

Thirty Years of Friendship with a Thousand-Year-Old Civilization

Guillermo Ricardo Vélez*

Ambassador of Colombia to the People's Republic of China

Thirty years for a country like China can be few compared to the years of history, and the conception of time in relation to a thousand-year-old culture. Nevertheless, three decades of good friendship and relation are of great worth for both countries. Thirty years in which China and Colombia have achieved to build up a path with common areas in spite of the cultural diversity, the linguistic barrier, and the geographic distance. This has allowed maintaining a constant approach and recognition between the two countries, making this relationship stronger, complementary, and diverse. Thus, it is fundamental to perform a retrospective analysis of what the relationship has been, at a time when China has become the second commercial partner of Colombia.

The importance of China is significant: its global reach and its incidence on topics that are part of forums and summits in the international agenda like climate changes, poverty, and the latent financial international crisis, is of great magnitude and relevance, as it plays the role of an essential and active participant.

The People's Republic of China has reached second position in the world's economy by setting up reform and openness policies for more than thirty years. Proof of their economic vitality may be observed, as while the economic slowing-down shows symptoms of slight improvement in industrial countries, the situation has its most abrupt contrast in China, where thanks to a pack of financial stimuli during 2009, it reached a growth close to 9%, displacing even Germany as the greatest goods exporting country in the world.

2010, was the year in which we commemorated the establishment of diplomatic relations and celebrated the bicentennial of our independence. Meanwhile, China hosted Expo Shanghai for six months. It has been considered one of the biggest and most visited exhibitions in the world (it doubled Monaco's) attended by over 72 million people. This exhibition had the greatest amount of exhibitors, for a total of 250, among States and international organizations, and granted China as hostess a privileged and unique position on the international platform.

The Colombian Embassy recognizes that this and many other facts make China a strategic ally for our approach towards Asia to open a horizon full of infinite key opportunities. This diplomatic mission works arduously in all possible areas and instances to materialize processes and reinforces bonds by taking the proper, decisive steps which have characterized us during this past thirty years, in order to meet the results that will be presented below as wise decisions.

Colombia established diplomatic relationships with the People's Republic of China on February 7th, 1980, adhering to the "Just One China" principle; it means that

Colombia recognizes the Government of Beijing as the only legitimate legal Government of the Republic of China. This is the basis of the bilateral relationship that has allowed forging a three-decade friendship, where mutual respect comes first.

Since the establishment of diplomatic bonds, there have been high level meetings, and friendship has grown stronger regarding diverse areas like technical, educational, cultural, military, economic, and commercial cooperation among others.

In fact, in 1981, high level visits between Colombia and the Popular Republic of China initiated. They have been a constant decisive factor in the understanding and dynamics of the relation between the two countries. The first official visit, and the one of highest level to Colombia, was made by the Chinese Government Premiere, Mr. Zhao Ziyang, in response to the invitation made by the Colombian President, Mr. Belisario Betancur in 1985. President Ernesto Samper Pizano was first to visit China as Head of State in October 1996; then in 1999, President Andres Pastrana Arango as well.

In 2005, President Alvaro Uribe Velez officially visited The People's Republic of China to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations; he attended together with an important business and academic mission. In 2006, Colombian Vice President, Francisco Santos, officially visited China, as well as in 2010 when he traveled there due to the Expo Shanghai event. He privately met Vice President Xi Jinping on that occasion. In recent years, the heads of State of both countries have met at the General Assembly of the United Nations and at the business encounter of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC CEO Summit 2008).

During the years 2008, 2009, and 2010, several high-level visits of the Chinese Government took place. In 2008, a delegation led by the vice chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Chinese People's Political Consultative National Committee visited Colombia. In 2009, Vice president Xi Jinping and the vice chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Abdul'ahat Abdulrixit traveled to Colombia in February and November respectively. In 2010, we welcomed Minister of Justice, Wu Aiyang and the State Advisor and Minister of Defense Liang Guanglie.

Trade between Colombia and China is more frequent each day and the visit of important state officials as well as personalities from the Colombian political,

economic, commercial, military, educational, and cultural spheres among others stand out.

At a multilateral level, China and Colombia have provided mutual support. Colombia stood by and backed the People's Republic of China aspiration to be part of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), as well as the candidacy of Shanghai as home for the World Exhibition 2010 and the Olympic Games of Beijing in 2008. China has provided its firm support to Colombia in becoming a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) once the moratorium is lifted, as well as its candidacy and later election as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council in the sixty-fifth General Assembly session.

Multiple mechanisms have allowed both countries to get closer. Colombia and China have held five vice ministry Political Advisory Mechanisms, seven Joint Commissions of Cooperation in Economy and Trade, three Joint Commissions of Scientific and Technical Cooperation, and several bilateral Work Plans for Education and Culture.

Regarding economic cooperation, which is derived from the Economic Cooperation Agreement of 1985, five bilateral agreements have been signed between 2004 and 2010, when the Chinese government donated musical instruments, computers, X ray equipment, agricultural machinery, medical technology, and traditional medicine to Colombia, among others. The Chinese Government has granted humanitarian aid to Colombia for the victims of floods. It supports national government programs that seek the elimination of anti-personnel mines. China also supported Colombia's participation in Expo Shanghai.

In the field of scientific and technical cooperation, during 2009, the third Joint Commission for Scientific and Technical Cooperation took place, based on which cooperation agreements are expected to be signed for the exchange of experiences in hybrid rice, technological centers and academic mobility. It is all a reflection of the dynamics that this bilateral cooperation has developed, in search of a greater alignment and harmony based on Colombian priorities to reinforce the development of capacities through impact programs.

Regarding education, agreements among universities and academic institutions, as well as students and teachers exchanges from the two countries is now a more frequent practice. The interest in learning both languages, Mandarin and Spanish respectively is notorious. In recent years two Confucius Institutes have been established: one in Bogota at University of Los Andes, and another in Medellin

between the University of Antioquia and the EAFIT. There are several language schools, universities, and schools in Colombia which currently offer Mandarin courses. Since 2006, near forty Colombians are granted scholarships every year by the Chinese Government and twenty Chinese students take part in the ICETEX Academic Mobility program, which allows them to enhance their Spanish language and to spread culture like Mandarin in various universities and academic environments in Colombia.

In the cultural field, Programs developed through the 1981 Agreement, take into account elements of the arts, literature, heritage and all other cultural manifestations. The first exchange from Colombia to China was done by writer, novelist, anthropologist, and scientific investigator Manuel Zapata Olivella in June 1982.

The cultural exchange and the presence of Colombia in China have been increasing. During the last decade folklore and art groups like the ballet company "Liga de Granados" from Bogota; "The Sonia Osorio Colombia Folkloric Ballet"; "The Antioquia Folkloric Ballet"; "The Delirium and Circus for All Group" from Cali World "Salsa" Champions; "The Barranquilla Carnival Corporation" and "The Philharmonic Orchestra of Bogota", have all increased the cultural exchange between Colombia and China. From the 80's on, Colombian audiences began to get familiar with Chinese acrobatics, music, dance, opera, and other artistic disciplines.

The six-month exhibition of the "Terra cotta Warriors of Xi'an" at the National Museum of Bogota, opened in June 2006, has become not only the most important Chinese exhibition in Colombia, but the most attended history exhibition in the museum. The Colombian Gold Museum exhibited 168 original pieces of pre Columbian culture between May and September 2009, at the Shanghai Museum, which is considered one of the most important museums of the Asian continent.

Attended by eight Colombian film directors, during the last three years, thirty Colombian films have been showed as part of five Colombian film cycles.

As for the economic and commercial outlook, there has been dramatic progress in this last decade. For instance, in 2003, bilateral trade between both nations was equivalent to 700 million dollars, while in 2009 Colombia exported to China 950 million dollars and China exported to Colombia 3,700 million dollars. According to the figures and projections of the first half, bilateral commerce between the two nations is estimated to increase above the 6 billion dollars, making China the second commercial partner of Colombia by the end of 2010.

Since 2006, the result of the promotional program for Chinese investment in Colombia has already started to consolidate. The Chinese oil company, SINOPEC invested more than 400 million dollars in Colombia, purchasing the assets of the American Company: Omimex. In 2007, after intense team work between a group of Colombian businessmen and the Chinese enterprise, Capital Airports Holding, (company in charge of the management of the most important airports in China, including the mega airport of Beijing) obtained the concession for the management of six airports in Colombia- Jose Maria Cordoba and Olaya Herrera in Medellin, among them- after participating in a bid and standing against fierce international competitors.

In 2009, despite the international financial outlook, the number one Chinese petrochemical company SINOCHEN entered the country with an investment of over 300 million dollars, taking Colombia as center of business for the Andean region.

It is expected that in 2010 Chinese investment will keep reaching sectors like energy, car parts, biofuels, and metal-mechanic through many opportunities that have been brewing for some months. There is optimism that the work done at the Pro export Trade Office in China will lead to important investments of Chinese companies in Colombia, and will reinforce Colombian production by consolidating world-level sectors that will impact the industrial development of the country, thus bringing welfare to all Colombians. This whole perspective has been the product of many years of work on the part of the Colombian Embassy in China with different companies, entities, and organizations, in the firm purpose of enhancing bilateral commercial and friendship bonds.

2009 was a very productive year for the positioning of Colombia in China. In February, the year started with the visit of the Chinese Vice president Xi Jinping to Colombia, where the Approval of Tourism Destination was granted, a very important instrument for the promotion of Colombia as tourism destination in China. In September, the Latin American version of the World Economic Forum 2010 was successfully organized in the city of Dalian, event that took place in Cartagena during April. It had the successful participation of 500 world companies, 15 of which were 15 Chinese companies that interacted with the world business elite at the so called "Latin Davos".

In November, the Chinese- Latin American Business Summit took place in Bogota, the most important promotional event of trade and investment between China and the region, with the presence of high officials of the Chinese Government and over

300 Chinese businesspeople, who had the opportunity to visit Colombia and take back with them the best impression not only of Colombian people, but of the business opportunities they found there.

The whole relationship between Colombia and China has been built not only at a government level, but also on a business and academic level. Thus, it is important to share this thirtieth anniversary with all the Colombian sectors that have facilitated communication channels between both countries, allowing them to be each time more fluid and meaningful.

This is why this magazine is presented as a manifestation of bilateral exchange in diverse fields, and the interest of Colombia, Latin America and the whole world in China.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank all the authors of the different articles that are published in this magazine, who have witnessed the development of relations between Colombia and China. Many of them have lived in China and have experienced its splendid culture and the vitality of its economic development during the last years.

Guillermo Puyana Ramos writes about the excellent communication channel between China and Colombia through the Colombian – Chinese Friendship Association and its relevance in the bilateral relation since mid-20th century. The “Cultural Diplomacy” concept proposed in the article is interesting. No doubt the so called “Soft Power” in China has become an element for the reinforcement of the bilateral relationship and the Friendship Association has provided a meaningful contribution in this sense.

Former Colombian Ambassador to China, Dr. Pablo Echavarria made an interesting analysis about the Chinese-Latin American relationship evolution under a commercial and economic approach. In that article, several analyses from the academic circles regarding the influence of the Asian giant upon the Latin American region are contained, as well as the perspectives of this relationship, particularly in the areas of trade and investment.

The Embassy’s Commercial Attaché, Dr. Alejandro Ossa, through his broad professional experience in China, provides an interesting proposal regarding Chinese investment in Latin America and Colombia. The industrial development and productive transformation through his analysis are remarkable. The Chinese investment must have an added value for our country, reason why this must be a policy to promote.

Dr. Gustavo Gaviria, Ambassador in Special Mission, and Colombia General Commissioner for Expo Shanghai, introduces us to the Colombian participation in such an important event, and presents the opportunities that were opened for our country at the World Expo. Colombia took part in Expo Shanghai in a pavilion that recreated its five component regions, not only making it possible for Chinese and Foreigners to appreciate at a distance what we are, and what we have achieved as a Nation, but also to attract businesses and valuable opportunities that have matured for our progress and benefit.

The educational experience with China has been very enriching for ICETEX. The academic mobility program for Chinese students to Colombia, and scholarships granted by China to Colombians, have been decisive factors to promote relations between the two countries, being this the main articulator for cooperative education. It is enriching to get closer through education, cultural knowledge, and learning languages like Mandarin and Spanish respectively. So it is essential to continue with the program of student exchange in order to achieve a better understanding of our people.

China has been part of Professor Enrique Posada's life story, which is why he wishes to share his experiences, own perceptions about China, and all he has learned with us. It is a very interesting article, full of meticulous details that enable us to travel through time and discover the China of the 80's and its cultural features.

I wish to invite all our readers to explore this publication and the articles within, with the purpose of getting to know the diverse perspectives about the bilateral relationship.

