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DEPARTMENT OF EU INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND DIPLOMACY STUDIES



"EXCHANGING IDEAS
ON EU-CHINA RELATIONS:
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY
APPROACH"

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER: COMPARING CHINA AND EUROPE IN AFRICA ABDOULKADRE ADO	04
CITY DIPLOMACY AS TOOL FOR IMPROVING THE EU-CHINA COOPERATION: THE CHINESE AND EU UNESCO CREATIVE CITIES NIEDJA DE ANDRADE E SILVA FORTE DOS SANTOS	09
EU POLITICAL DISCUSSION OF CHINA'S "SECURITY THREATS": INSIGHTS FROM EP RESOLUTION 2019/2575 MICHELE CASADEI	14
THE RETURN OF GEOPOLITICS: EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND CHINA RUBEN ELAMIRYAN	19

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CITY DIPLOMACY AS TOOL FOR IMPROVING THE EU-CHINA COOPERATION: THE CHINESE AND EU UNESCO CREATIVE CITIES

NIEDJA DE ANDRADE E SILVA FORTE DOS SANTOS

Introduction

Cities are called the “powerhouse of nations”.¹ Indeed, about 72% of them are wealthier than nations,² and the United Nations (UN) predicts that two-thirds of the world’s population will live in cities by 2050.³ More than 120 global institutions are comprised of cities,⁴ such as the Organization of World Heritage Cities, Eurocities and the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN). In such networks, cities act internationally, a practice known as ‘city diplomacy’ (CD).

City diplomacy has received attention in EU-China cooperation at least since the EU-China Mayors’ Forum in 2012, when the role of CD in strengthening citizens’ participation was discussed as a means to foster the pillars of the Sino-European 2020 cooperation agenda.⁵ However, the EU-China partnership continues to be predominantly driven by commercial and geopolitical goals.⁶

This paper argues that CD is a potential tool to enhance EU-China collaboration through multilayered diplomacy by promoting the involvement of civil society at the grass-roots level. The EU-China interaction at the UCCN is analyzed to illustrate this argument and to make recommendations on how the EU could support cities in this framework.

Public Diplomacy and City Diplomacy

Public diplomacy (PD) is the way countries organize assets like culture and values to communicate with foreign publics and present themselves in an attractive way, and increase their soft power.⁷ Most importantly, PD can lead international stakeholders to support a country when a

crisis arrives, being a source of ‘reputational security’.⁸

In a globalised world, cities are pivotal to PD, because they are better in “building common understanding and relationships”.⁹ Indeed, cities can mitigate difficulties in interstate relations by building a “high level of trust in interpersonal civil society trust networks”.¹⁰ This is due to the fact that “face-to-face relations have more cross-cultural credibility than do government broadcasts”.¹¹ PLUIJM and MELISSEN define CD as “institutions and processes by which cities, or local governments in general, engage in relations with actors on an international political stage with the aim of representing themselves and their interests to one another”.¹²

The integration of CD in the higher level foreign policy is an idea developed under the theoretical perspective of ‘multilayered diplomacy’. This considers local, national and supranational government and structures as actors of a complex diplomatic model in which international and domestic dimensions mix at different levels for governing global issues.¹³ This means that cities perform internationally in line with top level foreign policy, which is a suitable model to support the mission and goals of the external action of the EU.¹⁴

PD measures fall into five categories of actions: ‘listening’, that is understanding foreign expectations for defining foreign policies accordingly; ‘advocacy’, the international defence of arguments; ‘cultural diplomacy’, the approach through a country’s cultural aspects such as art, beliefs and other; ‘exchange diplomacy’, that is hosting or sending

citizens abroad for studies or acculturation; and 'international broadcasting', the use of radio, TV and social media to transmit news abroad at large scale.¹⁵ Cities operate mainly in the fields of cultural and exchange diplomacy.

City Diplomacy between the EU and China

Since the 1990s, European and Chinese cities have joined international organizations gathering cities. However, the pioneer initiative involving cities directly concerted by EU-China cooperation was the 2012 EU-China Mayors Forum' sponsored by the President of the European Commission, Mr. José Barroso, and the Premier of China, Mr. Wen Jiabao. Its goal was to discuss governance of sustainable urban development.¹⁶

Since then, rapprochement of cities under the EU-China cooperation has intensified. In 2013, Sino-European cities signed agreements like the Shenzhen-Amsterdam agreement on low-carbon or the Xi'an-Chartres cultural partnership.¹⁷ Furthermore, the EU-China Urbanisation Flagship got support from Horizon 2020, which provided funding in 2018 for the diagnosis of challenges and obstacles in designing EU-China policy and cooperation. This research pointed to cultural differences, language barriers and cities' lack of human and economic resources as the main issues to be overcome in international cooperation.¹⁸ In 2019, the 14th High Level Forum on urban policy cooperation discussed several themes related to cities, such as the circular economy, urban mobility, and culture. Despite being a channel of dialogue that was already open, hence a potential advantage, the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) was not part of the EU-China urbanization agenda until this point.

China has integrated CD as a tool of national foreign policy. In this regard, the Shanghai Institute for International Studies identified the pattern of Chinese CD: identity definition, coordination with central government, focus on policies and strengthening of diplomatic channels. Chinese cities usually have foreign affairs offices at the city level.¹⁹ At national level, the Chinese People's Association for the Friendship with Foreign Countries coordinates the cities' international activities. On the other hand, due to the emphasis on national sovereignty, Chinese cities do not install representations abroad.²⁰

On the European side, despite being able to install offices in other countries, such as Bradford's office in Qingdao²¹, the international performance of cities is not strongly coordinated by the EU. In fact, the Committee of Regions (CoR), which is supposed to oversee cities and regions,

merely adopts recommendations within a highly decentralized approach.²² For instance, the 78th plenary session in 2008 discussed how CD could be relevant for addressing transnational issues, while advancing EU interests at the local level.²³ In that occasion, the CoR suggested EU members set up a funding instrument to support CD,²⁴ but there were no follow-up actions.

Hence, there is a path opened for Sino-European CD and its full potential remains to be explored. In this regard, international activities involving cities could be carried out under the EU-China cooperation umbrella. Coordination through those activities will bring benefits to the cooperation, for instance through the UCCN, which has the potential to advance the future cooperation agenda.

Culture and creative economy in EU-China relations

The EU-China relationship has been studied with a focus on the economy, trade, investment and traditional diplomacy. In this regard, Fulda states that "Europe and China need to go beyond commercial and geopolitical interests of their respective governments and require the strengthening of civil society exchanges and collaborative people-to-people relations".²⁵ Indeed, citizens complement the Sino-European relationship at its grassroots. In this context, culture is a promising tool to engage people in diplomacy.²⁶

A joint report on culture and creative industries recently commissioned by the European Commission and the Ministry of Culture of China has shed light on aspects of CD which also concerns UCCN goals. The main findings were: [1] cultural relations are shifting to people-to-people diplomacy, [2] cultural entrepreneurship is rising in China, [3] co-creating is a trend in cultural exchange [4] artists are engaging in social purposes, [5] Chinese cities seek knowledge and creativity for sustainable development, [6] creative industries are people-driven [7] the education sector needs creativity and culture and [8] Chinese creative and cultural industries offer market opportunities to the EU.²⁷ China also seeks European collaboration to drive the change from 'made in' to 'created in China', placing the creative economy at the center of cities' improvement.²⁸ The conclusion indicates that transforming policies into action requires mediation,²⁹ which could be supplied by the UCCN. Additionally, culture and the creative economy, which are at the core of the UCCN, were emphasized as relevant means to develop EU-China cooperation focused on peace and security, prosperity, sustainable development, and people-to-people exchanges.

City Diplomacy in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN)

The UCCN was created in 2004 to promote international cooperation on sustainable development. Currently, it comprises 246 cities, including 14 from China and 89 from the EU.³⁰ Acting as a mediator in CD, UNESCO keeps updated information on cities' features, representatives, contact details, and showcases cities' events and activities through its digital platform, which is a kind of permanent informal monitoring.³¹

Beyond merely committing to the UCCN objectives, cities must participate in annual conferences and submit four-year reports according to UNESCO guidelines.³² The mission statement of the UCCN recommends that cities interact, for instance through research on creative cities, which corresponds to advocacy in PD, or by sharing knowledge, which invokes cultural and exchange diplomacy in PD.³³

A focal point in charge of negotiating, developing and coordinating international cooperation represents each city in the UCCN. The four-year reports submitted by cities pass through a formal qualitative evaluation by a peer-review system. The assessment focuses on contributions to the UCCN management, achievements in sustainable development, inter-city cooperation and the action plan for the next period. To date, UNESCO has recognized the efforts of all cities that have submitted reports. Annually, UNESCO chooses the best initiatives which are presented in the UCCN conference. This is a token of success.

China and the EU in the UCCN

There are 11 EU and Chinese cities which have been members of the UCCN for at least five-years that had submitted monitoring reports by 2017 which are analyzed in this paper. That is the case for four Chinese cities: Shanghai, Chengdu, Hangzhou, Beijing, and seven EU cities: Dublin (Ireland), Enghien-les-Bains (France), Fabriano (Italy), Graz, (Austria) Krakow (Poland), Östersund (Sweden) and Saint-Étienne (France).³⁴

The actions taken by those cities were separated into national level or city diplomacy. Then, city diplomacy actions were categorized according to the PD framework: [1] listening, [2] advocacy, [3] cultural diplomacy, [4] exchange

diplomacy and [5] international broadcasting. Then they were classified into areas of the EU-China strategic agenda: [1] peace and security, [2] prosperity, [3] sustainable development, and [4] people-to-people exchanges.

The analysis identified 87 actions from Chinese cities. Among them, 42 were city diplomacy measures, 31 of them (74 percent) advanced with EU partners. The actions were categorized as follows: 17 for exchange diplomacy, 13 for cultural diplomacy and one for advocacy. From the point of view of areas of EU-China agenda, they were: [1] 10 for people-to-people exchanges, like the 'UNESCO Creative Cities Beijing Summit' promoted by Beijing, involving 19 Europeans and about 100 Chinese citizens and the professional exchange promoted by Hangzhou for a Chinese citizen in Fabriano, [2] 15 for

prosperity, such as the Fashion Week in Shanghai, involving at least 100 designers from the EU, and [3] six for sustainable development, for instance, the food show promoted by Chengdu in Helsinki,

Rovaniemi and Copenhagen, involving around 100 people.

On the other hand, EU cities promoted 195 actions, of which 77 were in the field of city diplomacy. Among them, 21 actions (27 percent) were partnered with Chinese cities. They were classified as: 17 for exchange diplomacy and four for cultural diplomacy. In the perspective of areas of the EU-China agenda, there were: [1] 14 for people-to-people exchange, such as the publication of the Crafts and Folk Art book by Fabriano, involving around 20 people from China, [2] three actions for prosperity, like the 'COD100 Program' of Graz, and [3] four actions for sustainable development, such as the Biennale Internationale Design promoted by Saint Étienne, involving around 20 people from China.

Among the main findings, both EU and Chinese cities adopted actions mainly related to cultural and people-to-people diplomacy.

The single action on advocacy was the branding project of 'Beijing Design 2017'. Additionally, Chinese cities were more active in partnering with EU cities. All Chinese cities carried out at least one project with EU counterparts. In fact, 74 percent of all Chinese actions were partnered with EU cities. On the other hand, two of the European cities did not share any projects with Chinese cities. Indeed, only

BOTH EU AND CHINESE CITIES ADOPTED ACTIONS MAINLY RELATED TO CULTURAL AND PEOPLE- TO-PEOPLE DIPLOMACY.

27 percent of the total actions developed by EU cities had Chinese cities as counterparts.

The Chinese government appears to focus on creative cities. As an illustration, national political authorities participated in the Creativity 2030 Summit (Beijing), in the 2014 Annual Conference (Chengdu) and supported funding for creative industries (Shanghai). In regard to EU cities, involvement of national governments or EU authorities was not reported.

Remarkably enough, exchange diplomacy was widely performed by both China and the EU, bringing practical benefits for the economies by opening doors for entrepreneurial cooperation, mainly among SMEs. Concretely, UNESCO mediates the cities' approach while cities' focal points mediate actions. This minimizes the dispersion of power inherent in people-to-people direct interaction, which usually makes central governments fearful.³⁵ Examples of exchange diplomacy are the cooperation between Beijing and Enghien-les-Bains for promoting enterprises and the participation of young designers from Graz in the Shenzhen Design Week, as well as the exchange between Saint-Etienne and Shanghai on design.

Local level actions may involve real needs of citizens and concrete implementation of sustainable development. Indeed, cities offer a wide scenery of possibilities meeting the EU-China cooperation goals. Effective and accountable actions at city level can thus foster long-term relationships, back dropping Sino-European cooperation at international level.

Conclusion

Cities are relevant actors in the globalized world. In this context, the UCCN has created opportunities for international cooperation among cities, ultimately giving the floor to citizens. The EU-China cooperation has recognized the role of CD and citizens, but has remained focused on commercial and geopolitical goals.

Cities are a powerful tool to involve people in an organized way, as well as to build long-term relationships due to the laypeople's high cross-cultural credibility. In this regard, the UCCN is a channel for overcoming barriers by approaching cities with very well established mechanisms. Moreover, relevant aspects of the Sino-European cooperation are at the core of the UCCN, such as cultural entrepreneurship and sustainable development guided by creativity.

Therefore, China and the EU must pay strategic attention to the UCCN by monitoring the international performance of cities, besides associating those efforts to national foreign policies. Integration of local, national and supranational governments in a multilayered diplomacy approach may strengthen foreign policy. China has already moved into this direction, but the EU still has room to leverage it, for instance, by including a focus on the UCCN at the CoR, during high level forums on urban policy and in its external action. 🌐

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