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NO COOPERATION WITHOUT
CIRCULATION: WHY EU-CHINA
TALENT MOBILITY MATTERS

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The logo for EIAS, featuring the letters "EIAS" in a bold, serif font, with a blue arc above the letters.

No Cooperation Without Circulation: Why EU–China Talent Mobility Matters

Tightening immigration policies in traditional hubs such as the U.S. creates new opportunities for Europe and China to cooperate in attracting and retaining young European talent in China. This opportunity is not merely theoretical; since Deng Xiaoping's opening-up reforms in the late 1970s, the outbound flow of Chinese talent to Europe has thrived, resulting in more than 68,000 Chinese students and professionals contributing to Europe's academic and professional landscape. On the other hand, looking at the reverse flow of Europeans to China, earlier phases of the 2000s demonstrated that structured talent mobility frameworks can effectively support economic exchange, though these were primarily designed for senior and experienced professionals. Today, this legacy framework is increasingly misaligned with the patterns of mobility involving young European professionals in China. To regain momentum, structural and social barriers need to be addressed, such as complex visa procedures, uneven immigration policies, social integration challenges in the workplace, alongside competition from regional actors such as Japan and South Korea, which continue to constrain young European mobility to China. At the same time, China remains an attractive destination as an economic power hub, with strong innovation capacity and a positive image among young Europeans. Therefore, by addressing talent mobility challenges at this critical juncture, the EU and China can foster a more reciprocal talent mobility framework, contributing to a realistic foundation for future economic and political cooperation.

A critical moment to appeal European Talents

Recent U.S. policy shifts under the Trump administration are quietly redrawing the map of global talent mobility. [By scrapping the H-1B visa lottery](#) in favor of prioritising the highest-paid candidates, the U.S. has raised the bar for entry-level access to what was once the world's most open talent market. The consequences are especially felt by early-career professionals, young

Europeans among them, for whom America is becoming less a land of opportunity and more a destination reserved for the already-established.

Therefore, for the first time since 2020, the cross-border movement of highly-skilled professionals declined by [8.5%](#), due to “tighter migration rules” in the traditional hubs not only in the US, but also in the UK and Canada. In other words, the narrative of the U.S. being the most attractive global talent hub is being dismantled by the combination of [high cost and “fortress” immigration policies](#), and [political uncertainty](#) that drives the U.S. to become less appealing for young professionals.

Yet this shift may work in Europe and China's favor. As the U.S. pulls up the drawbridge, it inadvertently opens the door for alternative destinations to step in, and young European professionals, no longer able to count on America as a default launchpad, are [increasingly looking elsewhere](#) to start their careers. Therefore, this is a crucial moment for Europe and China to coordinate and rethink how to attract young Europeans to pursue international careers respectively. Furthermore, [recent reports](#) indicate that young Europeans hold a more positive view of China, particularly in economic terms, and are interested in gaining China-related experience and potentially building a career in this field. Despite strong interest in China among young Europeans, the incentives for talented young Europeans to work there are declining due to [structural and institutional barriers](#). It is also important to note that countries such as South Korea and Japan represent strong competitors in attracting young European talent. It is therefore urgent to implement simpler, more transparent, and more standardised visa procedures, together with appropriate integration policies coordinated by the EU and the Chinese government, to enhance reciprocity between both sides.

A Working Model That No Longer Fits

In the [early 2000s until the last decade](#), talent mobility between Europe and China has functioned effectively as part of a broader economic cooperation framework. China actively relied on foreign expertise, particularly European professionals [to fill managerial](#) and [technical gaps](#). Initiatives such as [management training programs](#) and [expatriate placements](#) allowed European talent to occupy mid to senior-level positions, directly facilitating business development and knowledge transfer.

Crucially, this shows that a functioning talent mobility framework between Europe and China is not theoretical, but it has already existed in practice, and cooperation is therefore already in place. However, this model is now becoming obsolete because China's [domestic labour market](#) has evolved significantly; the managerial and technical gaps are being filled by a [growing pool of highly qualified locals](#). The demand for foreign professionals at the managerial level has declined. In other words, the original talent mobility architecture still exists institutionally, but its underlying logic no longer matches China's current economic realities. This creates a clear mismatch; the existing institutional framework was designed to import senior expertise, yet China has largely filled those gaps with domestic talent. China's actual demand should shift toward young European professional profiles.

At the same time, the U.S. becomes less accessible to early-career professionals. China sends a strong signal; the [Five-Year Plan](#) indicates a strategic interest in [strengthening ties with Europe](#), particularly in innovation and economic cooperation. This suggests that the talent mobility is not disappearing but rather needs being reconfigured. Therefore, China has now, instead of focusing on importing high-level managerial expertise, an opportunity to attract young European professionals and establish a long-term talent pipeline aligned with an innovation-driven economy. Yet, the [current policies](#) have not fully adapted to this shift. The institutional framework still reflects the previous phase of development during the early 2000s, creating barriers for the type of talent China is currently seeking to attract. If these structural and social barriers are not addressed, the misalignment will not only undermine talent mobility but also the cooperation between Europe and China. Given that talent mobility is a practical foundation starting point for the EU-China economic and innovation partnership and without effective and updated mobility policies, cooperation between the EU and China will remain constrained.

Fundamental Theoretical Framework: Push and Pull theory

The "[Push-Pull Theory](#)" acts as a useful explanatory framework to understand the young European workers' dynamics in China. It was first proposed by American scholar E. S. Lee (1966). This theory is designed to explain the motives behind the international talent migration dynamics. It consists of two forces, the "Push" and "Pull" forces, including external factors such as institutional administration, economic, and also internal factors, such as cultural attractiveness and emotional connections. This can be seen as a model that incorporates

institutional explanatory and psychological-cultural insight. Here, the individuals' migration decisions are jointly influenced by "Push" and "Pull".

The Push factors refer to negative conditions that drive individuals to leave. For example, in the current context, stricter immigration policies and attitudes imposed by the United States can be considered as a clear "push factor". In contrast, the "pull" forces represent positive attractions that draw them to a new location. For instance, the economic attractiveness of China is a "pull" factor that draws young European professionals. Building on this framework, young Europeans face challenges of "Push and Pull" factors from a structural and social perspective.

Resolvable Structural and Social Challenges that young European Professionals

Despite the Chinese government's efforts to recruit overseas talent, young European professionals continue to encounter several structural challenges (Push Factors) and social challenges (Pull Factors).

Immigration Procedures remain burdensome, time-consuming, and incoherent

Despite recent progress, such as the [R-visa \(Talent Visa\)](#) and the new [K-visa \(STEM Talent\)](#), significant barriers to talent mobility remain in China. China's permanent residence card has been notoriously labeled as one of the ["hardest Green Card\(s\) to get"](#). This pressing issue is affecting young European mobility in China. Although Chinese authorities have streamlined procedures by digitalising applications and linking work permits to social security cards, requirements still vary by city and employer, making the process administratively complex.

Moreover, from a residence permit perspective, temporary residence permits are not issued for the entire duration of one's contract; many are issued for one year initially, and require annual renewal, and two or three-year permits can be granted only after a [few years of consecutive residence](#) in China. Furthermore, [existing legislation](#) on residence permits is widely seen as skeletal, broad in outline but thin on detail, and inconsistent across cities. For instance, applicants might find a more simplified and digitalised visa procedure in Shanghai but not in

Tier 2 cities, such as Wuhan or Chengdu. The city disparities and lack of detail enhance the administrative burden for young European talents.

To attract young European talent to China, prioritising an unified, simplified immigration and residence system that works consistently across cities, would offer a compelling incentive for prospective applicants. A single, fully digitalised application platform with clear and transparent requirements would significantly reduce the administrative burden on applicants, while still allowing local governments to retain some discretion.

Non-Effective Integration within the Chinese (enterprise) Community

The majority of the young Europeans [find it difficult to integrate](#) into Chinese society, with two-thirds of the talent respondents identifying the lack of social integration, particularly into the workplace's culture, and inaccessibility to leadership positions as key barriers. In other words, foreign employees often face a lack of upward mobility by not being included in meetings and decision-making happening within the organisation, being left out when work requirements are being deliberated, and rarely receiving explanations for certain mechanisms that affect their work.

Language and cultural barriers are a major contributor to inefficient integration. In China, workplaces that are able to recruit and support foreign professionals in an English-speaking environment remain relatively uncommon and costly to maintain. Such environments are typically found only in [large multinational corporations](#) operating in China or in major Chinese firms with an international background. In contrast, most small and medium-sized local companies lack the capacity to provide conditions that accommodate and attract foreign employees.

Getting European talent through the door is one thing; making them stay is another thing. Young Europeans are often [marginalised in China's workplace](#), as mentioned. Integration is not a soft issue but a competitive advantage; therefore, China needs to make it more accessible. This could be addressed by developing a "National integration guideline" for Chinese enterprises, such as intercultural management training, cultural awareness, communication and inclusive practices, particularly training in workplace norms and decision-making styles. Furthermore, to incentivise the companies' to adopt integration policies, it is helpful to implement a reduction of

tax for small and medium-sized companies that hire foreign professionals and encourage an English-friendly environment.

Insufficient for a soft environment to retain, and discrepancies in policies between cities

China's talent mobility policies place [greater emphasis on attracting talent than on retaining it](#). Beyond the challenges outlined above, European professionals also encounter [soft environment](#) barriers arising from the broader social context. Although programs such as the "[Thousand Talents Plan](#)" and other national recruitment initiatives offer generous material incentives, [empirical studies](#) suggest that financial rewards alone are insufficient to retain foreign talent.

The [perception of opportunities](#) and government support is a critical factor influencing whether foreign talent chooses to stay. Therefore, the question of talent retention depends largely on how these foreign professionals perceive their opportunities, including employment prospects, salary levels, living conditions, and the rights and privileges available to them.

Apart from talents' perception, the primary problem remains the [discrepancy](#) between institutional support and mechanism for social integration. Particularly, policies regarding spousal employment, children's education, household registration, and access to healthcare are often regionally unbalanced. The second-tier cities and below often focus on "[initial recruitment](#)" without providing a sustained "service chain", resulting in a temporary return followed by an outflow. These inequalities create difficulties for talent to settle in China for a long period of time.

Although China has invested heavily in attracting talent, attraction without retention is a revolving door. Retention is shaped [not only by salary](#), but also by [long-term stability](#), including access to healthcare, family support policies, and broader welfare protections. If China wants to compete globally, it must move beyond a short-term focus on recruitment numbers and prioritise long-term retention rates. This requires policies such as a more [unified healthcare](#) and [pension system](#) for foreign workers, allowing them to enjoy social benefits comparable to those of local employees. Such measures would help foreign talent build a life in China rather than pursue only a temporary career there.

Social Pull Factors and Migration Challenges: The Cultural Soft Power of Japan and Korea.

Beyond structural challenges, China contends with social pull factors from regional competitors like South Korea and Japan. Both countries benefit from immense cultural soft power via the [Hallyu \(Korean Wave\)](#) and [otaku \(anime-related\)](#) phenomena, positioning them as [premier destinations for young Europeans](#).

The [data](#) shows young Europeans from across the G20 rated Japan as the most attractive country in East Asia, with 73% of respondents rating it attractive and only 15% unattractive. South Korea is similarly considered more appealing compared to China, with 63% in attractiveness and with only 19% considered unattractive; it scored significantly higher than the other countries' average. Conversely, China notably scored lower than its neighbours in terms of attractiveness, receiving 57% in terms of attractiveness and a higher unattractiveness rated at 25%. The data indicates that Japan and South Korea are strong rivals in terms of soft power, proving the perception that lifestyle and culture often influence the mobility preferences of young Europeans workers.

Opportunities for China and Europe: A Positive Image of China among the Young Europeans

Despite the structural and regional social challenges outlined above, China and Europe face a unique opportunity stemming from changes in the U.S. political landscape, particularly in light of restrictive measures. Contrary to the U.S., [China's image](#) among young Europeans remains largely positive. An impressive 82% hold a good opinion and image of China, including 19% who say they have a “very” good opinion. Therefore, China enjoys a more positive image among young Europeans, particularly in Spain, the UK, and Southeast Europe.

Besides, young Europeans are not only attracted by China's “soft power ” (cultural and historical) but also by its [business and innovation capacities](#). A significant 69% of respondents cite the scientific and technological strengths, as well as economic power, as China's most impressive aspects. While 82% believe that Chinese technology has a vast global influence, nearly half (48%) consider this influence to be significant. This perception aligns with economic reality in terms of business and innovation capacities for Europeans. In the eyes of inflow

capital, China [ranked fourth worldwide](#) in 2025 for foreign direct investment, reaching approximately [\\$116 billion in 2024](#), excluding the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

Furthermore, China has officially become the world's [top spender on R&D](#), reaching approximately \$785 billion, outplaying the combined efforts of the EU and the U.S. Moreover, China broke into the Top 10 for the first time, [ranking first](#) globally in “Knowledge and Technology outputs” It is also considered a global leader in patent filings and is home to the highest number of [top 100 innovation clusters](#), including Shenzhen, Hong Kong, and the Guangzhou hub, which is now ranked first. Lastly, in terms of institutions' research level, Chinese institutions now occupy [eight of the top 10 positions](#) in the institutional rankings, while [several Western institutions](#) are experiencing a decline in ranking, [such as](#) Germany's Max Planck Society, the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), and Harvard University.

As a whole, these indicators not only confirm China's status as a genuine new economic powerhouse but also highlight its growing capacity for innovation and future growth. For young European talents, this is a substantial opportunity to work in China. It is also a unique window for China to attract and retain young Europeans by investing in its business and innovative sectors as a strategy, given that soft power cannot be improved overnight. Rather than viewing China as a threat, Europeans should perceive it as an opportunity to learn, collaborate, and engage reciprocally in the innovation and technology sectors.

The opportunities created by the present U.S. government policies are not just China's moment but a shared opportunity. To seize these opportunities, China and the EU must bridge the gap in civilian sectors by developing bilateral projects for young Europeans and Chinese while establishing research projects, company cross-cultural exchange programs, and the [Young Chinese-European Exchange Summit](#) to foster direct engagement. Moreover, if young Europeans are to see China as a destination, both regions need to clarify the career pathways for expats to ensure they can fit into their long-term trajectory. Lastly, China stands to benefit from continued investment in business and innovative sectors to solidify its status as an economic powerhouse, as Soft Power cannot be improved in a short period of time.

Positive and Negative Implication for China and Europe

Talent mobility between Europe and China produces a complex tapestry of outcomes. From China's perspective, welcoming young European talents will enhance the knowledge exchange, long-term innovation capacity, modernisation, and enhance China's soft power, resulting in strengthening the attractiveness of China's investment environment. However, these gains come with domestic pressures, as the young talents will occupy posts such as R&D and tech. Although this could be considered as competition with domestic graduates during the [high youth unemployment period](#), in reality it will have a more complimentary effect.

Yet, the talent mobility is not one-sided, as many Chinese study and work in Europe, which contributes to fostering a [two-way innovative environment in Europe](#). According to the [data](#), the reciprocity is already visible on the ground; there are 68,252 Chinese who are contributing to Europe's academic and professional setting in 2024. It shows that talent mobility is something realistic, practical, and possible between the two regions, and the two-way exchange is less about competition and more about the circulation of skills, knowledge, and perspectives.

The mobility can contribute to building a [people-to-people](#) connection through exchange, to build a more pragmatic, nuanced, inclusive understanding between China and Europe, potentially reshaping the China-EU relationship toward a constructive and multilateral one. In [theory](#), the human-level relations form the foundations for the relationships between countries. People-to-people exchange (PPE) can be a social power that drives [constructive international relations](#), and it can enhance the mutual resilience to conflicts, compromises, and coordination between them.

While this outlook is promising, this optimistic view warrants some [caution](#). Talent mobility may heighten [risks to national security](#) and [intellectual property](#) for both sides. Yet, when it is properly governed by transparent and reciprocal frameworks, these exchanges can strengthen trust, accelerate shared innovation, and deepen mutual understanding rather than undermine it. Overall, despite these inherent challenges, the young European talent mobility contributes to a long-term reciprocity, deepening people-to-people understanding while driving long-term development in economics and innovations.

Beyond the initial observation of the recent United States immigration policies under the administration of Donald Trump, this analysis shows that global talent mobility is shaped by a deeper structural reconfiguration. What becomes clearer is that Europe and China's talent

mobility is not constrained by demand but by friction at the administrative level, uneven integration capacity, and competition from regional soft power that shapes long-term retention as much as initial attraction.

As noted, the talent mobility between China-EU is not merely theoretical but has existed since the early 2000s, while the present U.S. immigration policies offer a strategic window for China and Europe to reposition themselves within the global talent flows. Seizing these opportunities requires going beyond the recruitment-focused logic toward a system that prioritises retention and integration in the long term. Persistent visa barriers, workplace culture, uneven social policy, and domestic talent competition prevent China actually from benefiting from its attractiveness, even as young Europeans maintain a broadly positive perception of China.

Ultimately, both sides must deal with structural challenges regarding visa procedures and integration policies. Such cooperation inevitably raises concerns around intellectual property protection and technological leakage. Yet, rather than acting as deterrents, these risks can be managed through clear, reciprocal, and rules-based governance frameworks. By coordinating closely, the European Union and China can turn into a period of shared success, fostering innovation and the economy, and strengthening people-to-people understanding in this fragmented world, reinforcing the foundations of the EU-China relationship in a more pragmatic and resilient way.



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