



Speech of the President of the Max Planck Society

Professor Dr. Patrick Cramer

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– Check against delivery –

Dear all,

52 years ago, a man called Rolf Pauls was the German Ambassador to China. On one evening in April 1974, he hosted a dinner. Half of the guests were from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the other half was from the Max Planck Society. Remember: this was when Mao Zedong was still in office. What a time to start interactions between Chinese and German scientists.

Ambassador Pauls asked himself how he could foster their discussions. He decided that a casual buffet dinner could nurture exchange. Indeed, this was a good decision. A lively scene unfolded, like in a movie.

For example, Max Planck President Reimar Lüst was solving physics equations on paper napkins together with theoretical physicist Zhou Peiyuan, who later served as President of Beijing University.

Dear Partner Group Leaders, dear alumni, dear guests, today, we use that same language of science to learn from each other. What unites us is our shared quest for scientific excellence.

But what does excellence really mean?

First of all, excellence means to ask big, open questions. And to do original, creative and cutting-edge science in a large variety of fields, from the natural to the social sciences. But excellence is more than that. It also means that we value independent evaluation and peer review. It means that we fight these paper mills and predatory journals, so that we maintain our integrity and foster trust in science. Excellence also means open science, that we share results and data, and that we communicate the chances and risks of our work to society. Excellence means that we address global challenges together, such as climate change, the loss of biodiversity, or public health. And it means that we pass on our knowledge and train the next generation.

Dear colleagues, excellence also requires strong collaborations, such as ours. Let me share with you some numbers.



Last year, Max Planck and Chinese researchers were engaged in 157 collaboration projects. Between 2019 and 2023, we published 8,678 papers together. This means that China ranks number 4 amongst our partner countries, following the U.S., the UK and France.

And to make this very clear: One pillar of this collaboration is our partner group program! In 1999, Jing Yipeng developed the idea of the partner group program – together with Gerhard Börner at the MPI for Astrophysics in Munich.

And believe it or not: Professor Jing is with us today! Thank you for joining and thank you for this great idea! Since then, over 70 partner groups have been established in China, and many more throughout the whole world.

Dear colleagues, you all know: we are living in times of big geopolitical challenges. How should we react to them? Should we isolate ourselves and wait for better times? No, certainly not, dear colleagues, it is rather in these times when we as scientists should stand united. Together, we can be the voice of reason in a rapidly changing world. To me, the key to this is multilateralism. What do I mean? Well, we at Max Planck want to work with the best in the world. And we want to work with different partners, as required by our science.

To make this clear: We seek to increase our interactions with China and with several other countries in Asia and Latin America. And despite the anti-science actions of the new U.S. administration, we will continue to work with our American colleagues.

Dear colleagues, on this visit to China, I am gaining new insights. Earlier this week, we visited the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing University and the new Huairou Science City with its large infrastructures.

I am seeing great opportunities for science. This is no surprise, because eight of the top ten institutions in the 2025 Nature Ranking are based here in China. By the way: the other two are Harvard and – of course – Max Planck.

And this trend will continue: Over the next five years, China increases its R&D spending by at least 7% per year. And China is very good at introducing students to the natural sciences. We just got a glimpse of this at the Shanghai Science and Technology Museum. So what is next on our tour?

Tomorrow we will visit Westlake University and the Unitree Robot Factory, and then we will see the FAST radio telescope and the Shenzhen Institutes of Advanced Technology SIAT. How exciting! I have not been in Shenzhen yet.

Dear guests, let me close with a thank you to those who make our interactions possible! From Max Planck I want to mention Barbara Spielmann, who had helped to shape our China activities for decades, and Sabine Panglung who took care of our cooperation contracts.

And of course I would like to thank my current delegation: Christiane Haupt, Alexander Jost and Sebastian Höpfner are with us tonight. And believe it or not: I am the only one who does not speak Chinese! And a big thank you to the Academy for inviting us today, and providing us with the opportunity to meet here in Shanghai!



And guess what: After our meeting, we will have a buffet dinner, just like our colleagues had, back then in 1974. And rest assured: We will have enough paper napkins to write down ideas for new collaboration projects.

Please enjoy the company!