

News

Bringing down the cultural barriers

OPEN HOUSE GIVES STUDENTS A CHANCE TO UNDERSTAND THE EUROPEAN UNION

By ZHANG JING

Chen Ke, 35, a book editor in Beijing, drives her Skoda to work every day. She has been under the impression that her car is a Japanese brand.

"I didn't know it was a Czech brand until I went with my son to the open house organized by the embassy of the Czech Republic," says Chen.

The 2011 EU-China Year of Youth, a month-long celebration in Beijing, kicked off May 6 to mark the 36th anniversary of formal EU-China diplomatic relations. A tour, open to the public, started at the EU Delegation to China and passed through 18 European Union embassies, including Cyprus and Malta.

Each embassy displayed its cultural strengths to attract young people to the open house. The French and Italian embassies showed films; Luxembourg and Greece presented traditional foods; Ireland and Austria boasted their traditional dances.

"I had previously planned to go to the US for further studies, but after having fun at the open house at the



ZHANG JING / CHINA DAILY

Simone Martin, an intern with the embassy of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, demonstrates how to make a traditional waffle on its open day.

Irish embassy, I might change my mind and choose to go to the Trinity College in Dublin," says Wang Lijun, a student at Beijing Normal University.

"The main purpose of the EU open house is to strengthen young people's understanding and knowledge of the European Union, its member states and EU-China relations, as well as to foster friendship and offer further occasions for people-to-people exchanges between European and Chinese youths," said Markus Ederer, ambas-

sador of the EU Delegation to China.

China's business ties with the EU were also an important talking point for some officials at the open house.

"Unknown to many, the EU is China's largest trading partner and China is the EU's second largest," says Marianne Gumaelius, head of trade and investment section at the EU Delegation to China.

"We don't agree on everything because we come from different backgrounds, but we should look for oppor-

tunities rather than obstacles."

Instituto Cervantes is a nonprofit institute that promotes Spanish culture and language. The organization opened a school in Beijing in 2006 and it now has more than 5,000 students.

"The student recruitment growth rate has been 50 percent for the past three years," says Enrique Maldonado, media officer with Cervantes.

Conversely, Maldonado says there is a growing interest among Spanish students to speak Chinese. Some of his Chinese students have expressed their desire to go to Spain and teach Chinese there.

Hannelore Mueller, a Beijing-based German language teaching advisor, helped organize 120 German-speaking students aged 13-16 from Beijing, Tianjin and Taiyuan to visit the German embassy during the open house.

An injured left foot didn't deter Huang Huanjie, 13, from going to the German embassy on crutches to enjoy the party. Huang and his friends toured the embassy, filled out mock visa applications and tasted German sausages and bread in the garden. Five lucky winners rode in an electric-powered Mini Cooper in the courtyard, driven by German Ambassador Michael Schaefer.

Besides showcasing famous Irish writers such as James Joyce and William B. Yates, the Irish embassy invited two young dancers to perform. Erin Jensen, 10, and her sister Christy,

12, had previously performed in the Forbidden City.

The Austrian embassy named their event Let's Waltz. Eight Austrian ball room dance instructors conducted classes in Beijing and Shanghai, attracting passers-by.

Besides presenting their traditional "tree cake" and "finger cheese" to the audience, the Lithuania embassy resorted to a basketball game between diplomats and guests.

"Nowadays, some 50 million Chinese visit Europe each year. We would be content to attract 1 percent of those Chinese visitors to Lithuania," says Andrius Maslauskas, commercial director of Litamicus Travel Ltd.

At the conclusion of the tour was an exhibition named "European Union in My Eyes". It attracted more than 400 participants from 11 countries and regions, including Norway and Hungary. Some of the youngest participants are in kindergarten.

"It is amazing to see how well Chinese paintings and calligraphies blend with Western paintings in the exhibition hall," says Nagy Gabor, cultural counselor at the Hungary embassy.

"No one country in this world can solve such problems as climate change and environmental protection alone," says Michael Schaefer, German ambassador to China. "We need to work together and young people are our future."

High-speed rail link set for launch

By XIN DINGDING

The high-speed railway linking Beijing to Shanghai, which will open later this month, is safe and reliable and the reduction in operating speed is to maximize efficiency, rail authorities say.

"Its technology is advanced, its quality reliable and safety guaranteed. It is completely ready for operation and will open in late June," Hu Yadong, vice-minister of railways, told a news conference on June 13.

Tickets for the journey between China's top two cities will range from 410 yuan to 1,750 yuan (44 euros to 187 euros), depending on the train's designated speed and seat category. Tickets will be sold online a week before the formal launch date.

The 1,318-km line will run 90 pairs of trains daily. These will travel at either 300 km/h or 250 km/h. The fastest travel time between the two cities will be four hours and 48 minutes, or about half the time trains currently take.

The ministry had previously considered cutting the travel time to just four hours by running trains at a top speed of 380 km/h.

Speed cuts will also be introduced on other rail routes.

Starting July 1, several high-speed railways, including the lines linking Wuhan and Guangzhou, Zhengzhou and Xi'an, and Shanghai and Nanjing, will see train speeds reduced from 350 km/h to 300 km/h. Trains that run at 250 km/h will be added to these lines to meet diversified needs.

The speed cut is in line with a nationwide directive made public in April that said all high-speed trains must run at a slower pace than previously announced — no faster than 300 km/h — to make journeys safer.

The directive followed a major corruption scandal in February when then railways minister, Liu Zhijun, was dismissed after an investigation into serious disciplinary violations. It raised concerns over the costs and safety of high-speed rail links.

Hu rejected speculation that operating speed had been slashed because high-speed railways were unsafe or unreliable. He said that the decision was due to maximizing efficiency. The high-speed railway was built according to the technical standards of travel at 350 km/h, and all test runs were conducted at 350 km/h, he said.



WANG HAOFEI / XINHUA

Two engineers test seats in a business-class car of a CRH380B high-speed train in Changchun, Jilin province.

During the test period, from November to May 10, trains covered a length of more than 600,000 km, and a one-month trial operation that commenced on May 11 has seen trains covering a total length of 2 million km.

The technical reliability of the line, as measured by international criteria, is world class, he said. "But when we decided on its commercial operating speed, we took into account economic efficiency."

The vice-minister said that the railway will operate a dual-speed system with the slower trains making way for faster ones. The bigger the speed gap (between two types of trains), the greater the impact on the line's operating efficiency, he said.

The ministry found that running trains at 350 km/h and 250 km/h on the same line will be 20 percent less efficient than operating trains traveling at 300 km/h and 250 km/h.

The ministry also took energy consumption, the wear and tear on tracks and rolling stock, into consideration, Hu said.

The ministry is taking every measure to ensure the line's safety.

Maintenance workers will spend four hours checking the tracks every night. Two passenger-free trains will travel the line every morning to conduct safety checks before trains with passengers get the green light.