

K.U.Leuven launches association for Chinese alumni

REINER VAN HOVE

On 5 and 6 March, the foundation of the K.U.Leuven China Alumni Club was celebrated in Beijing and Shanghai. It is the first university-wide alumni association that covers a whole country.

The alumni association is the most recent of a series of initiatives K.U.Leuven has taken in China in the past few years. For example, it has concluded bilateral co-operation agreements with a number of top universities in China and in 2007, a comprehensive institutional accord was signed with Tsinghua University.

China is the second best represented country in Leuven's international student community after the Netherlands; about 450 Chinese students enrolled this year. "Our objective is not necessarily to increase that figure, but rather to profile ourselves better in order to continuously attract the best students and researchers," Bart Hendrickx, Director of the International Office tells us. "You can establish all kinds of complex systems to this end, but social networks continue to be the most efficient way," Professor Bart De Moor, Vice Rector for International Policy adds. "I know this from personal experience. Many of my doctoral students found positions at Stanford as a result of the contacts I have there. If we track down our alumni in China successfully and develop good relations with them, they can assist us with the selection of new students and researchers."

"Our alumni could also be involved in guiding professors from Leuven who travel to China for short periods of time, as well as facilitating the access of our spin-offs to the Chinese market and of our researchers to Chinese research centres. This requires people who know the local do's and don'ts."

"The Chinese attach great importance to networks," Hen-



Bart Hendrickx, Director of the International Office of K.U.Leuven, addresses the alumni in Beijing.

members can register. In the next stage, we can start 'nurturing' the network with the most appropriate information."

At the launch of the club at the beginning of March, it was apparent that many alumni are interested. Hendrickx: "About fifty alumni attended in Beijing and there were about eighty in Shanghai, including a few Flemish alumni who live there. It was a good mix, but we need to promote more interaction between the Chinese and Flemish groups."

"LEUVEN WAS UNFORGETTABLE"

If it aims to promote a sense of pride amongst its members, the China Alumni Club could not have a better co-ordinator than David Xu. Without hesitation, he describes his stay in Leuven as the most wonderful time of his life: "My father studied medicine in Leuven and later obtained a PhD supervised by Professor Edward Carmeliet. He encouraged me to study in Leuven as well,

drickx says. "That is why Chinese alumni are also able to benefit from the excellent reputation K.U.Leuven is developing in their country: being affiliated with high quality increases their own market value." Professor De Moor makes a comparison to the US: "Americans consider the university they studied at to be a real asset on their CV. They are very proud of being able to say they are an alumnus of Yale or Berkeley, etc. We have a lot of room for improvement with respect to identity and branding. We have to find the aspects of K.U.Leuven that a Chinese alumnus would recommend to his/her children."

The China Alumni Club provides an umbrella structure for the existing alumni associations in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and other places. The association will co-operate with the Belgian Embassy in Beijing, the consulates in Shanghai and Guangzhou, the Benelux Chamber of Commerce in China and the Belgian-Chinese Chamber of Commerce in China. David Xu, who is himself an alumnus of K.U.Leuven, will co-ordinate the China Alumni Club. Hendrickx: "He is meeting with a number of alumni in the next few months to explore the ways in which they can concretise their commitment and which duties will be entrusted to them. There is also an online database through which

Xu's responsibilities extend beyond the co-ordination of the alumni association. Hendrickx: "He has been tasked with strengthening K.U.Leuven's position in China in the broadest sense. China evolves incredibly quickly and you need a permanent representative in the field if you want to successfully maintain your reputation as an illustrious research university. For example, he has to draw attention to the position of K.U.Leuven in various rankings – these are of enormous importance to top Chinese universities, for the selection of their partners. Moreover, we expect Xu to assist the development of existing co-operations with Chinese partner universities. A fine example of this is the seminar about technology transfer and spin-off creation that we are organising with our Chinese partners for the World Fair in Shanghai."

"The situation in China is of course part of a broader policy," Professor De Moor concludes. "In these times of globalisation, our perspective must be intercontinental and we should thus also explore new initiatives in other parts of the world – in Latin America, for example."

Online

<http://www.kuleuven.be/international/chinalumni>

for the benefit of my personal development and my career. He hoped that I might be of importance to Belgium and China in my professional life. My own time in Leuven – I studied the post-graduate in Human Settlements – was unforgettable: it was hard work but a lot of fun as well."

The wish of Xu's father has come true: his son represents the Flemish company Egemin in China and he is now also the representative of K.U.Leuven: "Leuven already has a good reputation here when it comes to research and technology transfer. I hope I can expand that good name through the network of social contacts that I have established in the government, at universities and in the media. I have already contacted the partner universities to ask if they can organise a K.U.Leuven Day or Weekend to introduce Leuven to Chinese students. We have also planned a number of activities for the Shanghai World Fair, which will undoubtedly give Leuven's image a considerable boost as well."

"I also intend to organise alumni meetings once a month, in different cities. My main goal is to foster a family reunion feeling amongst the alumni, but I also want to appeal to their networks to spread information about K.U.Leuven."