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## Chinese whispers

Sarah Collins explores the changing nature of the EU's research ties with China

"China is becoming a world power in research," says Ignacio Asenjo Ruiz of the EU's delegation to Beijing. "Our cooperation with China is not based on the idea that we have to help China to set up a proper research strategy but that it is in our own interest to set up cooperation."

In the latest framework programme for research, FP7, explains Ruiz, there is no longer the same focus on development-related cooperation between the EU and China, the reason being that the Chinese don't need it. He says that 1.4 per cent of China's GDP is devoted to research, which is more than most European countries. Spain, for instance, has a 1.2 per cent quota. And in output of international research publications China is second in the world only to the US. So where has Europe's money gone so far?

Under FP6, there were several projects that attracted EU funding, mainly in ICT, energy, food safety, agriculture and environment. Two interesting ones, says Ruiz, are the Simba and Spear projects – on intelligent transport and aquaculture, respectively – which he says have brought Chinese standards closer into line with those of the EU. "China is the largest aquacultural producer in the world – two thirds of aquacultural products in the world come from China – but it's not very sustainable.

The Spear project has created web-based tools for sites in Shanghai and Beijing, where there is very, very intensive aquaculture. It has gathered all the geographical, climatic, societal and economic information in the two areas and from this has created tools to allow aquacultural producers to decide to make their products more sustainable, which fish to choose, how many and how to feed them, so that the water is not harmed and production is sustainable in the long term."

Of course, this is an example of the kind of development-focused project that was common under FP6, but which the EU has moved away from under FP7. The idea now is to establish a more strategic relationship with the Chinese, using the framework programme as a guide. Research cooperation with Beijing is now treated under thematic areas within FP7, so projects are slotted in under headings like health, nanosciences, transport, and so on. But the other side of developing a strategic partnership with a country like China is also to entice world-class scientists to work in Europe, as well as with it. And research will no longer be so one-sided, as Ruiz explains that they are currently working on establishing projects of mutual interest co-funded by both China and the EU. So he welcomes the EU's shift in focus.

"This is timely because we are trying to shift to more strategic cooperation. China has become a real giant in research," says Ruiz. "Part of this logic is that we will collaborate with China on an equal basis because they are a world power and they have a lot of resources." Taking not just EU-China research collaboration, but the changing nature of the EU's cooperation with all third countries into account, the commission will publish a communication in July called a 'Strategic framework for international cooperation' to set the long-term goals for scientific and

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**Sarah Collins**

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