

## WSPÓŁCZESNE CHINY

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### **THE SISTER CITY FRAMEWORKS AND CHINA'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AT THE TIME OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC<sup>4</sup>**

#### **Introduction**

Next to coping with the COVID-19 pandemic the Chinese government needs to mitigate the country's negative image, promote China's discourse, and maintain access to the global technological and financial resources, especially those in the West. In this context, the central government needs to use 'subnational actors' to rebuild trust and promote their solutions to manage the pandemic crisis. The paper is based on previous studies of the role of local governments in China's foreign policy which present the importance of local interests in shaping

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national policies.<sup>5</sup> Bearing this in mind the paper discusses the role of local governments as a public diplomacy tool in the context of the pandemic. By utilizing their networks, lower-level authorities have been trying to persuade their respective twinned partners to “tell China’s story well”, encouraging them to reproduce official narratives presented by the Chinese side. Next to discussing the general significance of the Health Silk Road and the Digital Silk Road as part of public diplomacy, the paper focuses on the provincial and municipal level, and discusses two case studies of Sichuan province with its capital Chengdu, and of Guangdong province with its capital Guangzhou. Both were selected because of their geographical location: Sichuan and Chengdu are part of the inland section of the Belt and Road Initiative, while Guangdong and Guangzhou, as coastal areas, are part of the maritime dimensions of the BRI. Using these two cases the authors test the hypothesis that institutionalized relations through sister city agreements play a dominant role in China’s provincial public diplomacy within the Health and Digital Silk Roads frameworks. To verify the above-stated hypothesis, the authors address the following questions: how to conceptualize China’s public diplomacy with special regard to the role of the local governments based on the Health Silk Road and Digital Silk Road during the pandemic? Moreover, how do the local governments differ in leveraging China’s public diplomacy through “mask diplomacy”, as illustrated by the two selected case studies of Sichuan and Guangdong? Going further, by taking a quantitative approach, the paper identifies major directions of interaction by the two local governments of Sichuan and Guangdong provinces: the extent of twinned partners medical assistance and technological cooperation, the geographical areas of activities in developing and developed countries, the major themes of meetings, and finally, whether the character of these activities is bilateral or multilateral. The authors argue that parallel to using the Health and Digital Silk Roads, local governments have been promoting official Chinese Covid-19 pandemic narratives and persuading their partners to assist in advancing a positive global image of China.

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<sup>5</sup> Li Mingjiang, “Central Local Interaction in Foreign Affairs”, in: *Assessing the Balance of Power in Central-Local Relations in China*, J. Donaldson (ed.), Routledge, New York, London 2016; Dominik Mierzejewski, *China’s Provinces and the Belt and Road Initiative*, Routledge, New York, London 2021; Chen Zhimin, *Ciguo zhengfu yu waijiao shi* [Subnational governments and foreign affairs], Chancheng Chubanshe, Beijing 2021; Tim Summers, *China’s Regions in an Era of Globalization*, Routledge, New York, London 2018.

## Public diplomacy and local governments during COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, China's central government has been extremely sensitive to the negative foreign perceptions of the country's domestic politics. Central authorities have tried to abolish these perceptions by using the local governments and international activities in an attempt to counter the country's negative image in the eyes of the international community.

Provincial and local authorities, by being less overtly ideological, try to positively influence perceptions abroad. The central government has been faced with the dilemma of managing the pandemic crisis and persuading the worldwide public opinion that the virus had not been "produced" in China. From the perspective of a rising power such as China has been, a positive image which generates trust and cooperation is of particular importance. It helps to build alliances, drive the economy and thereby contributes to national interests.<sup>6</sup> As mentioned by Jervis (1970), the way a country is perceived in the world essentially shapes the interaction between nation-states on the global stage.<sup>7</sup> This process, known as "public diplomacy", is mainly navigated by the country's engagement with the general public from overseas through communication, assisted by certain narratives and images designed to promote its national interests. Public diplomacy is defined as "direct communication with foreign peoples, to affect their thinking and, ultimately, that of their governments".<sup>8</sup> In traditional discussions, public diplomacy is understood as the process by which direct relations with people in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented. Moreover, public diplomacy would be the way governments, private entities and groups act upon public opinion, to directly influence foreign policy decisions of another government. Leonard suggested several variables potentially useful for a comparative analysis.<sup>9</sup> He identified three dimensions of public diplomacy: news management, strategic communication, and relationship building; three spheres: political/military, economic, and social/cultural; two types of public diplomacy: cooperation and competition; and five public diplomacy

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<sup>6</sup> Falk Hartig, *How China Understands Public Diplomacy: The Importance of National Image for National Interests*, "International Studies Review" 2016, no. 18, p. 655.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1970.

<sup>8</sup> Gifford D. Malone, *Managing the Public Diplomacy*, "The Washington Quarterly" 1985, vol. 8, no. 3, p. 199.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Leonard, *Diplomacy by Other Means?*, "Foreign Policy", no. 132, pp. 48–56.

instruments: NGO diplomacy, diaspora diplomacy, political party diplomacy, brand diplomacy, and business diplomacy.<sup>10</sup>

A new concept of public diplomacy was introduced at the beginning of this century in the research community. Rather than characterized by persuasion, presented by a one-way flow of information during which certain actors control the message to win over international audiences, according to Rhiannon Vickers “NPD can be characterized as a blurring of traditional distinctions between international and domestic information activities, between public and traditional diplomacy, and between cultural diplomacy, marketing and news management”.<sup>11</sup> In China’s case, public diplomacy serves the country’s foreign policy objectives and its domestic development by improving China’s image in the world. In the eyes of Ingrid d’Hooghe, the Chinese public diplomacy has four sub-goals: to present the country as a stable and reliable economic partner, to be seen as a responsible member of the international community, to promote international understanding of China’s political system and to shape the country’s own understanding and identity in the global affairs.<sup>12</sup>

Turning to the Chinese narratives, the concept of public diplomacy was introduced in 1990 by Zhou Qipeng from the Institute of Diplomacy, developed subsequently by Lu Yi in his book “Public Diplomacy” (*gongzhong waijiao*), where he discussed two reasons for public diplomacy: firstly, external publicity (should be translated as external propaganda), and developing international cultural relations.<sup>13</sup> With the growth of the Chinese international agenda, Beijing has been instructing provinces and cities to conduct a national foreign policy with a special focus on public diplomacy. This point was articulated by Zhao Kejin when he said that, to avoid controversial issues, the government should use, *e.g.*, private companies as an image transmitter of China.<sup>14</sup> For his part, Chen Haosu believes that perceived as unaffiliated to the central government, the local governments are more effective, especially when it comes to public diplomacy or soft power.<sup>15</sup> Chen Futao has argued that local governments promote people-to-people relations and play a unique

<sup>10</sup> Eytan Gilboa, *Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy*, “The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science” 2008, vol. 616, pp. 55–77.

<sup>11</sup> Rhiannon Vickers, *The New Public Diplomacy: Britain and Canada Compared*, “The British Journal of Politics and International Relations” 2004, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 182–194.

<sup>12</sup> Ingrid d’Hooghe, *China Public Diplomacy*, Brill Nijhoff, Leiden, Boston 2015, p. 99–101.

<sup>13</sup> Zhao Kejin, *Gonggong waijiao lilun yu shixian* [Public diplomacy: theory and practice], Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, Shanghai 2007, pp. 34–35.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 209.

<sup>15</sup> Chen Haosu zai Zhongguo Guoji Youhao Chengshi Dahui kaimoshishang de jianghua [Chen Haosu’s speech at the opening ceremony of the China International Friendship City Conference]: <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/57507/8311402.html> [accessed 12.08.2021].

role of middle person/intermediary (*zhongjie xingweizhe*) or central policy agents (*daili ren*) and diplomatic partners (*hezuo huoban*) in China's foreign policy. Therefore, Beijing treats local governments as "trust providers" and utilizes their soft power to improve the international image of the PRC.<sup>16</sup>

This approach is also seen in the light of people's diplomacy (*minjian waijiao*), which is understood as being part of China's overall foreign policy. The major task here is to prepare a friendly ground for relations with the central government by shaping public opinion preferences.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as revealed in interviews conducted with local officials (2016-2019) in Guangdong, Sichuan, Chongqing, Yunnan, and Heilongjiang, the key tasks in local government international activities were to attract foreign capital and investments, search for export markets and be part of public diplomacy, and work internationally to manage the economic cooperation and "tell China's story well", thus enhancing the country's "international discourse power".<sup>18</sup>

In theory, public diplomacy should be perceived as a two-way institution. On the one hand, the practice of city diplomacy impacts the country's foreign strategic decision-making. When signing a cross-border cooperation agreement and joining a global or regional multilateral cooperation framework, the central government needs to consider local interests. In principle, international interests of a city and the national interests should be placed within "the unity of diversity" framework. Thus, although not seen as having a direct effect, the influence of local diplomacy on national foreign policy decisions should be understood as an indirect participation in the decision-making process. On the other hand, urban diplomacy can provide a multilayered path for implementing the national strategy. By establishing friendly and cooperative relations with cities and regions in other countries, cities can promote the development of bilateral relations, or increase the possibility of reaching international agreements and competing with other "global cities".<sup>19</sup>

The concept of subnational diplomacy has also drawn the attention of central leaders. In May 2014, President Xi Jinping used the term, "city diplomacy" (*chengshi waijiao*) for the first time. In his speech at the 60th anniversary of the China

<sup>16</sup> Wu Jianmin, *Difang zhengfu waijiao queke* [Shortage of diplomatic skills of local governments]: <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2012-04-16/170824280412.shtml> [accessed 22.07.2021].

<sup>17</sup> Lin Songtian, *Zhuoli jianshe 'si you' dajian minjian gonggong waijiao de 'caihong qiao'* [Efforts to build the "Four Haves" and build the "Rainbow Bridge" of non-governmental public diplomacy]: <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0512/c1001-31706167.html> [accessed 14.09.2021].

<sup>18</sup> Dominik Mierzejewski, *China's Provinces and the Belt and Road Initiative*, Routledge, New York, London 2021, p. XX.

<sup>19</sup> Tang Wei, *Yi dai yi lu yu chengshi waijiao* [The Belt and Road Initiative and Urban Diplomacy], "Guoji guanxi yanjiu" 2014, no. 4, p. 63.

Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries he encouraged the municipal governments by saying “we must vigorously carry out China’s international sister city work, promote exchanges between Chinese and foreign local governments, and promote resource sharing, complementary advantages and win-win cooperation”.<sup>20</sup> Apart from these general remarks, the Chinese president was more specific in addressing the major obligation of public diplomacy: through participating in the activities of international non-governmental organizations the Chinese local governments should spread the voice of China, tell the story of China, and show the world the real China.<sup>21</sup>

In 2015, in the document “Vision and Actions for Promoting the Joint Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road”, the central government urged “the important cities” to strengthen official friendly relations with foreign partners, by focusing on people-to-people and cultural exchanges, highlighting practical cooperation, and forming more illustrative examples of cooperation.<sup>22</sup> As part of China’s project of the Belt and Road Initiative, urban areas have been regarded as advanced places which act as connection points (*lian-jie dian*) in China’s international politics. Furthermore, in October 2015, the 13th Five-Years Plan highlighted the importance of international communication capabilities, innovations in foreign communication, strengthening cultural exchanges and promoting Chinese culture on a global scale.<sup>23</sup> The process of the internationalization has been strengthening international competitiveness of cities, their sustainable development, and global recognition.

This, however, does not mean that a city acts as an independent actor. City diplomacy serves the country’s overall diplomacy, safeguards its core national interests, enhances soft power, and promotes the core values of Chinese socialism.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, Chu Bin and Yang Jianying consider the Belt and Road

<sup>20</sup> Xi Jinping, *Xi Jinping zai Zhongguo Guoji Youhao Dahui ji Zhongguo Renmin Duiwai Youhao Xiehui chengli 60 zhounian jinian huodongshang de jianghua* [Speech by Xi Jinping at the China International Friendship Conference and the 60th Anniversary of the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries]: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0516/c64094-25024391.html> [accessed 13.09.2021].

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> *Vision and Action*, Full text of the Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative: [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2017/06/20/content\\_281475691873460.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2017/06/20/content_281475691873460.htm) [accessed 12.09.2021].

<sup>23</sup> Zhao Xinli, Ren Jingwen, *Zhongguo chengshi gonggong waijiao de yanjiu yu shijian* [Research and Practice of Chinese Urban Public Diplomacy]: [http://news.china.com.cn/world/2019-03/01/content\\_74815640.htm](http://news.china.com.cn/world/2019-03/01/content_74815640.htm) [accessed 24.08.2021].

<sup>24</sup> Yu Hongyuan, Zhou Yiqi, Cao Jiahan, *Chengshi duiwai jiaowang huoli zhishu yanjiu baogao* [A Research Report on the Vitality Index of Chinese Cities in International Communication], Shanghai International Studies Institute, Shanghai 2015, p. 34.

Initiative as “a new auxiliary force” (*xin bangshou*) in China’s city diplomacy that will shape a new chapter of globalization through closer relations with external actors.<sup>25</sup>

The importance of local governments in public diplomacy was discussed by Jian Wang when he called for the strengthening of city diplomacy as part of post-pandemic public diplomacy, which he saw as a very effective channel for managing globalization and securing access to global markets.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, as argued by Zhao Qireng, public diplomacy during the pandemic should serve as a consolidator for the bilateral state-to-state relations and play a part in influencing foreign public opinions with the ultimate goal of shaping the network of China’s friends.<sup>27</sup>

At the beginning of 2020, and with the outbreak of the pandemic, local governments as “trust providers” with a less overt political ideology started to utilize their networks to gain political support in a challenging situation. China’s public diplomacy has been increasingly required to respond to crises, persuade the global public opinion of Beijing’s good intentions and its effective pandemic governance. Needless to say, at the time of the “made in China virus” public diplomacy and the role of local authorities were put to the test. During the pandemic, Beijing launched a massive diplomatic effort, aimed at both foreign governments and foreign public. By sending “medical support” to sister cities when requested, Chinese local governments ensured that partners perceived that the Chinese government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic was correct, as illustrated later by the Łódź-Chengdu cooperation. The “central to local” narrative strategy proved that the authorities were effectively controlling the pandemic outbreak, offering medical treatment to the sick, and sharing information about the virus with the international community. In other words, as framed by the government in China, Beijing’s policy was open, transparent, and responsible. However, this was possible only thanks to the advanced technology which helps the local governments monitor their citizens and limit the possible spread of the virus. The local government also expected that the international community, especially those at the local level, would emulate and praise China for all its efforts. As Denny Roy noted, another important theme in China’s public diplomacy was “anti-stigmatization”, i.e. objecting to China’s association with the virus whereby COVID-19 was referred to

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<sup>25</sup> Chu Bin, Yang Jianying, ‘*Yidai yilu*’ *shiyuxia chengshi waijiao de dongli, gongneng yu jizhi* [Urban Diplomacy from the Perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative. Motivation, Function, and Mechanism], “Qinghai Shehui Kexue” 2018, no. 6 (49).

<sup>26</sup> Jian Wang, *Rethinking Public Diplomacy for the Post-pandemic World*: <https://afsa.org/rethinking-public-diplomacy-post-pandemic-world> [accessed 10.09.2021].

<sup>27</sup> Zhao Qizheng, *Zhongguo jinru gonggong waijiao xin jieduan* [China enters a new period in public diplomacy]: <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0411/c40531-29918421.html> [accessed 12.09.2021].

as “the Chinese virus”. The third theme was “anti-overreaction”, where Beijing objected to foreign government restrictions on travelers from China, and advice against traveling to China; the fourth theme was related to China’s generosity in sending medical supplies to help other virus-stricken countries.<sup>28</sup>

### **Health and Digital Silk Roads as part of public diplomacy**

In line with the decision of the central government to manage the pandemic inside China by using advanced technologies and to send medical equipment to other countries, the local authorities implemented two central initiatives: the Health Silk Road and the Digital Silk Road. China’s concept of the Health Silk Road (HSR), similarly as the One Belt, One Road launched in Astana (September 2013), made its first appearance outside China during President Xi Jinping’s state visit to Uzbekistan in 2016. However, the idea of a health diplomacy and multilateral cooperation can be found in a document published in 2015 by China’s National Health and Family Planning Commission (NHFPC) in a reference to health exchanges and cooperation within the Belt and Road Initiative. The Chinese side perceived international health cooperation as one of the most important dimensions of BRI’s “people-to-people exchange”. In August 2017, as a host at a BRI High-Level Meeting, China proposed the “Beijing Communique”, signed by health ministers from 30 countries and representatives of organizations, more notably WHO and UN-AIDS, and other health agencies. This document initiated a cooperation in health security, maternal and child health, health policies, health systems, hospital management, human resources, medical research and traditional medicine. Moreover, the Chinese side has been offering internships for medical staff, capacity-building for public health crises, emergency medical relief for crises, promoting Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and free of charge treatment abroad by Chinese doctors. Going even further, future international health cooperation was set out in the *Health China 2030* document, published in 2016. Cooperation was presented largely through bilateral frameworks and strengthened by people-to-people exchanges with countries of the BRI. Needless to say, the South-South cooperation with the developing countries was seen as a priority and China continues to offer medical aid teams to developing countries, with particular emphasis on maternal and child healthcare.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Denny Roy, *China's Pandemic Diplomacy*, “East-West Center”, September 2020, no. 144.

<sup>29</sup> Ngeow Chow-Bing, *COVID-19, Belt and Road Initiative and the Health Silk Road: Implications for Southeast Asia*: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/indonesien/16537.pdf> [accessed 12.09.2021].



In what might be regarded as a paradox during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese government tried to use the momentum of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis to promote both the Health and the Digital Silk Roads. Being the major donor, at least according to the Chinese media and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China took this opportunity to highlight its international humanitarianism and ambition to implement a vision of a community with a shared future for humanity.<sup>30</sup> This phenomenon wherein millions of surgical masks and test kits had been donated was quickly recognized as “mask diplomacy”, motivated both by the recipients’ needs and the wish to use aid to strengthen political alliances.<sup>31</sup>

True to the overall assumption, political relations have been helping the export of Chinese medical equipment and propagation of China’s official narratives: many Chinese provinces have sent masks or other medical equipment to their respective sister entities, such as Fujian province to its sister region in the United States – the State of Oregon, and Hunan province to the UK county of Lincolnshire.<sup>32</sup> This “donation diplomacy” was implemented as part of a public diplomacy mainly by provinces, municipalities, Chinese embassies worldwide, the army, private companies, NGOs, as well as by private individuals. More than 150 countries and four international organizations have now received medical equipment from China. The Chinese also organized video consultations with medical teams in over 170 countries and sent medical teams to some 30 countries, including Italy, Serbia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. According to UN Comtrade statistics (2020), in 2019, 47% of the world’s exports of face masks originated from China, greatly outdistancing other largest exporters like Germany (7%) and the United States (6%). Interestingly enough, Huawei also became part of China’s donation diplomacy. This Chinese multinational corporation donated medical equipment to Spain, the Netherlands, and Baltic countries, then discussing the 5G agreements with Chinese companies.<sup>33</sup> As such, mask diplomacy has played a role in shaping China’s external image as an effective partner, with endless resources and the ultimate goal of persuading

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<sup>30</sup> Zhao Lijian, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference*: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1767935.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1767935.shtml) [accessed 23.08.2021].

<sup>31</sup> Diego Telias, Francesco Urdinez, *China’s Foreign Aid Political Drivers: Lessons from a Novel Dataset of Mask Diplomacy in Latin America During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, “Journal of Current Chinese Affairs”, August 2020, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Andreas Fuchs et al., *Mask Wars: China’s Exports of Medical Goods in Times of COVID-19*: [https://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/pdfs/WPS108\\_Mask\\_Wars\\_\\_Chinas\\_Exports\\_of\\_Medical\\_Goods\\_in\\_Times\\_of\\_COVID-19.pdf](https://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/pdfs/WPS108_Mask_Wars__Chinas_Exports_of_Medical_Goods_in_Times_of_COVID-19.pdf) [accessed 12.08.2021].

<sup>33</sup> Hiddai Segev, Galia Lavi, *China Donation Diplomacy*, “INSS Insight”, Institute for National Security Studies, 2020, no. 1324.

others to deepen cooperation with Mainland China and disseminate the views of the Chinese government on current international issues.

The second part of China's local government engagements was used under the Digital Silk Road umbrella to strengthen smart city projects. Xi Jinping drew attention to the socio-economic challenges related to the growing population of urban agglomerations in his speech at the Central Urban Work Conference in Beijing in 2015. The main goal of changes made in planning urbanization processes was safety, i.e., reducing traffic, water and air pollution, combating crime, and improving the sense of security of city dwellers.<sup>34</sup>

The Digital Silk Road (DSR) was announced in 2015. The DSR achieves two main purposes. Firstly, it facilitates the building of connections in information and communication technologies (ICT) between China and other countries. Secondly, it promotes China's involvement in the process of technological development of other countries, including the countries of Southeast Asia.<sup>35</sup> According to estimates by 2018, China had invested USD 79 billion abroad through the Digital Silk Road.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, the large-scale implementation of smart city solutions in China and promotion of the Chinese modern urbanization model have become a vital part of international activities pursued by China's local governments during the pandemic. Starting in December 2019, in cooperation with domestic technology companies, the Chinese government began testing several solutions as part of the smart/safe city platform. These included Artificial Intelligence (AI) surveillance systems with a facial recognition technology, big data collection, analysis, drones and tracking apps. As the pandemic began to spread to other countries, China started promoting smart city technology abroad in February 2020, referring to the effectiveness of these solutions in China.

Another step taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was the announcement by the Chinese central government of stimulus measures to help its economy recover from the aftermath of the pandemic. The emphasis of these new measures was placed on a much stronger technological footing. In particular, they included core components of the smart city ecosystem. According to the records published in May 2020, China had signed cooperation agreements under the DSR umbrella with at least 16 countries. In fact, according to the research of the American Council

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<sup>34</sup> China Daily, *China Seeks to Make Cities Better Places to Live in*: [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-12/22/content\\_22778165.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-12/22/content_22778165.htm) [accessed 30.08.2021].

<sup>35</sup> Clayton Cheney, *China's Digital Silk Road: Strategic Technological Competition and Exporting Political Illiberalism*: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/chinas-digital-silk-road-strategic-technological-competition-and-exporting-political> [accessed 15.08.2021].

<sup>36</sup> Richard Ghiasy, Rajeshwari Krishnamurthy, *China's Digital Silk Road and the Global Digital Order*: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/chinas-digital-silk-road-and-the-global-digital-order/> [accessed 10.09.2021].

on Foreign Relations, at least 26 countries have declared their willingness to participate in the Chinese project.<sup>37</sup> However, it is worth stressing that the majority of them are medium or underdeveloped countries.

The safe city platform is one of PRC's "export goods" in its technological expansion within the Digital Silk Road initiative which can be considered a subcategory or a component of the larger category, the smart city. In the case of integrated platforms, the main providers of these solutions have been Chinese companies such as Huawei, ZTE, Dahua, Alibaba, Kedacom, and Shenzhen ZNV.<sup>38</sup> According to a 2019 report prepared by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Huawei has referred in its presentations to one of its safe city projects envisioning a 15% reduction in violent crime, 45% increase in its case clearance rate, and a reduction in emergency response times from 10 to 4.5 minutes, with citizen satisfaction increased from 60.2% to 98.3%.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, China's actions under the auspices of the Health and Digital Silk Roads go further. As Jacob Mardell has argued, during the pandemic the Health Silk Road became a useful tool for shaping and monitoring the narratives around China's management of the pandemic crisis, and for its ability to provide a way forward for partners and the global community rather than the employment of a benevolent approach.<sup>40</sup> In the Digital Silk Road context, next to the technological cooperation the Chinese government and companies promoted the concept of "inclusive globalization". As reported by "Guangming Daily", the Digital Silk Road was meant to "jointly promote a new type of globalization that is more inclusive and sustainable". The future of globalization is characterized by a digital drive with rapid growth cross-border data flow and digital trade.<sup>41</sup> In this regard, the local authorities have become part of China's public diplomacy, and as discussed in the paper, less encumbered with an ideological rhetoric, they have tried to promote a positive image of the country.

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<sup>37</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, James West, *Assessing China's Digital Silk Road Initiative*: <https://www.cfr.org/china-digital-silk-road/> [accessed 10.08.2021].

<sup>38</sup> Katherine Atha et al., *China's Smart Cities Development*: [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/China\\_Smart\\_Cities\\_Development.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/China_Smart_Cities_Development.pdf) [accessed 13.08.2021].

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan E. Hillman, Maesea McCalpin, *Watching Huawei's "Safe Cities"*: [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/191030\\_HillmanMcCalpin\\_HuaweiSafeCity\\_layout\\_v4.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/191030_HillmanMcCalpin_HuaweiSafeCity_layout_v4.pdf) [accessed 15.08.2021].

<sup>40</sup> Jacob Mardell, *China's "Health Silk Road": Adapting the BRI to a Pandemic-era World*: <https://merics.org/en/short-analysis/chinas-health-silk-road-adapting-bri-pandemic-era-world> [accessed 12.09.2021].

<sup>41</sup> Guangming Daily, "Shuzi Sichou zhi Lu" zhong zai guize jia ["Digital Silk Road" focuses on building rules-based system]: [https://theory.gmw.cn/2021-08/19/content\\_35091909.htm](https://theory.gmw.cn/2021-08/19/content_35091909.htm) [accessed 02.09.2021].

### A reality check: Sichuan and Guangdong actions during the COVID-19 pandemic

As previously stated, the Chinese mask diplomacy pursued by provincial and municipal governments and the promotion of smart cities solutions have been playing a vital role in spreading China's positive narrative about the country's effective pandemic management through medical help, donations and commercial deals. However, this was not obvious at the very beginning of this initiative. In February 2020, the Foreign Affairs Office of Chengdu Municipal People's Government announced that the city authorities were receiving words of support from international partners regarding the rapid development of the disease caused by the SARS-COV-2 virus. Next, the first international aid arrived from the Japanese sister city of Kofu which had sent 6,000 surgical masks. In an official statement Chengdu confirmed anticipating further help from sister cities, the European Parliament, and other international institutions.<sup>42</sup> Other regions and cities did the same, but outside of the sister city mechanism, with the Wakayama Prefecture of Japan and Seoul having contributed more medical equipment supplies.<sup>43</sup>

At the time when the Sichuan government introduced mechanisms to curb the virus in January 2020,<sup>44</sup> words of support, published on the Chengdu and Sichuan FAO webpage continued to be received by Chengdu, from South America (Chile; Lavalleya, Uruguay), Europe (Łódź, Poland); Asia (Japan; Singapore); North America (Nebraska, USA) etc. Moreover, the authorities in Chengdu organized videoconferences on how to combat the virus *e.g.*, with local governments in African countries such as Chad and Congo (Brazzaville).<sup>45</sup>

In April 2020, while successfully controlling the pandemic in the province, local authorities in Chengdu successively provided aid in the form of preventive equipment and shared their experiences in combating the epidemic itself and its effects

<sup>42</sup> Chengdu FAO, *Guoji you cheng, guoji zuzhi, guoji youren xiang wo shi fa lai guanxi weiwen* [International sister cities, international organizations, international partners send condolences and wishes to our city]: [http://cdfao.chengdu.gov.cn/cdwqb/c146828/2021-03/22/content\\_cf17c1f712d742e-8a66d2e4dac1d9b54.shtml](http://cdfao.chengdu.gov.cn/cdwqb/c146828/2021-03/22/content_cf17c1f712d742e-8a66d2e4dac1d9b54.shtml) [accessed 30.08.2021].

<sup>43</sup> Sichuan FAO, *Sichuan yuanzhu wuzi dida ri han, guoji you cheng zhencheng zhixie* [Medical aid from Japan and South Korea arrived in Sichuan, sincere thanks to sister cities]: [https://www.scwsb.gov.cn/xwzx/yw/wsyw/202004/t20200408\\_11369.html](https://www.scwsb.gov.cn/xwzx/yw/wsyw/202004/t20200408_11369.html) [accessed 30.08.2021].

<sup>44</sup> CDUTCM, *A letter to all Foreign Friends in Chengdu*: [https://www.cdutcm.edu.cn/gjjy/news/content\\_59679](https://www.cdutcm.edu.cn/gjjy/news/content_59679) [accessed 30.08.2021].

<sup>45</sup> MFA China, *Zhu Ketediwa dashi Wan Li canjia Sichuan sheng tong Ketediwa deng zhong xi Fei siguo yingdui xinguan feiyan yiqing shipin jiaoliu huiyi* [Ambassador Wan Li to Côte d'Ivoire participated in a videoconference between representatives of Sichuan Province and four countries in West Africa on how to respond to the new coronavirus pandemic]: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq\\_676201/gj\\_676203/fz\\_677316/1206\\_677922/1206x2\\_677942/t1768501.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/fz_677316/1206_677922/1206x2_677942/t1768501.shtml) [accessed 30.08.2021].

with 20 international partners.<sup>46</sup> In June 2020, the local authorities proudly announced that all medical products useful for the containment of the virus were labeled “Made in Chengdu”. Among international partners, the local authorities from Bologna, Milan, Italy; Valencia, Spain; Linz, Austria; Nuremberg, Bonn, Germany were mentioned.<sup>47</sup> It is also worth noting that the aid provided to Chengdu’s sister cities promoted the communication channels developed under the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>48</sup> An example of this “Made in Chengdu” drive were medical materials dispatched by that city in 2020 June via the China-Europe Express to Łódź in Poland and to Tilburg and Maastricht in the Netherlands. During the early pandemic period, Łódź turned to its Chinese sister cities of Chengdu, Guangzhou, and Tianjin but aid at this critical juncture came only from the capital of the Sichuan province, which sent 12000 masks – as reported by “Rzeczpospolita”.<sup>49</sup>

In the case of Łódź it is also important to emphasize that the aid from Chengdu had been organized at the request made in March 2020 by the city of Łódź authorities. Local government officials, President Hanna Zdanowska and Chairman of the City Council Marcin Gołaszewski requested FFP2/FFP3 masks, gloves, protective goggles, disinfectants, waterproof overalls, and PCR tests. Apart from Chengdu, Łódź authorities had applied to other Chinese sister cities, namely Guangzhou and Tianjin. However, aid at this time only came from the capital of the Sichuan province with its donation of 11 700 protective masks. In a letter to Luo Qiang the Mayor of Chengdu, the Łódź authorities gave the Chinese side credit for being effective: “Poland and Łódź have been facing an unprecedented and so far, unknown coronavirus epidemic. China has managed to go through a difficult period” and “There is a difficult time ahead of us in Poland and Europe – at the time of a deep night that we will survive just like you”.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Chengdu FAO, *Wei guoji you Cheng Kang yu gongxian Chengdu zhahui* [Contribute Chengdu wisdom to international sister cities fighting the pandemic]: [http://cdfao.chengdu.gov.cn/cdwqb/c146828/2021-03/22/content\\_162c1dba2ba44c12bd6059da79237137.shtml](http://cdfao.chengdu.gov.cn/cdwqb/c146828/2021-03/22/content_162c1dba2ba44c12bd6059da79237137.shtml) [accessed 30.08.2021].

<sup>47</sup> Chengdu FAO, *Chengdu ziyuan Ouzhou guojia you Cheng Ji shiguan kang you Huo Dian zan* [Chengdu is praised for supporting sister cities and embassies of European countries in fighting the pandemic]: [http://cdfao.chengdu.gov.cn/cdwqb/c146828/2021-03/22/content\\_adbc9854d1b04876a-8ce1b43568dd136.shtml](http://cdfao.chengdu.gov.cn/cdwqb/c146828/2021-03/22/content_adbc9854d1b04876a-8ce1b43568dd136.shtml) [accessed 30.08.2021].

<sup>48</sup> Chengdu FAO, *Zhong-Ou ban lie qian qi Rong-Ou kang yiqing yuan* [The Sino-European railway line leading to Łódź contributes to the fight against the coronavirus pandemic]: [http://cdfao.chengdu.gov.cn/cdwqb/c146828/2021-03/22/content\\_d5172eb84fe344798fa46206838dc91b.shtml](http://cdfao.chengdu.gov.cn/cdwqb/c146828/2021-03/22/content_d5172eb84fe344798fa46206838dc91b.shtml) [accessed 30.08.2021].

<sup>49</sup> Rzeczpospolita, *Łódź prosi o pomoc miasta partnerskie z Chin* [Łódź asks for help from partner cities from China]: <https://www.rp.pl/Koronawirus-SARS-CoV-2/303219973-Lodz-prosi-o-pomoc-miasta-partnerskie-z-Chin.html> [accessed 30.08.2021].

<sup>50</sup> Mirosław Malinowski, *Koronawirus. Władze Łodzi proszą o pomoc Chiny!* [Coronavirus. Łódź authorities are asking for help from China!]: <https://expressilustrowany.pl/koronawirus-wladze-lodzi-prosza-o-pomoc-chiny/ar/c1-14870999> [accessed 02.09.2021].

From a practical point of view the value of the donation made by the municipal government in Chengdu was estimated to be only 48,560 CNY (6,345 EUR); however, the Chinese side had paid for all the shipping costs, customs duties and transportation directly to Łódź. The deputy mayor of Chengdu, Niu Qingdao, in a video message addressed to President Hanna Zdanowska, expressed concern about the situation caused by the rapid spread of the pandemic and said that “Covid-19 is a common challenge before which the whole world stands. We must unite to overcome it”.<sup>51</sup> This act of donating also became an opportunity to promote the China-Poland railway connection. According to information provided by Chengdu's Deputy Mayor, by 2020 trains on the Chengdu-Łódź line had made over two thousand journeys, 39.3% of total Sino-European rail transport volume.<sup>52</sup> Since 2013, the Chengdu-Łódź line has transported goods worth USD 8.22 billion. According to information provided by the president of the Management Board of Hatrans, which manages the Chengdu-Lodz railway connection on the Polish side, in February, March, and April 2020 the rail traffic had decreased substantially. For some time train departures from China were completely suspended but the connection was reopened in April 2020. In April and May 2020 every train from China to Poland carried several containers with preventive medical equipment (for commercial sale).<sup>53</sup>

This enthusiastic response from the city of Łódź authorities contrasted with a rather lukewarm response from other partners of Chengdu: as acknowledged in the official sources of sister cities, only three governments – the Provincial Governor of Nakhon Ratchasima, Wichian Channothai, the governor of Pernambuco, Paulo Camara and the authorities of Lavalleya expressed official gratitude.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Hanna Zdanowska, *Full transcript from Deputy Mayor of Chengdu Niu Qingbao video message addressed to President of Lodz*: <https://uml.lodz.pl/dla-mieszkancow/o-miescie/wspolpraca-z-zagranica/chengdu/> [accessed 02.09.2021].

<sup>52</sup> Lodz City, *Historia – Współpraca partnerska Łódź-Chengdu* [History – Lodz-Chengdu partnership cooperation]: <https://uml.lodz.pl/dla-mieszkancow/o-miescie/wspolpraca-z-zagranica/chengdu/> [accessed 02.09.2021].

<sup>53</sup> Roman Czubiński, *Hatrans: Pandemia nam nie zaszkodziła* [Hatrans: The pandemic did not harm us]: <https://www.rynek-kolejowy.pl/mobile/hatrans-pandemia-nam-nie-zaszkodziła-98164.html> [accessed 02.09.2021].

<sup>54</sup> Pernambuco Twitter, Official Twitter account of Pernambuco State government: <https://twitter.com/governope/status/1258779078263484417> [accessed 16.09.2021]; Marina Falcão, *China doa 11.400 equipamentos de proteção para Pernambuco* [China donates 11,400 pieces of protective equipment to Pernambuco]: <https://valor.globo.com/brasil/noticia/2020/05/08/china-doa-11400-equipamentos-de-protacao-para-pernambuco.ghml> [accessed 16 September 2021]; China Embassy Uruguay, *Lavalleya se Hermana con Sichuan* [Lavalleya Twins with Sichuan]: <http://uy.china-embassy.org/esp/xwds/t1812359.htm> [accessed 16.09.2021]; ThaiNews, *Suphrnburī rāb mxb hnakk phaxnamay cak mnthl sechwn* [Suphanburi Province received masks and sanitary equipment from Sichuan Province]: [https://thainews.prd.go.th/th/news/print\\_news/TCATG200615123747605](https://thainews.prd.go.th/th/news/print_news/TCATG200615123747605) [accessed 16.09.2021].

As regards the cooperation between Chengdu's sister cities, the Mayors' Conference of Sister Cities and Friendly Cooperative Cities of Chengdu was held in Chengdu since 2016.<sup>55</sup> In 2021, during an online meeting titled "Stand United to Create Better Life" Chengdu's Mayor Wang Fengchao established the "Chengdu International Sister Cities Cooperation Joint Initiative." The initiative of Chengdu's cooperation with 28 international partners has been based on four levels of cooperation: deepening anti-epidemic cooperation, promoting partnership, promoting complimentary benefits, and strengthening cultural and people-to-people exchanges. This, in fact, became an element of the promotion of the Health Silk Road at a local level, and made possible the promotion of a positive image of China.<sup>56</sup>

According to qualitative data published by the Chengdu Foreign Affairs Office, the municipal government sent medical assistance to a small number of sister cities: Kathmandu (100,000 masks; 1000 protective suits), Maputo (20000 masks, 5000 N95 masks, 500 protective overalls, 300 face shields), Kofu (6000 masks), Łódź (12000 masks), Bonn, Linz, and Maastricht (ND). Despite the Sichuan mask diplomacy and promotion of the Health Silk Road, the sister city framework has been playing a minor role, with only 18% of Chengdu's entire Health Silk Road activities in external relations. Out of 33 cases of foreign aid offered by Chengdu City and the Sichuan province, 29 were conducted on a bilateral agreement basis (87.9%).<sup>57</sup>

As regards sister cities and provinces, foreign medical aid to twinned partners had been shipped in 11 out of 33 cases (33.3%). None of the official statements regarding these meetings mentioned technical cooperation (Digital Silk Road) and all the cases were connected to health cooperation (Health Silk Road). The medical aid from Chengdu City/Sichuan Province was distributed almost evenly amongst 17 developed countries (51.51%) and 16 developing countries (48.49%). By focusing on the developing world the local government was able to explore new markets for a future economic collaboration: in Africa, with the Ivory Coast, Chad, Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of the Congo), Brazzaville, (Republic of the Congo), and in Latin America, with Chile (Biobio), Brazil (Pernambuco), Argentina (Buenos Aires), Uruguay (Lavalleja), and in Southeast Asia: with Suphan

<sup>55</sup> Bonn City, *News from Our Project Partnerships*: <https://international.bonn.de/international-profile/international-cooperations/news-from-the-partnerships.php> [accessed 02.09.2021].

<sup>56</sup> China CBN, *Chengdu yu 28 ge guoji you cheng lianhe fabu* "Chengdu guoji you cheng hezuo lianhe changyi" [Chengdu and 28 international sister cities jointly released the "Chengdu International Sister Cities Cooperation Joint Initiative"]: <http://www.china-cbn.com/opinion/shishi/202104/414067.html> [accessed 02.09.2021].

<sup>57</sup> Sichuan and Chengdu FAO 2020-2021: <http://cdfao.chengdu.gov.cn/> and <https://www.scwsb.gov.cn> [accessed 14.09.2021].

Buri, and Nakhon Ratchasima in Thailand, and in Laos, along with Tashkent, and Samarqand in Uzbekistan.<sup>58</sup>

The international activities of Guangdong and Guangzhou authorities show that both the provincial and municipal governments concentrated less on mask diplomacy than on the Digital Silk Road and smart city solutions. The activities of Guangdong province have been oriented mostly on the promotion and development of advanced technologies. This southern province has played this role since the time of the first reforms in the late 1970s. In November 2020, Guangzhou organized the second edition of the international conference devoted to the new generation of the high-speed 5G Internet. Parallel to centralization processes in China, these activities were embodied in the central policy dictated by Xi Jinping. According to Ma Xingrui, all provincial activities have been in line with Chairman Xi Jinping's opinion on the widespread use of modern technologies in the country and their promotion abroad.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, Guangzhou has been an active participant of multilateral platforms as the "Green City Initiative" of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, and cooperated with the World Bank to carry out the "China Sustainable City Cooling Project" pilot program initiated in September 2020.<sup>60</sup>

Another example of international activities pursued by the local authorities would be participation in the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. It is worth noting that in addition to topics related to the implementation of technological innovations in urbanization processes, in July 2021 Wen Guohui the Mayor of Guangzhou's devoted a great deal of attention to the need to protect the environment and implement systems aimed at reducing harmful emissions.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the government of Guangzhou has scored many successes in this area, such as developing the urban agglomeration while improving water use management and reducing soil and air pollution, as noted in the UN Sustainable Development Goals Local Voluntary Report.<sup>62</sup> This experience can serve as a model for

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>59</sup> Guangdong FAO, *2020 nian shijie 5G dahui zai Guangzhou zhaokai* [The 2020 World 5G Conference will be held in Guangzhou]: <http://www.gdfao.gov.cn/Item/27304.aspx> [accessed 02.09.2021].

<sup>60</sup> Guangzhou FAO, *Guangzhou to be the Pilot City in the Sustainable Urban Cooling Project*: [http://www.gz.gov.cn/guangzhouinternational/home/citynews/content/post\\_6553660.html](http://www.gz.gov.cn/guangzhouinternational/home/citynews/content/post_6553660.html) [accessed 02.09.2021].

<sup>61</sup> Guangzhou FAO, *Wen Guohui zai Lianheguo Kechixu Fazhan Gaojibie Zhengzhi Luntan Zhutibianhui shang fayan* [Wen Guohui speaks at the theme side event of the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development]: [http://www.gzfao.gov.cn/dtxx/wstdt/content/post\\_217617.html](http://www.gzfao.gov.cn/dtxx/wstdt/content/post_217617.html) [accessed 02.09.2021].

<sup>62</sup> SDGS UN, *Vibrancy, Inclusion, and Openness; a Mega-City's Road Towards Green Development UN SDGs Guangzhou Voluntary Local Review*: <https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/VLR%20Guangzhou%2C%20China-compressed.pdf> [accessed 02.09.2021].



other cities to emulate. Under the umbrella of “Understanding China” (*Dudong Zhongguo*) International Conference, Li Xi, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party of Guangdong Province promoted a model of local pandemic management and poverty alleviation.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, the local government promoted a fair, diverse, inclusive, and open sustainable development of the megacity of Guangzhou, and framed this as “Guangzhou’s Story”, a narrative for an international audience.<sup>64</sup>

When it comes to bilateral relations of local authorities with the Guangdong province, they are similar to sister city agreements. During the coronavirus pandemic the closest contacts were maintained with representatives of Los Angeles and Auckland, cities which have a twin-city agreement with Guangzhou. In addition, in 2014 all three established the “Guangzhou-Auckland-Los Angeles Tri-City Economic Alliance” aimed on deepening the cooperation in the fields of economy, trade, and investment.<sup>65</sup> So far, as part of this trilateral cooperation two rounds of cooperation have been carried out, with another round initiated at the end of 2020 for 2020–2022.<sup>66</sup>

A project implemented in Singapore in the field of modern technologies, such as integrated smart/safe city platforms, would be a fine example of the most fruitful cooperation undertaken by the local authorities of Guangdong. At the most recent annual meeting of the Singapore-Guangdong Collaboration Council held in August 2020 co-chaired by the Mayor of Guangdong, Ma Xingrui, and Singapore Minister of Transport, Ong Ye Kung, both parties promoted the China-Singapore Guangzhou Knowledge City (CSGKC), with a total site area of 123 sq km governed by China-Singapore Guangzhou Knowledge City Investment and Development Co., Ltd (GKC Co), the joint venture company between Swingbridge (a wholly-owned subsidiary of Temasek Holdings of Singapore) and Guangzhou Development District Administrative Committee (GDDAC). Additionally, both parties expanded this cooperation with Guangdong and Singapore, establishing a new initiative, the

<sup>63</sup> Guangdong FAO, *2020 nian “du dong Zhongguo” guoji huiyi (Guangzhou) zai Guangzhou juxing* [2020 “Understanding China” International Conference (Guangzhou) held in Guangzhou]: <http://www.gdfao.gov.cn/Item/27288.aspx> [accessed 02.09.2021].

<sup>64</sup> Guangzhou FAO, *Guangzhou jingyan shijie gongxiang tansuo juyou Zhongguo tese, Guangzhou tedian de chaoda chengshi kechixu fazhan zhi lu* [Guangzhou experience sharing to the World, explore the sustainable development of a megacity with Chinese and Guangzhou characteristics]: [http://www.gzfao.gov.cn/dtxx/wsdw/content/post\\_217615.html](http://www.gzfao.gov.cn/dtxx/wsdw/content/post_217615.html) [accessed 02.09.2021].

<sup>65</sup> Guangzhou FAO, *Luoshanji shi shizhang, Aokelan shi shizhang shipin jiyu Guangzhou: Weilai geng chang shijian, sanfang hui jixu jinmi hezuo* [Mayor of Los Angeles, Mayor of Auckland video to Guangzhou: In the future in an even longer perspective, the three parties will continue to work closely together]: [http://www.gzfao.gov.cn/dtxx/wsdw/content/post\\_214149.html](http://www.gzfao.gov.cn/dtxx/wsdw/content/post_214149.html) [accessed 12.09.2021].

<sup>66</sup> Guangzhou FAO, *Guangzhou, Auckland, Los Angeles start new round of cooperation* [http://www.eguangzhou.gov.cn/2020-12/24/c\\_577271.htm](http://www.eguangzhou.gov.cn/2020-12/24/c_577271.htm) [accessed 14.09.2021].

Singapore-China (Shenzhen) Smart City Initiative, focused on digital connectivity, innovation, and entrepreneurship, as well as on tech talent exchange and development. The same cooperation aims to promote greater ease of access to market opportunities in the Greater Bay Area of Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau and Southeast Asia.<sup>67</sup>

One of the foundations of smart city platforms is the use of artificial intelligence. This was illustrated by the signing in July 2021 of a memorandum of cooperation (MOC) in artificial intelligence between the Guangzhou Institute of Advanced Technology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Gwangju Institute of Science and Technology in South Korea. Guangzhou and Gwangju have also signed a sister city agreement. Both parties announced plans for the construction of a Sino-South Korean laboratory and a joint research center in key areas spanning robotics, intelligent manufacturing, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, energy, and environmental protection.<sup>68</sup>

Analyzing Guangzhou public diplomacy activities, the multilateral meetings within the United Nations platforms were as important as bilateral events, 48% to 52% respectively (25 meetings Jan. 2020-Sept. 2021). The format of sister city frameworks plays a less important role in Guangzhou's public diplomacy, with 31% of the city's activities in this sphere as compared to 69% outside of the sister city format (13 meetings Jan. 2020-Sept. 2021).<sup>69</sup>

An analysis of all 25 local government meetings in Guangdong Province shows that 56% of bilateral and multilateral meetings were devoted to the Digital Silk Road initiative, mostly specific technological solutions, the development of cooperation between enterprises and universities, and the implementation of complex projects such as the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area. Out of 13 bilateral meetings held with nine countries by the authorities of Guangdong province, as many as seven have been with developed and only two with developing countries.<sup>70</sup>

The profile of countries which have been the target of bilateral interactions with Guangdong province is thus in line with its policy, focused on partners with access to advanced technologies and experience in their implementation. Furthermore, the developed-to-developing nation ratio explains Guangdong's low commitment to the

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<sup>67</sup> Prisca Ang, *Singapore Aims to Work More Closely with Guangdong in Finance, Talent Exchange and Aviation: Ong Ye Kung*: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/spore-aims-to-work-more-closely-with-guangdong-in-finance-talent-exchange-and-aviation-ong> [accessed 14.08.2021].

<sup>68</sup> Guangzhou FAO, *Rengong zhineng: Guangzhou yu Gwangzhou xieshou fazhan xin xuan zhi zuo* [Artificial Intelligence: Guangzhou and Gwangju join hands to develop together]: [http://www.gzfao.gov.cn/dtxx/wstdt/content/post\\_218151.html](http://www.gzfao.gov.cn/dtxx/wstdt/content/post_218151.html) [accessed 14.08.2021].

<sup>69</sup> Guangzhou FAO: <http://www.gzfao.gov.cn> [accessed 12.09.2021].

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*.

Health Silk Road initiative, especially the mask and vaccine diplomacy.<sup>71</sup> Due to the extensive thematic scope, these international meetings were classified as general because they combined elements of both the Digital and Health Silk Road. They accounted for 32% of all meetings held between January 2020 and September 2021. The meetings associated with health cooperation were the least common. Only 12% of these meetings were related to ventures aimed at donating medical equipment or financial support to fighting the coronavirus pandemic. Thus, despite the global coronavirus pandemic, the main goal of policies of Guangdong province rather than acting in line with the Health Silk Road initiative was promotion of technological solutions.

## Conclusions

Public diplomacy, both at the central and local levels, serves as a tool for executing power: the ability to persuade others in order to obtain the required outcomes. In international activities of local Chinese governments priority is given to economic cooperation, followed by cultural interactions viewed as public diplomacy. All efforts in the field of public diplomacy are targeted on managing the sustainability of international markets.

This could not be possible without creating a positive image of China through discursive power that has been of special importance during the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, the responsibility of the local players in China's foreign policy goes far beyond material needs and plays a vital role in "telling China's story well" and shaping as well as controlling international narratives about China's domestic and international position.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, both Sichuan and Guangdong provinces have opened new fronts that will allow them to form new partnerships with other local governments. This conclusion should not be interpreted as only a search for new markets for Chinese products but also the promotion of positive narratives about China. As illustrated by the case of Sichuan and Chengdu, Chinese local governments have been projecting a very positive image of China's pandemic management; and yet, their foreign partners were less receptive, and not willing to reproduce the positive image of China in their respective narratives. In the case of Guangzhou, the situation has been the opposite. As a technological gateway for China, the city has been cultivating its relations with developed countries, fulfilling the obligation of being a strong component of the Digital Silk Road. Along with promoting the

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem.*

smart city solution, the local governments in Southern China had organized special sessions on “Understanding China”, and promoted their own solutions, called “Guangdong’s experiences”.

To sum up, during the COVID-19 pandemic local authorities had taken responsibility to market positive narratives about China through relations with sister cities and COVID help arranged via local channels. By focusing less on the political image of China and more on people-to-people relations, the provinces and municipalities have maintained existing channels for economic cooperation and, indeed, opened new ones in the times of the pandemic, at varying levels of efficiency, related to the concepts of the Health and Digital Silk Roads.

### **Abstract**

The paper looks at the important subject of the sister city frameworks as part of China’s public diplomacy at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic (post-2020). The first part presents the concept of public diplomacy, with special focus on the role of provincial and municipal governments in China. Relations between the local Chinese governments and other local governments are seen as “having less political color” and, according to Chinese scholars, are more effective in transmitting the national image and discursive power in the P.R.C. The second part elaborates on the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic and argues that local governments in China have been using the Health Silk Road and Digital Silk Road as a vehicle of China’s public diplomacy. This section also includes a detailed analysis of the Chinese government’s plans and actions taken by the central authorities. After a general analysis, the authors present Sichuan and Guangdong provinces’ actions as a case study. The first case study examines Sichuan and Chengdu’s efforts to promote the Health Silk Road through the “mask of diplomacy,” in the second, the authors discuss actions undertaken by Guangdong province and the city of Guangzhou as part of the Digital Silk Road.

**Keywords:** sister city framework, BRI, COVID-19 pandemic, public diplomacy