Sino-U.S. Sister City Relations: Subnational Networks and Paradiplomacy

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Abstract

This piece examines the humanitarian and global development impacts of international sister city relationships in a bilateral, Sino-U.S. context. These impacts include conflict prevention and resolution, human rights protection, capacity building and climate action. While trade is at the heart of cities' engagement in global affairs, globalization beckons a more comprehensive role for cities. At a time when popular nationalistic sentiment can easily shape hostile foreign policies, sister city relations play a notable role in maintaining and promoting peace. Economic interdependence and a mutual desire to promote understanding drive a supply-and-demand schema of personnel, idea and capital exchanges, which we argue is explicable by complex interdependence theory. Interviews with Chinese and American representatives from a total of 37 Sino-U.S. sister city and state pairs are used to inform the empirical and theoretical analysis.

Keywords

City Diplomacy, China-U.S., Complex Interdependence, Citizen Peacebuilding

Introduction

The people-to-people program conceived by President Eisenhower, which would later birth Sister Cities International, introduced private citizens into the peacebuilding process, such that greater understanding of foreign counterparts might reduce the probability of conflict in the long-run (Axelrod, 2006). Although the Eisenhower administration's China policy in the mid-1950s involved stubborn anti-Communist sentiment and support of Chiang Kai-shek's nationalists (Dulles, 1972), the crisis nonetheless left Eisenhower with the impression that there was a need for a channel of direct contact with the Chinese communists. Hence was Eisenhower's approval of Sino-U.S. bilateral talks at the ambassado-

rial level in Warsaw beginning in 1955 (Shambaugh, 1994). Through the 1970s, the normalization of U.S.-China relations and China's Open Door Policy laid the groundwork for bilateral ties at the subnational level (Bergsten et al., 2008; Harding, 1992).

Sino-U.S. sister city relationships can be understood as paradiplomatic activity, or subnational governments carrying out diplomatic functions parallel to that of their respective nation-states (LeCours, 2002; Tavares, 2016). Such activities find city governments asserting new authority in world affairs issues, even if not aligned with that of their respective nation-states (Acuto, 2016), and can often indirectly help define inter-state relationships, fostering a certain awareness of a common destiny (Friend, 1992).While Chinese cities are afforded a great deal of leeway in the conduct of international commercial cooperation efforts, their political context differs from U.S. counterparts. That is, while democracies like the U.S. allow locales significant political autonomy (Bursens and Deforche, 2010), city diplomacy in China is understood as an extension of the nation-state's interests and power (Xiong and Wang, 2013; Zhao and Chen, 2013).

One broader theoretical approach to explaining global inter-city linkages is found in sociology. Smith and Timberlake (1995) argue that global inter-city linkages, including trade flows and the cultural exchanges of people-to-people relations, undergirds and reproduces the uneven power structures of world-system. That is, the developed, politically strong regions (including the U.S.) maintaining greater profitability in production processes than—and often at the expense of—developing regions (Wallerstein, 1974, 2007). While a world-systems approach offers merit for the planetary scale of inter-city linkages, the specific bilateral context of Sino-U.S. sister city relationships may more clearly be viewed through the prism of complex interdependence theory. This perspective emphasizes a dense web of economic, technological, and other ties between nations in an era of accelerated globalization, in which a plethora of non-state actors and processes bind societies together in complex and interdependent ways (Shambaugh, 2005). Within this schema, a decline of military force as a foreign policy tool coincides with increased economic cooperation, which in turn should yield more interstate cooperation (Keohane and Nye, 1997, 2001). U.S. and Chinese counterparts across sectors at the subnational level—as at the national-level—share an economic interdependence and a mutual desire to promote peace through understanding, which produce the supply-and-demand schema of relationships observed in this study.

Informing the below analysis is telephone and email interviews from 2009-2010 of representatives from a total of 37 sister city and state pairs—32 Sino-U.S. sister city pairs, 3 Sino-U.S. sister state pairs, and 2 U.S.-Taiwan sister city relationships. Interviews on the American side normally involved non-profit 501(c)(3) sister city associations contracted to by their respective city government to carry

out the bilateral relationship. Interviews on the Chinese side involved officials of the Chinese Municipal Foreign Affairs Offices of the corresponding Chinese sister cities. The representatives of the sister city relationships in China and the U.S. were chosen based on the criteria of being involved the longest in the relationship, having the closest involvement, and occupying highest possible position in the respective organization or office. Respondents were questioned regarding their views on and activities related to bilateral trust building, local politics of sister cities during times of national-level turmoil, capacity building in public administration and other development areas and environmental protection-related cooperation. Every question asked of American representatives were also asked of Chinese representatives and vice-versa as a means of weeding out discrepancies in accounts of personnel exchanges and other sister city-related activities, of which none were ultimately found.

Conflict Prevention and Resolution

The foreign policy of both the U.S. and China are influenced by public opinion, and are subject to the possibility of popular nationalist sentiment pressuring leadership into a hostile foreign policy direction (Gries, 2005). Hence conflict prevention requires a gradual process of attitudinal change, as conflict itself is not merely an interstate phenomenon, but also an intersocietal one (Kelman, 2004). Former Sister Cities International president Patrick Madden alluded to this in an interview with the Beijing Review, suggesting that the mutual learning that occurs between U.S. and Chinese counterparts via sister city exchanges has a positive impact on bilateral public opinion, spreading first locally, and eventually up to the national-level (SCI, 2005). There is no guarantee that a peace dividend may be achieved via the improved public opinion fostered by subnational exchange, but societal desire for peace and fear of conflict has long motivated such efforts.

American propaganda about the Soviet Union, principally spread at the behest of the U.S. federal government, cultivated the illusion in countless Americans that the Soviet people could be thought of in the same cold, machine-like and otherwise evil manner as the Soviet government itself. Countering this phenomenon, U.S.-Soviet people-to-people exchanges were carried out by sister city and other organizations, having the effect of freeing American citizens from this illusion, showing them instead that Soviet society was just as ordinary and human as they were (Schatz, 1986). Mutual suspicions and strategic distrust between the U.S. and China today often translates itself into a Chinese foreign policy position seeking to contain and shape the U.S. so that it becomes a responsible power, and vice versa (Leonard, 2006).[1] These policy sentiments are a perennial source of increasing bilateral aggression at the national-level, and as such, Sino-U.S. sister city

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[1] Leonard, Mark, 2008. What does China Think? (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2008), 116.

exchanges frequently aim for building greater bilateral trust from the grassroots, in much the same way as U.S.-Soviet exchanges. Most interviews with respondents on both sides indicated that this trust building may eventually help avert national-level aggression stemming from mistrust, necessitating further inquiry on the issue of trust and bilateral policy outcomes.

Most respondents on both sides with experience in multiple levels of government—at and above municipal—indicated that personal trust can be more easily gained between two parties at the inter-city level as opposed to higher levels. There are several factors at play in this trust dynamic that may help to distinguish from the personal trust cultivated at the municipal level from that cultivated at higher levels of government. For instance, respondents argued that whereas the high-stakes of the national-level relations allows the idea of U.S.-China inter-societal competition to negatively influence cooperation, the perceived low-stakes of negotiations and cooperation at the city-level is free from this influence.[2][3]

Observing U.S.-China sister city relationships where they intersect with the perennial conflict flashpoints in U.S.-China relations is where peacebuilding value offered by sister cities may most clearly be seen. The issues of territorial sovereignty surrounding Tibet and Taiwan strike at the heart of the Chinese Communist Party's regime legitimacy, and hence foreign diplomatic contact with leaders in Tibet and Taiwan tends to stir incendiary sentiment at the national level of politics in China (Sutter, 2018)[4]. Yet respondents in Boulder, Colorado argue that the range of technical, educational and other exchanges they've carried out over time with their sister city of Lhasa, Tibet have proceeded with none of the political stir over sovereignty; the type that is commonly seen at the national level.[5] Despite the Chinese central government's restrictions on Taiwan's diplomatic recognition abroad, both Portland, Oregon and Columbus, Ohio simultaneously maintain sister city relationships with both mainland Chinese cities and Taiwanese cities. Respondents in both cities note that even after decades of facilitating the full gamut of exchanges with both Chinese and Taiwanese sister cities, none of the cross-strait territorial sovereignty issues or related tensions have been raised in any perceptible way, by any participating or external party.[6]

Detachment of subnational from national-level bilateral politics can also be seen

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[2] Interview with representative of Center for International Studies, University of Missouri St. Louis, November 13, 2009.

[3] Interview with representative of Houston-Shenzhen Sister City Association, November 11, 2009.

[4] Robert Sutter, 2018, US-China Relations: Perilous Past, Uncertain Future, Robert Sutter, 3rd edition.

[5] Interview with representative of Boulder-Lhasa Sister City Project, telephone interview, October 20, 2009.

[6] Interview with representative of Columbus Sister Cities International, May 12, 2010; and Tom Crowder, President of the Portland-Kaohsiung Sister City Association, December 2009.

in the example of Birmingham, Alabama and its sister city of Anshan, Liaoning. Birmingham city government representatives were in the midst of a major exchange with Anshan in 2001 when the U.S. EP-3 spy plane collided with Chinese military aircraft near Hainan and the American crewmembers were subsequently held in detention by the Chinese authorities. While a well-reported and salient international crisis unfolded at the national level, Birmingham's itinerary of varied exchange projects with Anshan proceeded without delays or other obstacles.[7]

The peacebuilding strength of these relationships lies in both their detachment from otherwise incendiary national politics and their continuity of communication. There is no question that the U.S. and Chinese national governments and their military branches continue to have the power to make decisions which can instantly plummet both states into war. No amount of inter-city relations and subnational connectivity has (or can) change or erode this institutional fact. Yet in conditions where national institutions and interlocutors may be hamstrung by the sensitivity of national politics—territorial sovereignty or otherwise—subnational actors can be relied upon to continue communications. While these communications may not directly inform the short-term peace-and-war decision making of national policymakers, they do inform the long-term public opinion which informs both U.S. and Chinese national policymakers' calculus in carrying out foreign relations.

Human Rights Protection

The conceptual boundary between nation-states serving as a guardian versus cities serving as commercially-concerned entities (Jacobs, 1984; 1992) blurs when normative matters, such as human rights concerns, are combined with increasingly globalized and activist cities. Peter Spiro (1997),[8] traditionally an opponent of subnational government involvement in foreign affairs domains claimed by the nation-state, noted how the rise of subnational governments in international affairs complicated yet perhaps begged some room in how we think of international human rights norms:

> *"Given the rise of subnational governments on the world stage, Human rights has come increasingly to implicate matters within the competence of subnational authorities at the same time as national governments are losing an important measure of control over their constituent units. In the face of these developments, international process should afford some place to subnational governments as both receivers and makers of human rights law" (Spiro, 1997-1998: 595-596).*

Globalized cities are as embedded and actant within global commerce as they

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[7] Interview with representative of the city of Birmingham, Alabama, May 15, 2009.
[8] Spiro, Peter J., 1997-1998. The States and International Human Rights. 66 Fordham L. Rev. 567.

are international normative frameworks (Alger, 1990; Knight, 1989; Meyer et al., 1997), but what happens when commercial interests clash with normative frameworks? The Tiananmen Square crackdown of June 1989 provides an instructive case for U.S.-China sister city relationships. The range of reactions to the crackdown saw a great deal of variation across U.S. cities with sister counterparts in China. Boulder, Colorado sent a letter of concern to Lhasa, Tibet, city halls of several U.S. cities maintaining Chinese sister cities received "nasty" phone calls from angry residents (Swaim and Trubo, 1989), and twelve of the then-existing forty U.S.-China sister city relationships suspended their relationships (Shuman, 1989). The harshest known response was from New York City—sister city of Beijing—in which mayor Ed Koch very vocally and publicly suspended all sister city activities with Beijing (Lampton, 2001), although the exchanges were not suspended indefinitely. New York's response was unsurprising given that its sister city of Beijing was the site of the actual crackdown. Protest also articulated itself in different, more symbolic ways. For instance, San Francisco Chinese community leaders sought and obtained Board of Supervisors approval for a bronze statue replica of the Goddess of Democracy to be put on public display in San Francisco as a commemoration of the Tiananmen crackdown. Not long after, the Chinese Consulate intervened and protested (Der and Rose, 1989).

These, however, were the U.S. city responses already recorded in extant literature. For this study, all American cities within the sample group that established sister cities in China before 1989 that continue to present day were asked about the effect of the crackdown. The majority of U.S. city respondents indicated that exchanges continued business-as-usual without any disturbance, with some cities experiencing a slight drop in the number of volunteers for a few years following the incident. That is, although the Tiananmen Square crackdown was a severe human rights violation, many cities understood that continuing sister city relations with Chinese cities in no way enabled or otherwise contributed to human rights abuses occurring in China.

The trauma of the Tiananmen crackdown ultimately had only a temporary tangible effect, with not a year passing before the forces of economic interdependence between the U.S. and China began actively restoring normal relations. Before President Bush's rapprochement efforts—and long before President Clinton's 1994 decoupling of human rights concerns from U.S. trade policy toward China—was rapprochement at the subnational level. The first visit of any Chinese government official at any level to the U.S. since the Tiananmen crackdown was by then-Shanghai mayor Zhu Rongji in early 1990, who later became Premier. Zhu traveled to Shanghai's U.S. sister city of San Francisco, and met with local officials there and subsequently in other U.S. cities to discuss how to recover and continue normal subnational relations in the post-Tiananmen period (Chandler,

1990; Trubo, 1990). While not all U.S. cities protested and acted upon grievances of China's human rights abuses, those that did were no doubt genuine in their convictions. Understandable, given the severity and scale of the crackdown. Aside from the rationale that inter-city relations were in fact separate from human rights abuses, one wonders, why did we not witness mass permanent suspensions of U.S.-China sister city relationships? A particularly relevant question given that part of the ethos of sister city relationships is the promotion of peace and prosperity. We posit that this can be explained not only because of the powerful draw and benefits of economic interdependence, but also as a matter of diplomatic protocol and function. Hundreds of sister city relationships were forged in the 1980s between U.S. and Central American communities specifically as a response to the Reagan administration's human rights abuses and civil wars in that region (Clarenbach, 1989; Gotthelf, 1987). Sister city ties served to channel financial and material aid as well as moral support for the embattled Central American communities, their function and purpose being to redress human rights abuses. U.S.-China sister city relationships, on the other hand, were forged within an entirely different context—achieving mutual local economic gain through cross-sectoral exchange and contributing to collective peace dividend through inter-societal understanding. The Tiananmen Square crackdown introduced a systemic shock to these ties, but it altered neither the original function and purpose of the ties nor the proven benefits from them. Furthermore, we draw from Geoffrey Wiseman's arguments[9] to suggest that having an engagement approach, as opposed to isolation, when dealing with adversarial states, will have long-term peace-building benefits. Successful conflict prevention and resolution often come through continued and two-way communication, as this approach allows for the parties to have information, leverage, and to improve conditions for cooperation and normalization of relations over time.

Capacity Building

It is well understood that U.S.-China economic interdependence drives sustained trade, which in turn raises the costs and stakes of potential conflict, and thus can decrease probability of conflict (Graham, 2003; Leon, 2017). The majority of sister city respondents reported engaging in at least one exchange aimed at trade and or investment attraction, and maintained such goals as a permanent feature of the relationship. Also falling under the purview of complex interdependence in U.S.-China sister city relations is the supply and demand for advanced management knowledge. The developed versus developing country context takes on a special character in this respect, as partnerships between cities of developed and developing states often find the former disproportionately acting as the source and the

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[9] Wiseman, Geoffrey, ed. Isolate or engage: Adversarial states, US foreign policy, and public diplomacy. Stanford University Press, 2015, 2-4.

latter as the recipient of training and professional learning (Bontenbal, 2009; Ramasamy and Cremer, 2007). This is reflective of the supply and demand structure of management exchanges covered in this study. Interviews with representatives of Sino-U.S. sister city representatives on both sides revealed that roughly half of the cities included in this study (15 out of 32) have engaged in governance best practices training in which Chinese government delegates come to the U.S. for training in a variety of sectors, such as social services, public administration, emergency services and waste management. A non-exhaustive précis of these exchanges between U.S. and Chinese sister cities are as follows: Gilbert, Arizona's exchange of wastewater treatment management practices and related technology with Leshan, Sichuan;[10] Charlotte, North Carolina's training in emergency response services for Baoding, Hebei;[11] and Rockford, Illinois' often receives provision of training in law enforcement best practices to counterparts in Changzhou, Jiangsu.[12] Beyond sister city relationships, the demand among Chinese local governments for management knowledge is also being supplied by the International City/County Management Association's China operations in Beijing, established in 2009.[13]

Lastly, the geography of Chinese cities' establishment of sister city relationships with the U.S. over time reflects the overall coastal-to-inland development pattern seen during the reform era. That is, coastal provinces and cities were the first to internationalize and house a disproportionate share of the population, leaving the central and western regions of China to play catch-up afterwards (Chen, 2005; Lin and Robinson, 1994). This has created a vacuum of demand for international partnerships in central and particularly western regions as they internationalize. Interviews with Chinese officials indicate that the PRC government is more likely to expedite U.S. partnerships with smaller, western region Chinese cities over those of eastern cities.[14] Respondents also indicated that sister city activities helping to develop rural areas, particularly in western provinces, have accelerated over the course of the 2000s.[15] The New Zealand-China Friendship Society uses existing Sino-New Zealand sister city relationships in Guangxi and Gansu provinces to facilitate poverty alleviation and financial management programs, as well as a scholarship program to help residents of poor rural areas to obtain nursing education and training overseas.[16]

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[10] Interview with representative of Leshan Municipal Foreign Affairs Office, July 1, 2009.
[11] Interview with representative of Charlotte International Cabinet, May 28, 2009.
[12] Interview with representative of Changzhou Municipal Foreign Affairs Office, December 2, 2009.
[13] Interview with representative of the city of Annapolis, Maryland, February 2010.
[14] Interview with representative of Changzhou Municipal Foreign Affairs Office, April 21, 2010 and November, 1 2010; and interview with representative of Guangzhou Municipal Foreign Affairs Office and Lanzhou Municipal Foreign Affairs Office, January, 2010.
[15] A special thanks to Yixin Chen of University of North Carolina Wilmington, scholar of rural China, for his advising on this subject.
[16] Interview with representative of New Zealand-China Friendship Society, May 11, 2010; See the

Climate Action

Madame Li Xiaolin herself, the head of CPAFFC, noted that increasing urbaniza-tion across China and particularly in western provinces will drive the formation of new sister city relationships with the U.S. and elsewhere, pursuant to hopes that urbanization-related city planning knowledge can be obtained (Zhang, 2014). Beyond the population-centric problems of urbanization, the shared problem of climate change begs equal participation from international actors, including U.S. and Chinese cities. That is, the development and deployment of the technologi-cal, managerial and scientific expertise necessary to achieve emissions reduction has become an increasingly cooperation-intensive activity. Hence U.S.-China interdependence in climate action articulates itself across multiple levels, from agreements between California and Chinese National Development and Reform Commission down to individual sister city exchanges. Examples of such climate governance cooperation found in this study are not restricted to larger, wealthier city pairs—as in the case of the environmental collaboration agreement between the Port of Los Angeles and the Port of Guangzhou, which aimed at addressing air quality issues (Port of LA, 2005)—but also involved western region Chinese counterparts. Notably, Boulder, Colorado's development of a Climate Action Plan with Lhasa, Tibet aimed at reducing vehicular emissions;[17] and Albuquerque, New Mexico's trade in a range of environmental technologies with its Chinese sister city of Lanzhou, Gansu, as well as several inter-university research exchanges on subject areas including solar energy and wind power technology.[18]

Conclusion

The forces described by complex interdependence theory have and continue to articulate themselves in the supply-and-demand flows of personnel, ideas, wealth and so forth at the subnational-level between the U.S. and China. These forces offer continuity of intersocietal learning and other dividends that are needed to counterbalance the present national-level turmoil—the needless trade war and nationalist Presidential rhetoric that is as demonizing of China as it is coun-terfactual. The demonstrated resilience during and detachment from incendiary national politics these subnational ties offer may well contribute a more informed American public opinion of China and vice versa over the near- and long-term. The peacebuilding strength of these relationships lies in both their independence from otherwise incendiary national politics and their continuity of communi-cation. It is through gradual but continuance people-to-people exchanges that bilateral public opinion improves to create the necessary context for cooperation, conflict resolution, and long-term peace, and people-to-people exchanges are best

NZCFS website's pages for detailed information on the Guangxi, Gansu and healthcare projects at http://www.nzchinasociety.org.nz/.

[17] Interview with representative of Boulder-Lhasa Sister City Project, October 20, 2009.

[18] Interview with representative of Lanzhou Municipal Foreign Affairs Office, December 8, 2009.

administered at the city level. Even if economic affairs overseen and regulated by both national governments falls further into chaos, the reliable continuity of relations at the local level has in the past offered a unique diplomatic channel for re-normalizing relations, and may once again. This study provides surface-level anecdotal evidence for the stated utility of these relationships, but needed is more targeted inquiry better testing for a relationship between these subnational linkages and national policy outcomes over the long term. Further research on Sino-U.S. or broader international sister city relationships may focus on broader political-economic systems in which such linkages are embedded, including the world-system.

Bio

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