



TWO SESSIONS

PERSPECTIVE

Draft law a positive sign for foreign businesses

Lawyer says most who see China as a danger do not know the country

By CHEN WEIHUA in Brussels
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Like many other foreign experts and academics around the world, Bernard Dewit is among those applauding the draft foreign investment law that will be reviewed at the plenary session of the National People's Congress.

The draft law, already reviewed by the NPC Standing Committee in December and January, is expected to replace three existing laws on foreign direct investment in China.

Dewit, chairman of the Belgian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce, said he was pleased the new law will give foreign companies equal treat-

ment in government procurement. "So that is something very favorable," he told China Daily at his law firm in Brussels.

He praised the draft law for addressing concerns such as the protection of intellectual property rights and national treatment of foreign companies.

He called the draft law a positive sign from China for foreign businesses.

"We don't see a China closing its door. We don't see a China closing its borders. That is important," he said.

"We love an open China. And I think these measures are going in a good direction."

Dewit said he believes the draft

law will make it easier for foreign companies to access the Chinese market than it would have been under the first draft, which was rolled out in 2015.

A keen observer of China's legal system and the author of a book on China's foreign trade law, Dewit said China's legal system has become "more and more complex and more developed".

He said he believes the draft law will also help alleviate concern about Chinese investment in Europe. "That will also help in Europe to consider Chinese investment not as the enemy, not as the killer, but as a partner," he said.

The European Parliament last month approved new measures to screen foreign direct investment — especially by State-owned enterprises — on grounds of security and

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Bernard Dewit, chairman of the Belgian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce



public order. The rules have been seen by many as targeting China and several other countries.

Both the Dewit Law Office and

the 600-member Belgian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce help Belgian and Chinese businesses develop in each other's markets.

While praising the draft law for going in the right direction, Dewit stressed that it is important to see how it will be applied once it goes into effect. "But this is not just for China, it's for every country. You have the law, let's see how it is enacted," he said.

"Sometimes, it takes some time, especially in such a big country as China. As it has to be enacted in various provinces, that will be a new challenge. But I am confident in that."

Besides the draft law, Dewit expressed interest in the final negative list for foreign investment to be issued by the Chinese government, something he said will be

important to foreign investors.

In Dewit's view, there are countries in Europe actively seeking Chinese investment and countries that worry Chinese companies are killing local industries.

Dewit, who has been making frequent trips to China since the mid-1980s, said people in Europe who see China as a danger are mainly those who do not know China.

His trips to China have included visits to remote areas — Qinghai province and the Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang Uygur and Tibet autonomous regions. Dewit also received the Friendship Award from the Chinese government in 2017.

"I would say that after more than 35 years of interest in China, I am still learning about China every day," he said. "There are still a lot of things to discover."

When dogma disappears, progress follows

The annual two sessions always provide an opportunity for reflection, a moment to re-examine past assumptions and change course for the better. The trouble is that we humans often stick to old ways just because they are familiar, not necessarily because they are right.

Nothing characterizes human behavior more than dogmatism, the habit of clinging ferociously to an inherited idea and closing off discussion, even in the face of good evidence to the contrary.

Dogmatism can be deadly. Wars, especially religious ones, are usually fought because at least one party is absolutely certain that

its view of the world is the only correct one.

There is also a more benign aspect to dogmatism, though it's unhelpful in the search for truth: It gives people a sense of safety, order and orientation. It offers explanations.

And even if the explanations are wrong, at least they are comforting. That is why challenges to dogma almost always meet with resistance. Ideas that take people out of their comfort zones, whether at the dinner table, negotiating table or in a legislative session, can be troublesome.

The major downside to dogmatism, of course, is that it fundamentally closes off possibilities for improvement and, at worst, morphs into a sort of didactic religious orthodoxy that must never be challenged.

Such was the case with the Catholic Church, which for centuries knew for certain that the earth was the center of the universe. It maintained this false axiom even after Galileo used his optically superior telescope to deliver the scientific coup de grace in 1610.

The church was finally dragged kicking and screaming into the modern era, but it did not officially forgive Galileo until 1992 — more than 350 years after it had condemned him.

Dogmas are always difficult to break, simply because they are precious to those who hold them.

Another example bears mention. Before the dawn of science, everyone knew the earth was flat. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, got the sphere theory going around the 4th century BC.

In China, however, astronomers didn't follow the path of Western scientific reasoning — which boiled down to the constant destruction of old explanations and replacement with new ones.

Under that model, nothing was ever certain or stable, which was

deeply offensive to the Chinese mind.

As a result, flat-Earth dogma persisted in some circles in China beyond the 17th century — perhaps in part because flat and square symbolized virtue and righteousness — concepts deeply embedded in Chinese culture and cognition.

While the Greeks had launched modern science based on logic and human reasoning, the Chinese valued something more immutable. Western reasoning was uncomfortable because of the limits of human intellect and understanding, and so it was the Chinese scientists' job to discover and follow fixed natural rules.

Ruan Yuan, a prominent Chinese scholar during the first half of the 19th century, lamented that Western astronomers were constantly altering their explanations for celestial phenomena.

"The laws are always changing ... I don't know where the real reason lies," he said. "Heavenly laws are so profound and subtle that they lie beyond human ability."

For Ruan, scientific theories should express certainties that "last forever without error", according to Liu Shuchiu in an online periodical from the Asia-Pacific Forum on Science Learning and Teaching.

What all this history has to do with the two sessions of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference National Committee is simply this: Legislators considering proposals to improve the country have a choice. They can cling to old notions simply because they are old, perhaps even venerated, or they can reason their way to new approaches that promise greater benefits — whether that's a re-examination of family planning concepts, or deciding whether or not to raise the retirement age.

Choices abound, but be warned: The answers to many questions are backed by dogmatic constituencies.

It is not that long-held ideas are wrong because they are old, but merely that they ought to be moved from the realm of dogma into the realm of reason.

Once stubborn dogma is rooted out, along with the tribalism that usually comes with it, progress inevitably follows.

The collision of competing ideas is healthy for individuals, organizations and even states. When the clash produces light and not merely heat, we are rewarded with livelier understandings of the world and can choose the way forward with greater confidence.

That is the basic task of the two sessions.

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PEOPLE IN THE NEW ERA

The guitar hero from Guizhou

By ZHANG YANGFEI in Beijing
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Guitar is the hero in many genres of Western music — and also in a small, mountainous county in southwestern China.

In 2013, Zheng Chuanjiu returned to Zheng'an county in Guizhou province to set up its first guitar factory.

Last year, the county produced and sold 6 million guitars worth about 6 billion yuan (\$896 million), exporting to more than 30 countries and regions around the world, including the United States and Brazil. It also accounted for one-third of China's guitar exports.

The local government estimates that production will reach 10 million by 2020, with output valued at 10 billion yuan. The flourishing business has also helped lift 6,640 people in 1,278 households out of poverty, and had created more than 13,000 jobs by the end of October.

Zheng, the 41-year-old general manager of Zunyi Shenqu Musical Instruments Manufacturing, was elected a deputy to the 13th National People's Congress, China's top legislative body, last year. This year, he said he will propose making the county's guitar industrial park a national cultural industry demonstration park, so that the local guitar business can benefit more from central policies.

He will also propose that three counties in Guizhou — Wuchuan, Zheng'an, Daozhen — be incorporated into the nearby Chongqing economic zone, and be connected to railways to improve the transportation of goods.

"Wuchuan, Zheng'an and Daozhen are all poverty-stricken areas in Guizhou, and I think a large reason for that is because of the inconvenient transportation," Zheng said. "Although they have been connected to highways, they still lack a railway. I hope high-speed transportation routes can be built in the mountains."

Though Zheng was familiar with the 186 steps in making a guitar, he



Zheng Chuanjiu checks an employee's work at a Zunyi Shenqu Musical Instruments Manufacturing workshop in Zheng'an county, Guizhou province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

did not know how to pluck the six strings to play a song. During the NPC meeting last year, he set himself the goal of being able to play the guitar at this year's congress.

He arrived in Beijing on Saturday. In a video posted online by Guizhou Daily, he smoothly plucks the strings of one of his factory's Bessica guitars and sings, "I come from the mountains with a small guitar ..."

Zheng left his hometown with his brother in 1995 to earn a living in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, where they learned guitar-making skills at a factory.

After they were promoted to management positions, they started their own guitar manufacturing business in Guangzhou, before deciding to move the business to their hometown in 2013 to boost the local economy.

With encouragement from the

Zheng brothers, along with advantageous policies, more skilled musical instrument makers from Zheng'an began returning to their hometown to work. As a result, the industrial park — which is home to 54 guitar-related enterprises — flourished.

"At first, people could hardly believe that guitars played by world-renowned artists were made by a group of farmers living deep in the mountains," Zheng said, adding that it is precisely their hardworking spirit that created such fine professionalism.

Zheng's company is now the supplier for six of the top 10 guitar brands in the world, including Tagima and Ibanez.

However, Zheng wants to build an original brand that can make Zheng'an guitars known to the world.

"We are no longer satisfied with

guitar manufacturing, so we've created our own brand," he said. Their independently developed Bessica guitar has gone into production and was displayed at the Music China exhibition in Shanghai last year.

The county is also planning to establish the world's largest guitar museum and a high-end concert hall, according to Wu Qi, the head of Zheng'an county.

"We will transform and upgrade the guitar industry from being an original equipment manufacturer to creators of independent brands, as well as elevate low-end products to medium- and high-end ones," Wu said.

Zhao Yandi contributed to this story.

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Villagers need to play part in poverty alleviation

Although it has only been three days since the opening of this year's annual session of the 13th National People's Congress, I have already lost count of the number of times I have heard the deputies talk about poverty alleviation.

Just think about it: All Chinese people are expected to be lifted out of poverty by the end of 2020, no matter where they are and which ethnic groups they come from. Everyone that needs to be crossed off that list has already been identified, and the cause of their poverty has been carefully analyzed, with a tailor-made plan for poverty alleviation drafted.

The clock is ticking as poverty alleviation has entered the most crucial and challenging stage.

Many deputies, especially those from less developed western

regions, believe it is one of the most pressing matters to discuss at the ongoing session of the NPC, China's top legislature. Many of them know the exact number of locals who need help.

New poverty alleviation ideas have been constantly exchanged, and the problems that have occurred during the alleviation process are also being addressed during discussions.

There are various reasons why some people are still living in poverty, including being unable to work due to illness or living in a harsh natural environment. Such people have been offered health insurance and relocation packages to help them out.

Deputies are also keen on pro-

posals to ensure those who have been lifted out of poverty will not slip back into it.

The proposals include setting up sustainable businesses at relocation sites, so that people who have relocated to new areas can find jobs that are suitable for them.

The people living in poverty who worry deputies the most are those who do not want to make any effort and are just waiting for money and handouts from the government or other authorities.

During their panel discussions, deputies shared stories of their encounters with some of them. One villager fancied mutton soup for dinner, so he slaughtered the sheep that a husbandry company gave him to raise. The villager could have made a lot of money if

he had raised the sheep to increase his herd, like the others in the village.

Another farmer sold a flour milling machine the local government purchased with poverty alleviation funds on the day it was delivered to his house.

He took the money from the sale of the machine and gambled it away. His income could have been significantly increased if he had used the machine to process wheat into flour, instead of just selling the wheat he harvested.

Getting everyone out of poverty is a promise made by the central government. However, it is still up to every individual to put in effort to actually make it happen.

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Randy Wright
Expert's view



Cui Jia
Reporter's log