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Berlin, 23.03.2016

Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
on the occasion of his visit to the People's Republic of China, at Tongji University in Shanghai, China,
on 23 March 2016

I count it a great honour to speak today at your university which is so steeped in tradition. I would like to offer my thanks to Professor Pei Gang, President of Tongji University. My visit to you is an excellent opportunity to reflect on the development of the Sino-German partnership. And I intend to do that in a moment.

But I would like to begin by acknowledging those who have embraced a German legacy. For it is no news to you that the roots of Tongji University are German, growing out of the German Medical School. It was a doctor, Erich Paulun, who founded the school and built it up together with Chinese partners. Its programme was soon expanded to incorporate engineering courses, which contributed to the development of science and teaching in China. This background plays a central role in the fact that today we can speak of Tongji University as an outstanding place of academic exchange between our countries. I am impressed by the intensity with which several thousand students of your University focus on Germany and even come to us in Germany for a few terms, and how open your University is towards German students. But also by the strong support Chinese and German enterprises provide to endowed chairs at the Sino-German School for Postgraduate Studies, which was jointly established by your University and the German Academic Exchange Service 18 years ago.

The characters of your University are based on the charming saying "Crossing a river together in one boat". This motto now adorns your university emblem. It also stands for the intellectual and social progress which a university can and should help to generate. In order to fulfil this task for the benefit of society, a university has to be a place of unhampered research and free and frank discussion. A place

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where ideas can take shape and foster development without hindrance. This freedom is a precious commodity.

At the same time the motto of your University can be applied to the close ties between China and the Federal Republic of Germany. The commencement of our diplomatic relations in 1972 was characterised by vision and courage – in spite of a difficult international climate and the cultural revolution in China. Strictly speaking, at that time it was not a bilateral but a trilateral relationship, as the German Democratic Republic, the smaller German state dominated by the Soviet Union, also fostered relations with its "socialist sister state". Transcending all world views, Chinese and German people, over the course of more than forty years – and especially in the last quarter of a century – have built up a close-knit and sustainable network of economic and cultural, governmental and academic cooperation.

Take cultural exchange, for example: I just had the privilege of joining President Xi Jinping in launching the German-Chinese year of youth exchange, which is fittingly entitled "Exchange, Friendship, Future". For bringing together school children and students, young academics, sportspeople and artists is what builds the networks that will support our relations in the next generation. Experiencing another culture and maybe even learning its language, besides fostering true understanding, also develops the skills we like nowadays to refer to as intercultural competence. Art, too, helps us to become better acquainted with other cultures, as I experienced during my visit to the remarkable exhibition "China 8" in Düsseldorf last summer. I hope that the new exhibition "Deutschland 8" will attract just as much interest in China. I have great respect for such innovative, courageous and in some cases critical artists.

Incidentally, in Germany we are not only full of admiration for contemporary art from your country but also when we think of classical Chinese culture. How early it blossomed to a level that at the time was inconceivable for Central Europeans, who then lived in simple conditions. How rich was Chinese philosophy, which dates back to the sixth century B.C. and which has always attracted great interest in the West. And how significant was classical poetry, which played such a major role in China's history. What a rich cultural heritage, which is rightly revered throughout the world!

Yet it is not only cultural heritage that we admire and that unites us. Just take our modern economic relations, for example: the European Union is China's most important trading partner and its largest sales market. The volume of China's trade with Germany is almost as large as its trade with France, Britain and Italy put together. German enterprises and their joint ventures have had an outstanding impact on China's technological development, to the benefit of both sides. Many companies have also introduced new elements of a socially

oriented corporate culture. Moreover, increasing numbers of Chinese companies are investing in Germany. Despite the current slowdown in growth, many German enterprises wish to expand their business with China. Innovations are vital in order to maintain economic momentum in future – for instance, to drive forward the digitisation of industrial production. We would like to cooperate even more closely with China in this area, especially once the legal protection of innovations is more secure.

China and Germany are connected in many ways. Our two countries are the most densely populated and economically strongest states in their respective continents. At the same time, China and Germany have recently proved themselves to be anchors of stability for their regions even in difficult times.

We in Germany have great respect for what China has achieved since 1978 – for the economic development that has enabled so many people to escape from poverty – an historic achievement, particularly in view of the aberrations of history, with their terrible consequences for a large part of the population.

We in Germany also admire the huge willingness of individuals to achieve, the striving of so many young people to obtain a good education – with the goal of giving their children access to a better future through their own hard work. We are also delighted by the global-mindedness of many young people who go abroad to study and by the enthusiasm with which they subsequently channel this knowledge into the development of their country. And we acknowledge with interest and respect that China now boasts a broad spectrum of views and lifestyles that would have been unimaginable forty years ago. In a nutshell, Chinese society – and indeed German society – has become more diverse. This diversity is an important source of inspiration and hence a crucial factor in China's success. In turn it is true to say that restrictions on these opportunities for development jeopardise this progress.

However, some developments do give us cause for concern. For example, many Germans sympathise when they see media images of the smog in China's conurbations, now even here in Shanghai. Some people are asking themselves how prosperity can be distributed more evenly, or how those people fare who go their own way and seem to stand in the way of the official line. I met a number of such people in Beijing on Monday, and I was deeply impressed by them. Still others are concerned about the future of our economic relations when they realise the massive changes and modernisation facing China.

Our experience shows that, overall, we have some grounds for optimism in the long term. Our relationship is not built solely on institutional networks. In the past few decades in particular, trust has been established among many people on both sides. Above all trust in

the ability of our respective societies to learn. And trust engenders reliability. As long as societies and governments prove to be systems able to learn, progress can be made, also in relations between countries.

I am aware of how much ground China has covered since the mid-19th century. How your proud country was demoted to the status of a partial colony with the violent invasion of western states. How China's tradition-steeped culture, so admired by the European Enlightenment philosophers Leibniz and Voltaire, seemed to have been degraded. How the civil war of the Taiping Rebellion, undoubtedly the most brutal event of the 19th century worldwide, left a trail of destruction across your country. I also call to mind the turmoil following the end of the empire in 1912 – and the first democratic elections for a national parliament in China that summer. Likewise the many millions of lives lost in the war with Japan. And the Maoist mass campaigns in the 1950s, the hunger and despair, the devastating cultural revolution and finally, the liberating effect of reform and the opening up of the country since 1978.

The 20th century in particular was, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm, an "age of extremes" – both for China and for Germany. Our radical experience with violence, despite all the differences between our national histories, engenders a deep sense of common ground and the recognition that the unqualified desire for peace, the primacy of humanity and the power of reason are prerequisites for the positive development of a society.

I come to you from a country that has acquired a wealth of experience with new beginnings, transformation and adaptation. From a country that has faced some of the same problems that China has to confront. Germany has a unique and difficult journey behind it, for which it chiefly has itself to blame. Following two brutal dictatorships and especially after the Second World War, in which it violated the rules of humanity and perpetrated the most horrific crimes against humanity, it finally became a different country – first in the West, and then in 1990 in its entirety. A country in which all state power must answer to a supreme fundamental value – the dignity of the individual. In this context I would like to tell you something about my country, its history and a little about my own life. I am not forcing these experiences on anyone – neither on you nor on your fellow citizens. They are an offer intended to help you better understand the principles that guide me and guide German society.

There is more to tell than just German success stories. I have also witnessed what a society can lack. For more than four decades – as a child, as a young person, as an adult – I lived in the German Democratic Republic, that country whose propaganda glorified it as the "better" of the two German states. But it wasn't. It was a state that, as

part of the union of Communist countries dependent on the Soviet Union, silenced its own people, locked them up and humiliated those who refused to comply with the will of the leaders.

As a "dictatorship of the proletariat", this state was designed to serve the interests of the majority of the population, put an end to exploitation, protect against the alienation of the population and usher in an age of happiness and satisfaction. Yet the problem with this age was that most people were neither happy nor liberated. And the entire system lacked proper legitimacy. Free, equal and secret public elections were not held. The result was a lack of credibility, which went hand in hand with a culture of distrust between the rulers and those they ruled.

West Germany, in comparison, managed soon after the war to establish a stable democracy with separation of powers and a state committed to the rule of law. The central tenet for the emerging West German democracy was a response to the abuse of the law by the National Socialists to justify criminal behaviour. Never again was power to take precedence over the law. Henceforth the words of the German legal philosopher Gustav Radbruch would apply: "Law is the desire for justice." An important prerequisite for the economic success of the Federal Republic of Germany, too. The social market economy is simply inconceivable without a functioning legal system.

That insight was by no means to be taken for granted in Germany. True, my country was one of the birthplaces of the Enlightenment and produced some of its key thinkers – Immanuel Kant, for one. Nonetheless, the German state and many intellectuals along with it long resisted the idea that the values of the Enlightenment, such as civil liberties, could claim universal applicability. For a long time, Germany claimed special cultural status – a sort of exceptionalism – according to which what was right for everyone needn't necessarily apply to Germany. Ultimately, it took the cataclysm of Nazism and its defeat in the Second World War to make the Federal Republic of Germany open itself up to the basic principles of that philosophy: inalienable human rights and the rule of law, separation of powers, representative democracy and popular sovereignty.

Eventually, in 1989, the insight that human rights are not geographically or historically variable but indivisibly bound up with the existence of each individual triumphed in eastern Germany and across East-Central Europe too. That moment made it clear that the human yearning for freedom cannot be kept down. That's why individual liberties cannot be replaced by material goods or social status in the long term.

Even if the universal applicability of human rights does not yet mean that every person can de facto enjoy those rights – if, for

instance, a person is denied their rights politically – they can nonetheless lay claim to them. In particular, they can refer to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that the UN General Assembly adopted nearly seventy years ago. The Declaration was by no means a solely Western product. On the contrary, the committee which drafted it included intellectuals from Asia, Latin America and the Arab world; its deputy chairman was Chinese. The first article of the Declaration is this: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." It is in that spirit that we should conduct the dialogue between China and Germany on fostering and protecting human rights that we agreed in 2014.

Next to political engagement, some of the key foundations of a democratic society are social justice and the availability of ways to have a voice in that society – or they are if that society is to develop at peace with itself. That precise issue was at the heart of a very open discussion I had the privilege of conducting on Monday with a number of professors from the Central Party School in Beijing. In Germany, it was the chaos and the distress of the post-war period which fuelled that insight in the minds of the Federal Republic's founders – though they were also building on long-standing traditions.

The social security system, for example, which became the heart of the German welfare state after the Second World War, had been established in the late 19th century. Historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler called that welfare state the ingenious answer to the market society and its relentless generation of inequality. In the intervening years, the German people have developed a deep bond to the institutions of the welfare state and thereby to their state as such. They needn't hope for charity from the state but can rely on and refer to their rights.

We Germans have learned from experience that a welfare state becomes a driving force for a society when it is combined with a democratic order. Universal suffrage ensures that even those who have fewer assets have a voice to speak for their concerns. Maintaining the social balance is an ongoing task, however, a responsibility which employers and workers need to tackle in unison and liaison with one another.

Both German dictatorships distrusted the workers' institutions which later formed the core of that social partnership. The freedom that trade unions enjoyed was therefore a good barometer for measuring the level of political freedom in Germany's recent history. Until 1990, freedom for trade unions existed only in western Germany. Post-war trade union history there was characterised not by class warfare but by partnership between bosses and workers, between employers' associations and trade unions.

That social partnership is defined by the fact that, while it demands compromise from both sides, it ultimately benefits both sides too. It has sent economic development to new heights and paved the way to prosperity for broad swathes of our population. The economic boom in the Federal Republic of Germany is thus shaped not only by technological and scientific innovation but by that social innovation as well.

That collaboration between employers and the workforce, as an act of free will and free choice in pursuit of a fair deal for both sides, is what enables today's Germany to influence and flourish amid ongoing structural changes in the economy and the labour market – all while maintaining social harmony.

Germany has an interest in China being stable and flourishing well. On the subject of the economy, Chancellor Angela Merkel had it right when she said in Beijing, "When China is doing well economically, the whole world reaps the benefits." However, the Germans also have an eye on environmental development in China. We do that because we know how important China is with respect to the global climate – but also because we recognise ourselves in what is happening in China. Germany has first-hand experience of devastated landscapes, cacophonous traffic noise, polluted rivers and city air you can cut with a knife.

The process of overcoming a multitude of such problems in Germany has taken decades. Here as elsewhere, and especially in western Germany, civil society has played a vital role – perhaps even the key role. It was the nature-conservation and environmentalist movement that kept flagging up problems. It took considerable debate and many public protests, and ultimately a political movement arose that has brought about a shift in mainstream thinking. Politics responded, and we began the journey towards a greener society. We might draw the conclusion that the long-term goals involved in protecting the environment sometimes need to be implemented in the face of strong opposing interests.

Over time, the environmentalist movement itself has changed. Protest has given way to cooperation and dialogue with the state. These days, there are even environmentalist associations advising political and industrial stakeholders at the national and international levels. The green movement grew into a powerful counterweight to a mindset that was widespread in Germany as elsewhere, an excessive focus on short-term economic gain. It also had a beneficial effect on our state institutions, which themselves proved increasingly open and adaptable. As we can see, politics which seeks dialogue with the people and is answerable to them has a greater capacity for action and responsibility. Learning processes of this kind also result in a high degree of legitimacy.

Green technology has grown into an indispensable part of our economy and our exports. It provides countless jobs and is helping us move towards nuclear-free and fossil-free energy provision.

That idea, that the primary purpose of the state and of political action is to serve the common good, also has deep roots in the Chinese history of ideas. They go all the way back to Mencius, Confucius' most famous disciple, who answered the king of Wei's question about what would be good for his country thus:

"Where compassion prevails, nobody will neglect their parents, and where justice prevails, nobody will put the ruler in second place. The king would therefore have good reason to say that compassion and justice are everything."

When the people control their country's affairs, when they trust their state and their government, and when there is also a degree of social justice in place, then society is more stable and at peace with itself. And that harmony at home goes hand in hand with peaceful external relations.

Germany has always welcomed China's declared objective of growing in peace and seeking the greatest possible level of agreement with other countries. We also welcome China's efforts to assume an even more vital role within the international community and thereby do more to shoulder that aspect of the responsibilities arising from its growing economic clout.

The various forms of responsibility need practice, as we Germans are seeing for ourselves at the moment. We are also seeing that global public goods are not just something to be used but also something to be paid into, so to speak. The many crises facing the world today clearly demonstrate how important collective action and international norms are – for all countries large and small. We are glad to be on the way towards finding a common language with China, particularly on matters of global climate protection – and that your country wishes to be party to the global climate agreement.

Germany and China have recently taken on joint responsibility on a great number of global issues; implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals is one example. China and Germany also played their part in bringing about a nuclear agreement with Iran, a crucial step in combating the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Together, we are working hard to find ways to end the conflict in Syria and the incalculable suffering it is causing.

All of these steps are important, and yet our two countries will need to do even more. We should be aware as we do so that this kind of involvement creates opportunities – opportunities to play a role in the ongoing development of international structures. Strengthening regulatory systems and legal frameworks, making them more effective

and fair, is something we would like to collaborate on with China. New institutions that are created should complement the existing international system, not compete with it. And for us, Sino-German relations cannot be seen in isolation from China's relations with other important partners and allies of Germany's.

Relations between China and Germany are built on firm foundations of accumulated trust and proven reliability. Our two countries opened up and reformed themselves in the latter part of the last century. And yet we, and I personally, have questions today as well. First and foremost, what potential is still dormant in China? In view of the diversity and wealth of talent that exists in this country, I would guess that the potential is great in many areas. So how can it be brought to the fore to our shared advantage? I consider this question not from the utilitarian point of view of a trading partner but from the perspective of a partner taking a genuine interest in a fellow traveller's journey – a partner who is concerned to hear some of the news that has been coming out of China's civil society lately and in recent days.

My visit – and I want to reiterate this – is a visit of friendship. It is intended to further cement accumulated trust. And I am convinced that honesty and openness are the very means by which we can further nurture the ties between us.

To do that, we need to resist those things that weaken trust and encourage those that propagate it. In the Europe I call home, trust has grown out of predictability and the principles underpinning the rule of law. We in Germany believe that China can continue to achieve its ambitious development objectives in the coming years – if it makes use of and incorporates the strengths that arise from the diversity of its society. Those strengths, after all, draw to a significant extent on the life experience and ideas of every individual.

Vibrant and active civil society always means an innovative and flexible society. It can come to resonate and garner recognition on the world stage. And a state, in concert with society, can overcome crises more effectively and peacefully, and thereby guarantee greater stability in the long term. We in Germany put our faith in such a modern China, a China of creativity and debate between competing ideas. And not only that – the whole international community needs that China.

So, the future of our relationship depends in part on what internal forces we can tap into – on both sides. For one thing is clear: Germany in the year 2016 is no utopia. I fully expect that some of you will ask me questions about my country, about its prospects for growth, its neighbours in Europe or its response to Europe's increasingly dangerous surroundings. We are indeed facing new questions these days, which are challenging our understanding of human dignity. Above all, we are asking ourselves what we should do

when not only a few but unforeseeably large numbers of people, as refugees from civil war or victims of political persecution, come to us in search of shelter and a future.

Lu Xun, the father of modern Chinese literature and of the great Modernists of China in his day, is known to have spent the last years of his life here in Shanghai. At the end of his story "Hometown" published in 1921, in an optimistic era, he wrote the following:

"We cannot say for certain whether or not hope has always existed. Hope is like a path in the countryside. Originally, there is nothing – but as people walk this way again and again, a path appears."

May China and Germany together play a part in keeping hope alive in the world and finding ever new paths towards a brighter future.