On behalf of all the invited scholars I wish to thank the Ministry of Culture of the People’s Republic of China and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences for their kind invitation to participate in this important Symposium on China studies.

The theme of the Symposium is appropriate to the times we live in, being concerned with the phenomenon of globalisation and the need for greater cooperation between China and those countries along the “One Belt, One Road”.

It is proper that the organisers have placed emphasis on the historical origins and cultural inheritance of the countries to be involved in this great initiative. An understanding of history and culture is the essential precondition for cooperation based on mutual respect and for that reason the Ministry and the Academy are to be congratulated for making these the basic themes of the Symposium.
A harmonious world order can only be constructed on the basis of mutual understanding and that requires deep knowledge of our respective histories and main cultural characteristics. Above all, it demands an honest evaluation of how we have related to each other in the past and how the past affects the present and shapes the future.

Many scholars would argue that the most significant event of the 20th century was the creation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and the re-emergence of China as a great power following a century of humiliation. That development has reshaped and rebalanced the world order and we need to study its ramifications for the governance of the global system, for international finance, world trade, the maintenance of peace and the common challenges that confront us as a species, such as climate change. This should be a primary area of research for scholars, especially from the West.
We need also to study the Chinese system of government and of economic development, in particular the Five Year Planning process. What we are witnessing is the greatest ever transformation of a society both in terms of its scale and speed, and we need to develop a profound understanding of the policies and institutions which are making it possible so that we do not arrive at false conclusions about its durability or objectives.

All things being equal, as economists say, China will be by far the most populous country by the end of the century. There are two reasons for studying developments in contemporary China and for having an objective understanding of what is happening.

In that regard, we need to explore further the concept of the Belt and Road Initiative. As many see it, that initiative is a signal that China wishes to place itself again at the heart of world trade and at the same time to stimulate the independence of the world’s great economic regions, especially China,
South-East Asia and Europe. I think that it would be the correct interpretation and, as such, it should be a major area of study by think tanks and policy research institutes.

For that reason, I welcome it as the centerpiece of this Symposium. From my experience as a Minister for Finance I can say that greater inter-regional cooperation offers the best prospect for global economic growth and why I attach such significance to the “One Belt, One Road” initiative. We recently held a Round Table in Dublin between our Institute and the Institute of Economic Studies on that topic and how my country, Ireland, will be fully integrated into the trade routes joining China and Europe. It was an exercise we would hope to repeat again and which I would commend to all the think tanks represented here at this Symposium.

Let me conclude by saying, as a former Minister for Education, that it was a wise decision to choose “Cultural Identity and Common Heritage” as one of the five subtopics for consideration here at the Symposium. It was interesting that when President Xi visited my country four years ago in his
capacity as Vice-President that he gave as much prominence to culture and heritage as he did to economics, politics and diplomacy. To us, his hosts, that seemed the right balance. He studied our music, theatre, sport and community organisations to see what could be learned for use here in China. It is an approach that we in the West could emulate to our advantage.

For all these reasons, I commend the Ministry and the Academy for organising this Symposium and for inviting us to participate in what I know will be a fruitful dialogue between scholars and policy-makers.

We, your guests, thank you for your hospitality and friendship and look forward to the discussions before us both here in Beijing and later in Chengdu.