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## Voice

# Train of thought



By Augusto Soto · 2025-02-05 · Source: China Today



The Yiwu-Madrid freight railway route, the longest in the world, crisscrossing over 13,000 kilometers and covering eight countries, celebrated its 10th anniversary last November. However, it is more than an infrastructural milestone. It symbolizes free trade, prosperity and inspiration for continued dialogue between states and civilizations, presenting a contrast to the geopolitical conflicts engulfing Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

The Yiwu-Madrid train, also known as the Yixin'ou China-Europe freight train, has created an axis from which 18 railroad lines branch out between Asia and Europe, linking 50 countries and more than 160 cities throughout Eurasia.



The China-Europe freight train, with 110 containers loaded with daily necessities, car parts, mechanical equipment and other goods, sets off from the Yiwu West Railway Station in Zhejiang's Jinhua for Madrid, Spain, more than 13,000 kilometers away, on November 18, 2024.

The train arrived in Madrid, Spain, from the east China city of Yiwu in early December to commemorate its first journey on December 9, 2014. On Christmas Eve, The Irish Times'

seasoned correspondent Denis Stauton reported from Yiwu, the start of the railroad route, which also hosts the world's largest wholesale market, where more than 600 businesses sell an estimated 80 percent of the world's Christmas decorations. And no one in the West complains about China's "production overcapacity" at this time of the year, a diplomat tweeted, highlighting the report.

I have been in direct contact with China since 1986 and from my knowledge, I can attest that consumers in Europe are very satisfied with the "Made in China" products they buy throughout the year.

As the Spanish press reported, the train is a Chinese initiative. On September 26, 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with then Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy in Beijing and confirmed that the Yixin'ou would depart from Yiwu and reach its destination in Madrid, *Diario del Puerto*, a Western Mediterranean newspaper, reported.

The announcement was realized nine weeks later, to Europe's astonishment. It was no surprise to Xi, who three years later, during the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing, highlighted Spain's "special geographical advantage."

According to the China Railway Shanghai Group, which oversees and manages the stations and railways in Zhejiang Province in east China, where Yiwu is located, plus Shanghai and Jiangsu and Anhui provinces, since 2014, more than 6,700 freight trains from Yiwu have delivered 670,000 containers of goods. Among them, trains on the Yiwu-Madrid route completed 1,800 round trips, transporting 145,500 containers of commodities worth more than US \$8 billion.

The EU-China relationship's most distinctive terrestrial link leads us to look into the future. Over the last decade, the Yiwu-Madrid train has replaced the old Trans-Siberian train in the imagination of EU children learning the world map. But how will we move forward with free trade and de-escalation, avoiding any trade war that could compromise global stability at such a confusing geopolitical time? How to navigate a future away from transactional, volatile and ultimately counterproductive impulses, far from weaponizing trade?

The Chinese Ambassador to Spain, Yao Jing, underlined the importance of "strategic certainty," an aspiration for continuity shared by businesses, innovators, investors and societies of both countries. It is a concern and a necessity for the China-EU bilateral relationship in 2025, a year which marks the 50th anniversary of the relationship as well as the 20th anniversary of the comprehensive strategic partnership between Spain and China.

Parallel to the anniversary of the Yixin'ou, the Imperial Springs International Forum was held in Madrid on December 12, where Danilo Türk, former president of Slovenia and president of World Leadership Alliance – Club de Madrid, one of the hosts of the forum, reminded the audience that currently the World Trade Organization is paralyzed, "despite the fact that open trade is vital to reduce poverty."

He also highlighted the congratulatory letter sent by Xi, reinforcing China's commitment to multilateralism and openness. Xi said in a world marked by intertwined changes and turmoil, peace and development remain the shared aspirations of all. China is ready to work with other countries in the spirit of promoting global solidarity, upholding fairness and justice to safeguard global peace and stability. It is ready to follow win-win cooperation to promote



sustainable global development, and committed to inclusiveness and mutual learning to push for new progress in civilization.

Exchanges among partners around the world who believe in multilateralism and free trade are of utmost importance. Prior to the Madrid forum, the 12th China-Europe Forum, themed on “50 Years of Diplomacy-Advancing China-EU Relations in An Era of Globalization,” was co-organized in Brussels by the Chinese Mission to the EU, the renowned European think tank Friends of Europe, and the China Public Diplomacy Association. The distinguished speakers argued in favour of not instrumentalizing or weaponizing trade and investment tools.

The 50th anniversary of EU-China ties also seems a proper occasion to restart talks on rescuing the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) concluded four years ago. In early 2021 the agreement was hailed as providing for a level playing field.

“The CAI will ensure that EU investors achieve better access to a fast growing 1.4 billion-consumer market, and that they compete on a better level playing field in China,” the European Commission said in 2021. Influential voices in Brussels and Beijing are reemerging, advocating the removal of obstacles for CAI’s ratification. Progress in mutual understanding is more necessary than ever.

There is a new influential organization to promote mutual understanding. On December 1, the Complutense University of Madrid, one of the leading universities in Spain and the Spanish-speaking world, and Remnin University, one of the leading universities of China, signed an agreement to establish the China-Spain Center for Cooperation and Research. The two universities will promote and facilitate the exchange of students and staff, especially through the Qiu Shi Scholarship Program, developing joint projects and promoting cooperation in areas such as Spanish language and literature, history and philosophy.

In this special year, we need to stock up on inspiration to move into the future with political, economic, cultural and diplomatic efforts.

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