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Gilbert Van Kerckhove: my Chinese Olympic dream

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The Birds Nest under construction Photo: provided to Sino-US.com by Gilbert Van Kerckhove

As one of the first foreigners coming to do business in China since its opening-up, Gilbert Van Kerckhove has lived on and off in the country for over 30 years, witnessing its changes and transformation into the world's second largest economy.

The 68-year-old Belgian regards China as his second home and has worked assiduously to facilitate China's top construction projects including the Birds Nest and Water Cube. He's known to have acted as a bridge between the Chinese administration and foreign business community while China prepared for its 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

Due to his effective work, Van Kerckhove obtained the China Friendship Award in 2005, which is the highest honor bestowed on foreign experts by the Chinese government. And he is affectionately called by his friends as a "model China worker"—Yanglaomo (洋劳模).

On a brisk morning in late September, Van Kerckhove talked with the sino-us.com reporter in the cozy drawing room of his home office, a secluded duplex in Beijing's Dongcheng district. The tall, lean and spirited business strategist casually talked about his life in China while sipping Cappuccino, with occasional effusive laughter illustrating his good-humored nature.

According to the old "China hand", when he took the job of setting up the Chinese office of a Belgian

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engineering company in 1980, it wasn't his plan to stay in the country for long. In the eyes of his family and friends, "China was poor and dangerous," while for the new comer, the hardest thing to endure was the monotonous life outside of work. Besides, "the world at the time had insufficient understanding of China, and how the country would greet Westerners remained a mystery," Van Kerckhove said about a universal concern back then shared by the small foreign community in China.



Beijing's Chang'an Avenue in the early 1980s. Photo: provided to Sino-US.com by Gilbert Van Kerckhove

In the early 1980s in Beijing, there were no high-rise buildings along the Chang'an Avenue, and the current CBD area featuring a forest of skyscrapers was nothing but farmland. Van Kerckhove gained a master's degree in electronic engineering and previous working experiences in Siemens led him to Brazil, where he learned that top-rate engineers could be found and great projects could be accomplished even in developing countries. With the idea, he ignored all setbacks and came to Beijing.

Van Kerckhove also worked and lived in other countries in the following years, although he would come back to China always. In 1995, he went to Shanghai as the general manager of Alstom in charge of the Eastern China region, responsible for big construction projects including the Shanghai Metro Line 3 and the Pudong Jinmao Tower.

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Local residents mostly dress in dark-colored suits in the 1980s. Kerckhove poses in the China office for the Belgian company ACEC in Beijing in 1981. Photo: provided to Sino-US.com by Gilbert Van Kerckhove

At the end of 1999, he and his Chinese wife Sun Bin, who is also his long-term work partner returned to Beijing to set up their own company, the Beijing Global Strategy Consulting Co., Ltd. Meanwhile, the veteran business strategist accepted an invitation to act as senior consultant for the Beijing Municipal Government.

Working for Beijing's Olympic Games

Van Kerckhove's close ties with the government and his success in explaining Beijing to China's foreign business community gained him access to the 2008 Olympics. He began to participate in the preliminary work in 2001 and became a staff member of the Beijing Development and Reform Commission soon to be in charge of soliciting overseas investment in essential projects including Birds Nest and Water Cube. The Belgian businessman used his international connections to find partners for the Beijing Olympic Games, allowing eligible foreign companies to partake.

It was in the same spacious drawing room Beijing officials organized some crucial meetings to work on fundraising, tendering and economic planning issues for Birds Nest and Water Cube during the SARS epidemic in 2003. Van Kerckhove feels happy that he could provide Beijing officials the convenient solution—a discreet place to meet up with interested parties when such kind of gatherings would not be allowed in regular office buildings at the time. Actually, when his compound was also closed to outsiders, he moved the meetings to his friend's restaurant (Morel's Restaurant).

Hainan Island was the only place in China “free of SARS”, according to the WHO, and so foreign visitors were only allowed to go there. For the reason, over 120 Beijing government delegates set up a temporary office in Bo’ao of Hainan to decide on the Water Cube’s design while inviting and evaluating tenders for the Birds Nest. Van Kerckhove played a decisive role in ensuring the success of the “Bo’ao operation” by bringing apprehensive foreign executives and five world renowned specialists to Hainan. “They were worried about SARS and I used all sorts of methods to convince them to come,” he joked.

Van Kerckhove also remembers one incident that happened during the first contract negotiation for Birds Nest, because of which the initial bidding winner was ruled out. “The financing partner of the winning team behaved in an extremely rude manner and started to distance himself from what he had previously committed to do in the bidding documents,” recalled Van Kerckhove. He later luckily found the American partner’s written agreement to meet all commitments and also discovered his registered business address in San Francisco was suspicious. “The second placed winner of the tender came in and signed the contract,” he said, adding it’s a pity because the Chinese builder working with the “San Francisco fake guy” actually submitted excellent proposals.

In order to find really competent partners and engage them in the bidding, the “model China worker” had reached to dozens of chambers of commerce, hundreds of overseas companies, finished hundreds of reports and spared no efforts in exploring into totally new fields for him. For example, when the Water Cube designers decided to apply membrane technology to the outer wall for creating the natural pattern of bubbles in soap lather, no one really knew anything about the technology or companies behind it.

Van Kerckhove was sent to Germany, where the technology was developed. “Sometimes, stacks of materials were in front of me, and I had to digest them to prepare myself for negotiations,” he said. Finally, he established ties with the companies and got them involved. The German manufacturers then joined Beijing’s technical teams and submitted their quotations to deliver the membranes.



The Water Cube under construction Photo: provided to Sino-US.com by Gilbert Van Kerckhove

Long-term zealous work for the Olympic projects and previous involvement in many other essential projects had gradually turned the businessman into an expert on urban planning and sustainable operation of mammoth facilities. As his cooperation with the Beijing municipal government deepened, he became more vocal about his concerns.

“The original plans of the architect included many commercial facilities that could have helped with the post-Olympic operation were curtailed as the then mayor, Wang Qishan, ordered serious cuts in the

budget," said Van Kerckhove regretfully. He regretted that Beijing was also reluctant to grant more leeway to the foreign operator of the stadium. He warned the city that after 2008 there would be a problem with its operation, although the warnings were dismissed and the Beijing administration insisted that "there was no time to work it out and the priority was to get the stadium ready".

His worries later came true. The operation contract of Birds Nest failed and the investing parties withdrew. Finally, the Beijing municipal government took over the stadium themselves. Van Kerckhove had devoted quite a lot of work and emotions into the architecture. "Till today, China has little or no mass sports that can use the stadium and Guoan continues to be based in the Worker's Stadium." Although there remains hope, the good news for the Belgian fan of Birds Nest is that, President Xi has just launched a massive effort to promote soccer. "Maybe within 10 years the Birds Nest could be again hosting regular matches," he wished.

He remains positive about the overall impact of the event. "Beijing was too slow to act and running behind Shanghai to modernize the city. With the Olympics, Beijing was forced to act and improve the city dramatically. All Beijingers should be grateful for that!"

He was afraid Beijing would slow down the construction of subways after 2008, while the "great fact" is that it has even intensified the expansion, which he regards as an advantage for the city.

Van Kerckhove was sometimes amazed by the capital city's long-term consideration. "Actually the area for the Olympics was reserved decades ago by the Beijing urban planners, making its construction relatively easy. No building permits were given so few buildings needed to be removed, except for some migrant housing," he said.



How it looked on the "SPOT" before all construction started Photo: provided to Sino-US.com
by Gilbert Van Kerckhove

"Few people realize today how it looked before: it was a flat piece of land. Now there is a lake, a big hill, huge park and water channels."

Enduring marriage and "united team" for work

Van Kerckhove has been working successfully together with his Chinese wife Sun Bin for 30 years. They even worked together in multinationals as the companies understood that they formed a great and unique team.

"My wife has excellent contacts in the Chinese administration and understands how the bureaucracy works. She acts for and defends the Chinese way and interest, while I have excellent contacts with the embassies, chambers of commerce, foreign government officials and foreign companies. I understand the foreign way of thinking—their weaknesses and strengths," he said.

The couple would first have heated discussions between themselves before coming to a common understanding and strategy. Then, they would act accordingly to execute the strategy, coming out as a "united team".



The forest park and lake under construction Photo: provided to Sino-US.com by Gilbert Van Kerckhove

"It often required innovative and daring moves, but we managed to complete some 'mission impossible' for the Olympic projects." Van Kerckhove has gained fame for his efforts, although his wife's contribution is less well known as she always wants to remain modest and "invisible".

When Van Kerckhove talked about his successful marriage of over 30 years, he said the most comical aspect is that he only found out about his wife's prominent family background after they were married for a while. The family had many celebrities. Ms. Sun's grandfather was, along with Zhou Enlai (周恩来), one of the forerunners of China's revolution. Her aunt Sun Weishi (孙维世) was Zhou Enlai's adopted daughter. Her father Sun Yang was the former vice president of Renmin University. The husband of her aunt, Jin Shan (金山), was one of China's most famous actors. "Yet she practically never brings up her family background."

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