CityDance双城记

Editor's note: *Amity between the people holds the key to sound state-to-state relations. China Daily will come out with a series of stories highlighting Chinese cities' special connections with sister cities, mutual understanding, trust and friendship between peoples of different countries and cultural backgrounds, and shining light on "city diplomacy".*

UNBREAKABLE BOND SPANS DECADES



From Wuhan's Yellow Crane Tower to a modern art museum in Duisburg, these landmark buildings narrate stories of the history of the sister cities. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

By **CHEN YINGQUN** and **LIU KUN** in Wuhan and **XING YI** in Duisburg

The Chinese city of Wuhan and the German city of Duisburg joined hands in 1982 to become the first pair of sister cities between China and Germany. Decades have passed, and people still remember that this enduring friendship originated from a letter written by a German woman.

In the 1970s, Germany assisted in the construction of a cold-rolling steel plant in Wuhan. At that time, approximately 300 German engineers and their families lived in Wuhan, with the majority hailing from Duisburg.

One day, a German engineer and his wife took a walk along the Yangtze River. Seeing the scenery where the Han River meets the Yangtze River, the wife couldn't help but think of her hometown, Duisburg, which is situated at the confluence of the Rhine and Ruhr rivers and is also an industrial city.

Upon returning, she immediately wrote a letter to the then mayor of Duisburg, urging for a sister-city relationship between Duisburg and Wuhan, according to the local Wuhan newspaper, the Changjiang Daily.

Wuhan is located at the confluence of the Yangtze River and the Han River in Central China. It is an important industrial city with an excellent geographical location and convenient transportation by land, water, and air.

Duisburg, on the other hand, is a significant industrial city in the Ruhr area of western Germany. Situated at the confluence of the Ruhr River and the Rhine River, it is a crucial water and land transportation hub in Europe. Additionally, Duisburg is home to the world's largest inland port — the Port of Duisburg.

"It was precisely because German friends who lived in Wuhan discovered that these two cities, whether in terms of geographical location or industrial structure, had such great similarities, that they felt a sense of home here, which prompted the two cities to desire to establish a sister-city relationship," said Wu Min, executive president of the German Federation of Hubei Associations.

On Oct 8, 1982, Wuhan and Duisburg officially became sister cities. Since then, the two cities have enjoyed close cooperation in various fields such as science and education, economy and trade, transportation, culture and tourism, health, gardening, and sports, achieving fruitful results, Wuhan's Mayor Cheng Yongwen said while meeting with a visiting delegation led by Soren Link, the mayor of Duisburg in March.

Cheng said that he hoped the two cities would further deepen exchanges and cooperation in a wider range of fields and at deeper levels. Adhering to the principle of mutual benefit and win-win cooperation, they aim to jointly promote more fruitful outcomes from the friendly interactions between the two cities, making greater contributions to the high-quality joint construction of the Belt and Road Initiative and to enhancing the friendship between China and Germany.



The China-Europe Railway Express bound for Duisburg departs from Wuhan. XIAO YIJIU / XINHUA

In response, Link said Duisburg and Wuhan share a deep friendship and have broad prospects for cooperation. He hopes to continuously increase the intensity of exchanges, deepen practical and effective cooperation, and further compose a new chapter of cooperation between the two sister cities.

For over four decades, exchanges between these two cities have left many historical marks.

In 1984, Duisburg recommended the German expert Werner Gerich to provide technical consultation for the Wuhan Diesel Engine Factory, a State-owned enterprise. He was later appointed as its director, becoming the first "foreign factory director" in China after the reform and opening-up.

In 1987, Wuhan presented Duisburg with a gift, a Chinese-style garden. The Yingqu Garden, located within Duisburg Zoo, covers an area of approximately 5,400 square meters and was officially opened to the public in 1988, receiving great affection from the local people.

In Duisburg, elements of Wuhan can be seen quite often. In 2015, the German Federal Railway named a passenger train operating in the Ruhr area "Wuhan China Express", the first time in its history that it named a passenger train after a foreign city. Duisburg also named a street and the largest conference hall after Wuhan.

Since the year 2000, Duisburg has held an annual dragon boat race, a traditional Chinese paddling sport, which attracts about 3,000 local and global participants each year. Wuhan has also sent teams to participate in the competition multiple times.

Deep impression

For some Germans, the living experience in Wuhan has left a deep impression. Andrea Hoecker, a 30-year-old who has lived and studied in both Wuhan and Duisburg, said that Wuhan boasts many beautiful tourist attractions and stunning night views.

"The city is vibrant at night, offering opportunities to dine out, watch movies, participate in square dancing, sing karaoke, play mahjong, go shopping, get a haircut, and more. There are places to eat and drink around the clock, an experience she had never encountered before in Germany," she said.

Patrik Song, a German who married a woman from Wuhan, expressed that one of his most memorable experiences was visiting the night markets in Wuhan. He found it incredible to see a variety of delicious foods being prepared right in front of him.

> Wuhan and Duisburg share cooperation in various fields, enhancing relations between China, Germany



A mark of Wuhan is carved on the plaza in front of the city railway station in Duisburg. XING YI / CHINA DAILY

"A warm night, having a cocktail and trying all kinds of foods that I never even saw in my life before was one of the greatest things I was able to experience in my life," he said. "And even here, people were so eager and happy to talk and know more about me — the thirst for knowledge and contact with people from other countries is huge and I would love to spend even more time in Wuhan."

As industrial cities, Wuhan and Duisburg have both made efforts to seek economic transformation and high-quality development. The China-Europe Railway Express, an important project under the Belt and Road Initiative, has become a significant driving force for their development and cooperation, especially after Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to the city 10 years ago.

Xi visited Duisburg on March 29, 2014, during his trip to Germany. While welcoming the arrival of a freight train from China, Xi expressed hope that Duisburg would play a greater role in promoting cooperation between China and Germany, and China and Europe.

Link, who greeted Xi during the visit, said that with the train connections, Duisburg benefits directly from the Chinese projects and involvement in the region.

"Since Xi's visit, Duisburg has become an important logistics hub, with an increasing number of Chinese companies investing there. I believe that in the future, we will have even greater potential for cooperation with China," he said.



A worker walks past a stack of containers in Duisburg Intermodal Terminal, a logistics hub where goods come in and out through rail, the Rhine River and highway. XING YI / CHINA DAILY

In 2015, the express starting from Wuhan extended its European terminal to Duisburg. Over the past decade, Duisburg has become the node with the widest coverage, the most frequent trains, and the highest volume and value of goods among the Western European routes for the China-Europe Railway Express.

At present, a majority of China-Europe freight trains run into the Duisburg Intermodal Terminal, where containers with signs of China-Europe Railway Express are loaded by gantry cranes between trains, trucks, and barges every day, before setting off on the next leg of their journeys.

Li Zhuo, who is in charge of Chinese business development at Contargo Group, the company that operates the terminal, said the "good location" of Duisburg and the flexibility of different transport methods has made more Chinese clients choose Duisburg as their logistics transfer hub.

Sha Pengjun, general manager of Wuhan Asia-Europe Logistics, said that in July 2015, the China-Europe Railway Express (Wuhan) was inaugurated with regular services to Duisburg, and has since maintained stable and regular operations. Until now, a total of 797 trains have been operated, carrying 65,400 20-foot equivalent units, including 426 outbound trains and 371 inbound trains.

Currently, outbound shipments mainly consist of optoelectronic products, mechanical equipment and components, automotive parts, and clothing, while inbound shipments mainly include cosmetics, auto parts, mechanical equipment, complete vehicles, and milk powder, she said.

The China-Europe Railway Express (Wuhan) to Duisburg leverages the stable and efficient advantages of railway transportation, promoting the clustering and development of industries such as optoelectronics, clothing, and timber in Wuhan, she said.

Promoting trade

It has also assisted many local enterprises in expanding into the European market, enhancing the city's brand and visibility, and promoting regional international economic and trade development, she said.

"As an important part of the Belt and Road Initiative, the China-Europe Railway Express (Wuhan) has played a significant role in promoting the exchange and cooperation of economic and trade between China and Germany, as well as political and cultural exchanges," she added.

In 2016, Wuhan Asia-Europe Logistics opened its subsidiary in Duisburg, marking a new stage of accelerated development for the China-Europe Railway Express (Wuhan).

Living in Germany for years, Wu Min has witnessed the development brought to Duisburg by the express.

"At first, the German side did not expect the China-Europe Railway Express to develop so well. However, over the past decade, the China-Europe Railway Express has been thriving. Many Chinese companies have since settled in Duisburg, creating new economic development opportunities," Wu Min said. "Thus, Duisburg now pays more attention to its relationship with Wuhan and China."

He believes that Duisburg's unique transportation conditions by sea, land, and air will make it a distinctive logistics center. With the development of Internet of Things technology, the integration of artificial intelligence with logistics enterprises will lead to the rapid development of industrial enterprises, forming an interconnected ecosystem in the surrounding areas.

Moreover, both Duisburg and Wuhan consider the hydrogen energy industry as one of the emerging development directions, which will create opportunities for cooperation between the two sides, he said.

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Watch the video by scanning the code

Rhine hub set to play bigger role in bilateral collaboration

By **CHEN YINGQUN** and **LIU KUN** in Wuhan

Due to its extensive collaboration with China and its position of being an important transportation hub in Europe, Duisburg is poised to play a significant role in enhancing bilateral relations between China and Germany, the mayor of Duisburg said.

Duisburg Mayor Soren Link said Wuhan and Duisburg have had a long-term collaboration over the past four decades covering multiple areas such as culture, education and the economy.

"Our collaboration is concrete and measurable, with a foundation of mutual trust built between us," he said. "The high quality and efficiency of our partnership with China positioned us as a highly effective collaborator."

Moreover, the Port of Duisburg is the largest inland port in the world and has become the core of Europe's logistics hub, he added.

Link made a four-day visit to Wuhan in March, with a delegation of over 20 government and business representatives.

He said the Duisburg city government places great importance on cooperation with Wuhan and hopes to further enhance cooperation and explore potential projects for collaboration during his visit.

"Coming back feels like coming home again," he said. This is Link's fifth visit to the city.

In addition to engaging with their counterparts in Wuhan, his delegation took the opportunity to visit and gain insights into the latest advancements in Wuhan's smart logistics, observe the green and low-carbon evolution of the steel sector, and visit educational institutions to seek out possibilities for youth exchanges and collaborative efforts.

"My initial visit to Wuhan was in 2014, during which I perceived it as a city undergoing transformation, with numerous projects either being conceptualized or just beginning. However, Wuhan has experienced considerable developments since then, and I am pleased to have witnessed these great changes firsthand," Link told China Daily in Wuhan.

"Numerous envisioned projects at that time have now come to fruition, transforming Wuhan significantly and turning it into a hub for culture and tourism. Such transformation is enlightening for me; the resolve and rapidity with which China executes its plans is worth studying."



> The high quality and efficiency of our partnership with China positioned us as a highly effective collaborator."
>
> **Soren Link,** mayor of Duisburg

Numerous parallels

Duisburg and Wuhan have numerous parallels regarding their benefits and unique characteristics. For instance, each city serves as a central point for the steel sector while simultaneously navigating a shift toward sustainable economic practices. In terms of city development, they are both exploring ways to enhance urban living standards by fostering greener, more eco-friendly and energy-efficient urban growth, aiming to offer improved living environments for their residents. Additionally, both cities — situated at the junction of two rivers — play crucial roles as logistical centers, he said.

"We have many connections, and there are many areas such as culture, education and urban planning, where we can learn from and cooperate with each other," he said.

During his stay in Wuhan, Link relished hot dry noodles for breakfast and strolling in riverfront parks. He found traditional structures like the Yellow Crane Tower exceptionally beautiful. He found the locals, similar to those in Duisburg, very warm and open to conversation.

Link calls Duisburg "Germany's China city". He said the highlight of his career was the moment when he greeted Chinese President Xi Jinping, who visited Duisburg in 2014. Xi welcomed the arrival of a Chinese freight train at the Port of Duisburg, and expressed hope that Duisburg will play a greater role in promoting cooperation between China and Germany, and China and Europe.

Since Xi's visit, Duisburg has evolved into a crucial center for logistics, witnessing a surge in investments from Chinese firms, Link said. He is convinced that going forward, Duisburg's collaborative prospects with China will only expand further.

Link said the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative "essentially applies the traditional concept of the Silk Road to modern practices". This initiative facilitates the exchange and learning of cultures among different countries and their peoples, promotes trade relations, and makes a significant contribution to world peace. It has also had a positive impact on the Port of Duisburg.

Although some voices in Europe advocate for reducing economic reliance on China, Link maintained that it is crucial for the government to organize cooperative projects that could deliver concrete advantages to Duisburg and its residents, and China can be a good partner as long as the cooperation is win-win.



German and Chinese students of the Confucius Institute Metropolis Ruhr hold a concert at the University of Duisburg-Essen to celebrate Chinese New Year in February. PHOTO PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Top: Local families visit Yingqu Garden, which is located in Duisburg Zoo. **Right**: A statue of lion decorates the stone bridge over a pond in the garden. XING YI / CHINA DAILY

Friendship blossoms in Chinese garden

By **CHEN YINGQUN** and **LIU KUN** in Wuhan and **XING YI** in Duisburg

Jiang Donghua, 67, has kept two gifts from Duisburg that he values a lot. A pair of gardening shears from an old friend remembering his participation in the construction of a Chinese garden in Duisburg decades ago, and a cup symbolizing the long-lasting friendship between China and Germany.

The retired landscaping worker at the garden construction company affiliated with the Wuhan Landscape and Ecology Group was a member of the Chinese team that went to Duisburg 37 years ago for the construction of Yingqu Garden in the Duisburg Zoo, which has stood as a symbol of friendship between the two cities.

Wuhan and Duisburg became sister cities in 1982, afterward, Wuhan decided to present Duisburg with a Chu-style garden. Nevertheless, the creation of the garden was a challenging endeavor. Originally constructed at the Wuhan Zoo, it was subsequently dismantled, packed into 14 containers and transported to Duisburg. Meanwhile, Wuhan sent a team of 10 people, including carpenters, construction workers, a painter, a design engineer, an interpreter and managers to Duisburg to assemble the garden.

Jiang remembered that they spent a total of 90 days in the German city.

"The people in Duisburg are exceptionally friendly, and the city was both beautiful and modern," he recalled. "The German craftsmanship spirit deeply touched me. It was truly an unforgettable experience that will stay with me for life."

The garden, spanning an area similar to that of a soccer field, showcases typical Chinese architectural features, including the prevalent use of mortise-and-tenon structures adorned with stone lions, pathways, waterways and rock formations. Within the garden, one can find a variety of plant species such as bamboo, weeping willows, water lilies, metasequoia and winterswee trees, which represent Wuhan.

Upon its official opening to the public in 1988, the garden was enthusiastically embraced by the local community. According to official statistics, it currently attracts approximately 800,000 visitors annually.

Exceptional beauty

Soren Link, the mayor of Duisburg, reminisced about his childhood visits to Yingqu Garden.

"Many people in Germany are familiar with this Chinese garden and recognize its exceptional beauty, using it as a means to learn about Chinese culture," he stated.

During a visit to Wuhan in March, he encountered three workers who had been involved in constructing Yingqu Garden. Each of them was presented with a cup bearing the Duisburg logo as a token of appreciation. Link expressed gratitude for their journey to Germany and conveyed his desire for the enduring friendship between Duisburg and Wuhan.

Hu Songbing, general manager of the garden construction company linked to the Wuhan Landscape and Ecology Group, said that the garden has been damaged in some places due to aging. Thus, a few years ago, Duisburg expressed a desire for Wuhan's assistance in restoring the deteriorating sections of the Yingqu Garden. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, Wuhan packaged and dispatched 40 metric tons of ancient garden-building materials to Germany through the China-Europe Railway Express. Through three video conferences and 43 email correspondences, Wuhan supported German technicians in accomplishing the repair and refurbishment tasks.

On Aug 17, 2022, Yingqu Garden completed its first large-scale renovation in more than 30 years and reopened to the public. On that day, Duisburg Zoo welcomed in excess of 8,000 visitors, four times its usual attendance, Hu said.

Sergej Manske was visiting the garden with his two children on the first Sunday of April.

"I've been to many gardens, but I like this one the most. It is not too spread out, and has more cultural elements," he told China Daily. "I haven't been to China before and I definitely want to visit the country!"

Hu said that Europeans have a strong affinity for garden culture. Gardens are seen as vessels of cultural significance, and many Europeans view gardens constructed by Chinese artisans as genuine embodiments of Chinese heritage.

"This garden has a history of more than 30 years and holds certain historical value. Therefore, the German workers exercise great care and precision during their restoration efforts," he said.

Furthermore, he noted that the garden has evolved into a venue for exhibiting Chinese culture, hosting numerous events related to China. It has also become a preferred location for residents to organize traditional Chinese-style weddings.

Zhang Mingyao, co-director of the Confucius Institute Metropolis Ruhr in the University of Duisburg-Essen, said the teachers have recently produced an audio guide of the garden in both German and Chinese, and the zoo installed a plate with a QR code at the garden entrance to guide visitors.

"It will help visitors better understand the story and culture represented in the pavilion, the bridge and the painting in this Chinese garden," he said.





From left: Yingqu Garden in Duisburg consists of a pavilion and a kiosk in traditional Chinese architecture style; The Yingqu Garden at Wuhan Zoo. XING YI / CHINA DAILY; ZHOU GUOQIANG / FOR CHINA DAILY