also not about defining boundaries, excluding people or thinking in terms of rigid definitions along the lines of “you’re like this and we’re like that.” Only by taking stock of our differences and talking openly with one another do we define our own viewpoint more clearly and reach new common ground.

Our paths do not run parallel to each other and nor do they overlap. They are not predestined. Instead, we forge them ourselves, as you, the young generation, will do in a few years’ time. And we do so in a field of tension – China is simultaneously a partner country, a competitor and an opponent for Germany. I believe that dialogue and contention can be highly productive even in this tension between us.

Given all the upheavals and tension that define our current world, it is all the more astounding and precious that we have a basis that we agreed together in the past.

In a few days, we will mark a milestone and auspicious moment from the past – the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 70 years ago. It took two devastating world wars and millions of deaths before the world’s countries signed up to this joint basis predicated on the rights of the people. We see what has grown from this basis – the multilateral system, the Charter and institutions of the United Nations, agreements and regulations on topics ranging from trade to climate protection. None of this has ever been perfect or equally available to everyone. Nor has it ever been a panacea. But despite all its imperfection, it is still an amazingly valuable achievement.

My urgent advice is that we cannot undermine or abandon what we have agreed together. We live in an era of interconnectedness and mutual dependence. We need this joint basis more urgently than ever, partly because I am afraid that we would not manage to achieve something like this again today.

A century ago, the great reformer and philosopher Kang Youwei described the utopia of a “great community” that has overcome the boundaries of nation, race, sex and hierarchy. In other words, the hope for a common future is not a western or eastern, European or Asian, or German or Chinese idea. It is a human idea. Seventy years ago, the world managed to create a genuine basis for this hope – a basis of common language, mutual expectations, binding rules and enshrined rights. What an achievement! Particularly when influential co-founders of this order sow doubt and seek distance, then we –

Germany and China – must stand up all the more vigorously for this order to be upheld as regards trade, climate protection and other areas.

That is why my advice to you, my dear students, is to make use of what generations of people fought for – a global order that makes peace and cooperation possible in the first place. The future that lies ahead of you will not be won by a single person, people or nation alone. The future will not be a battle where it is “every man for himself”. Build your future on the joint basis that we established together 70 years ago! It is a good basis.

Thank you very much.