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Subnational actors in the relations between China and Central and Eastern European countries*

Abstract. While much discussion centres on China's engagement with Central and Eastern European countries, few studies investigate the role of subnational actors in the relations between the two sides. This paper brings China's cooperation with Central and Eastern European (CEECs) countries, centred around what is popularly known as the "16 + 1" mechanism. It aims to unravel the link between local governments and the "16 + 1" cooperation mechanism. Local governments' external cooperation is a new attempt in China's diplomatic layout. It argues that the exchanges between local governments are a useful supplement to the in-depth cooperation between the two sides, and the cooperation between the two sides has formed a relatively stable pattern. At present, it has entered the stage of an in-depth integration focusing on optimization and upgrading. The further development of local cooperation mainly depends on whether it can play a sufficient leading role in the economic development of China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: China-CEE Relations, Local Government, China-Poland Relations.

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Introduction

Local government's external relations emerge in the context of the relationship between the central and the local governments. As an institutional distribution method, it appropriately alleviates the problem of uneven development domestically. As a part of China's internationalization process, the active involvement of China's local governments has knock-on effects on their surrounding areas. The existence of globalization enables local government cooperation to generate higher revenue expectations from global contacts.

The participation of local governments in international affairs has become an issue of concern in the development of China's foreign relations. As a sub--state actor, when the interest pursued at the local level is the same as that of the country, local governments act as a useful complement to the country's overall diplomatic strategy. Starting with the Bucharest Guideline in 2013, cooperation at the local level is encouraged and supported as one of the crucial pillars of China's cooperation with Central and Eastern European (CEECs) countries.

This article illustrates local cooperation between China and countries in Central and Eastern Europe. It is divided into three parts. The first part will briefly review the development of local cooperation between China and the CEECs. In the second part, the paper will examine the institutional arrangements of local cooperation to see how they have evolved, in terms of sister cities and city networks, and what has been achieved thus far. The third part will analyze the case of China-Europe Express, involving China's western Sichuan Province and Łódź in Poland as an example, and thus gain a realistic and detailed understanding of local cooperation in Sino-CEEC relations. The examination of this case not only reveals some fundamentally different understandings of economic changes brought by local governments but also indicates the challenges of China's future position and policy. The investigation of subnational actors' activities requires a comprehensive approach. Therefore, in this part of the study, data will be obtained through various reports issued by the Chinese and CEECs government, as well as data published on relevant websites.

Local cooperation between China and CEEC: An overview

It seems that by highlighting the strategic importance and opportunities of China with the "European" frontier, Chinese scholar Wang Jisi (2012) regards this "matching westwards" action as a rebalancing of geo-strategy by the Chinese government. In fact, Chinese policymakers took the opportunity to engage with the region almost immediately after the former Soviet republics become independent in

the early 1990s. Since then, China has made continued efforts to manage relations with Central and Eastern European countries through pursuing its interests and impacts in the region. What makes China's effort in the region different now is its practice of largely experimental multi-dimensional diplomacy. This practice centres on the "China-Central and Eastern European Countries Cooperation Mechanism" (generally referred to as 17 + 1 Cooperation Mechanism), a network that brings together China, eleven European Union member states: Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia; and four Candidate countries: Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. Moreover, there is one potential candidate, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the academic literature on China-CEE relations little attention is placed, in terms of research, on the subnational dimension compared to traditional diplomatic issues. Although there are some empirical studies (Blatter *et al.*, 2008; Nagel, 2010; Tatham, 2016), they are concentrated rather on intra-European activities, not on relations with third countries. However, some recent publications have been trying to cover this phenomenon. T. Kamiński (2019) takes the case of the Lodzkie region's (Poland) cooperation with Sichuan Province in order to answer the question of what the factors behind the success of the Lodzkie region are. The primary motivation for this is to recognise the conditions that may play an important role in the process of building strong bilateral links between European and Chinese subnational units. Moreover, the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM, 2019) issued a report named *The Subnational Dimension of EU-China Relations*, it analysed selected case studies of European regions cooperating with Chinese partners. Besides this, D. Mierzejewski (2017) presents a picture of bilateral relations between Poland and China, so as to indicate the role of local governments in bilateral relations. Local authorities play an ever more critical role in shaping Poland–China relations. The author innovatively puts forward the role of local governments in the integration of the diplomatic relations between China and Poland. Furthermore, Chinese scholars (Liu 2017; Song 2017; Yuan, 2018) provide a systematic investigation, with a clearly defined overarching organizational framework for its vital research themes and questions. Apart from the local interactions, the above research omitted providing a timeframe for the relations between China and the CEECs in a systematic manner. In particular, the effect of local cooperation is not discussed in detail in the existing literature.

Local governments in international affairs have become an issue of concern in China's foreign relations. The local cooperation is another crucial dimension of China's tactics concerning Central and Eastern Europe. The Chinese leadership is determined to construct a "comprehensive, multilevel, multifaceted" approach for its diplomatic agenda for the new era. The frameworks are further elaborated in President Xi Jinping's report to the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist

Party in October 2017. The top Chinese leadership commits to the idea that China will continue to promote friendship and partnership with countries in Central and Eastern Europe, consolidate friendly relations and deepen mutually beneficial cooperation to ensure that China's development and policies bring more benefits to these partners. China is, therefore, putting an unusual focus on its relations, which places particular emphasis on local cooperation and marks Guidelines achieved in the past by both leaders. As a sub-state actor, when the interest pursued by the local level is the same as that of the country, local governments act in order to complement the country's overall diplomatic strategy. Starting with the Bucharest Guideline in 2013 (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013), cooperation at the local level is encouraged and supported as one of the crucial pillars of China-CEEC cooperation.

In this context, the willingness of Central and Eastern European countries to seek cooperation with countries such as China becomes increasingly stronger. Such changes in interdependence also contribute to the active participation of local governments. This also makes it possible for local governments to participate in international activities, and also provides favourable conditions for China to enter into the regions.

Central and Eastern European countries are closer to the EU in terms of culture and norms. Some of China's policy instruments (such as the $10 billion special loans) still encounter problems with European Union law, resulting in China's investment and engineering contracting in the region still being mostly being concentrated in non-access countries (such as the Balkan countries). In terms of investment preference, Central and Eastern European countries generally prefer greenfield investment, while China prefers the model of corporate mergers and acquisitions; for example, 86% of China's investment in Europe in 2016 was corporate mergers and acquisitions. As an increasingly internationalized and globalized world economy, local governments with enhanced economic functions can take advantage of opportunities embodied in internationalization to highlight their merits in low-level political agendas such as economics and culture.

Local cooperation provides China with the opportunity to integrate into the Central and Eastern European markets and to cooperate. Moreover, the lessons learned from the transformation and development of Central and Eastern European countries can provide a reference for China's reform. For example, Poland's experience in regional and urban management: local officials from Gdansk, Poland, and the visiting Chinese delegation have a strong interest in the city's taxation, finance, and sports facilities management. In addition, China's Guangxi Liugong Machinery and the HSW (Huta Stalowa Wola) Group in Stalowa Wola County, Poland, have reached agreements to establish a manufacturing and R&D base. The top bulldozer production line of Polish companies will help China further develop the Central and Eastern European markets (Huang, Liu, 2018).

In addition, after strong growth in 2017 and early 2018, global economic activity slowed notably in the second half of last year, the diversification of

development in various regions of Europe is further intensified. In particular, the situation in Ukraine and the refugee crisis highlights the difference between East and West Europe. The cohesive bonds that exist between the EU and European countries are gradually weakened, and the Central and Eastern European countries show that centrifugal force in the current refugee crisis. In this context, the trust of Central and Eastern European countries to China's promise is gradually "overdrawn", and the weakening of the institution also means that state power shifts at this regional level, such transferral correspondingly leads local governments to continue to search for it, so as to provide a driving force for deepening cooperation at the local level.

Moreover, the sixteen countries in Central and Eastern Europe have a total area of about 1.34 million square kilometres, which is close to 1/7 of China (World Bank, 2018). The total population is 123 million, which is close to 1/10 of China (World Bank, 2018). This scale is similar to the provincial units in China. In addition, the total trade volume with China is less than 1/10 of the total EU trade with China. Such a huge asymmetry also spawns the role of local governments in their broader participation in decision-making, implementation, and interest advancement. For example, Chinese narratives concerning cooperation with the CEE countries as an economic bridgehead of the "Belt and Road" Initiative (Kowalski, 2017). In recent years, China's Hebei, Chongqing, Chengdu, Suzhou, Ningbo, provinces, among other provinces or cities, have started to cooperate with the Central and Eastern European regions based on their local characteristics and open needs.

However, the localities of the sixteen countries in Central and Eastern Europe are complex, and economic status is different in their respective countries. For example, between China and Poland, the most important issue is the huge trade imbalance (Kamiński *et al*., 2019), and China's huge trade volume inevitably cause a huge asymmetric impact. In addition, the complexity of local governments also creates uncertainty. When obstacles are detected on the Polish governmental side and the agreements from Xi Jinping's Warsaw visit are not properly implemented, the Chinese turn to the Polish local authorities, which are mainly held by the political parties who are in opposition to the current Polish government, and signs new agreements with them (Góralczyk, 2017).

As China's power grows, especially in its global strategy, China is exerting its ambitions even more proactively. China finds it much more useful to exercise its economic statecraft, for example, by providing preferential loans and constructing necessary infrastructure in return for market, energy and other resources. However, it cannot overlook that the Central and Eastern European countries have considerable differences regarding population, economic development levels, religious beliefs, and degrees of return to Europe. These differences will, to some extent, affect these countries as an entire region. This in turn largely determines the long-term sustainability of China's cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries.

Local cooperation in practice: Sister cities and city networks

At present, local cooperation is considered as the method with which cities or local governments aim at pursuing local interests and develop interactive relationships with other actors in the international political arena (Van der Pluijm, Melissen, 2007). Similar references to local cooperation include "city-to-city diplomacy", "sister cities", "local diplomacy", "local foreign policy", "sub-national government foreign affairs". China's local cooperation in practice arises in the context of the globalization era. It mainly comes from two reasons: first, as the country's diplomatic system becomes more open, the local level gains more massive arena and abundant resources, it has appropriate diplomatic identities and plays a unique role in foreign affairs. Second, in the era of globalization, general foreign-related affairs are likely rising to become crucial for the overall situation. As a critical node connecting China and the world, cities play an essential role in dealing with related issues. Cities establish relations of international friendship so that their economic, scientific and cultural exchanges and cooperation can be facilitated.

For the city, the development of globalization completely changes in the country and even the world, so that the economic centres of each country more fall to the unit with the city as the main part. Globalization is increasingly enhancing the city's resource allocation capabilities, while causing a global market demand for the role of cities. Pushed by the Internet information wave, that emerges simultaneously with globalization, it brings a broad flow space to the city and makes it possible for the city to participate on a global level. It jointly promotes the city's participation in the global governance system, the city thus establishes a stable and sustainable connection with the international system.

Local cooperation has achieved prosperity development when promoting China-CEEC cooperation under multi-forms since the "China-CEEC" framework was established, i.e., Local Leaders Meetings, Working Meetings of China-CEEC Association of Provincial Governors, and Meetings of CEEC Capital Cities.

Table 1. Previous Local Cooperation Meetings between China and CEECs

Local Leaders' Meeting
Chongqing, China (2013)
Prague, Czech Republic (2014)
Tangshan, China (2016)
Working Meeting for the China and CEEC Association of Provincial Governors
Langfang, China (2015)
Tangshan, China (2016)
Plovdiv, Bulgaria (2018)

Forum for Mayors of CEEC Capital Cities
Sofia, Bulgaria (2016)
Podgorica, Montenegro (2017) Belgrade, Serbia (2018)

Source: data collected by the author.

Local cooperation is represented by establishing city diplomatic ties, which has taken over the external affairs framework in the general sense. Chinese President Xi Jinping has called on the CPAFFC association (Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries) to innovate and explore ways to allow for more people-to-people exchanges, help build more sister cities and promote exchanges between localities. The local dimension is further elaborated in President Xi Jinping's report to the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. Moreover, the number of friendly cities is increasing. According to CPAFFC association statistics, as of 2018, China and Central and Eastern European countries form 63 pairs of friendly cities at the provincial level, and at the city level. Meanwhile, some local universities or colleges set up language majors in Central and Eastern European countries to meet the demand for talent. Second, with the promotion of bilateral local cooperation, direct flights facilitate bilateral economic, trade, and personnel exchanges between Chinese cities and CEE countries. At the same time, various cities in China and Central and Eastern Europe have opened freight rail-routes, such as Suzhou-Warsaw, Yiwu-Riga, Chengdu-Lodz (Poland), Wuhan-Pardubice (Czech Republic), and Changsha-Budapest.

Sister cities

The prominent role of Chinese cities in external exchanges, especially furthering the work of sister cities, is carried out with the aim of reform and opening up trade routes (Chen, 2001). The need for foreign exchanges brings a huge adjustment in the relationship between the central and local governments. Local governments become important participants in China's foreign affairs. Chinese cities have taken on the most active role in participating in diplomacy following decentralization. The construction of international friendship cities also become the main way for Chinese cities to realize their foreign exchange functions.

In addition, with the deepening of regional integration, the exchanges between cities provide a new platform and act as a conduit for urban and rural cooperation between Chinese and foreign cities. Many cities in China are also promoting the development of urban foreign exchange under the mechanism of

multilateral regional cooperation. In this process, sister cities have done a lot of work to attract foreign investment, introduce projects, and expand exchanges. At the same time, there are many opportunities for cooperation in the construction of soft environment, environmental protection, and sustainable development among cities in adjacent areas.

The expansion of China's sister cities in the international geospatial context is in fact synchronized with the process of China's integration into the world system. Historical and cultural factors are the most important factors influencing the development of friendly cities. This is the most effective entry point for China, which is just beginning full contact with the world, to surpass the political obstacles at the time and promote cooperation between cities. With the deepening of China's reform and the opening up of its market, economic factors have become the main driving force for friendly city exchanges since the 1990s. This can be proved from the geographical distribution of China's sister cities. The closer to the globalized regions, the friendlier cities are able to move toward depth and breadth of relations, and the more advanced the level of urban modernization. This fully reflects the interaction between globalization and urbanization factors in the development of sister cities. In recent years, friendly city exchanges increasingly become the main means of coordinating the country's overall diplomacy. Therefore, developing a friendly city is not only to shape the international image of the city, to promote the history and culture of the city; but also to promote the overall internationalization strategy of the city by carrying out humanities exchanges, and to laying the foundation for the development of the city from both economic and cultural aspects.

The local governmental engagement between China and the Central and Eastern European countries began on June 18th, 1980. Shanghai and Zagreb, the capital city of Croatia, officially became sister cities. Since then, China has started its local interaction with Central and Eastern European countries. However, the progress between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is not always entirely prosperous. For example, when we look at the statistics of the sister cities for friendship, there are three significant problems in China's city relations with Central and Eastern European countries. First, the overall quantity remains at a low level compared with other areas. Second, it stagnates in some years. Third, they are unevenly distributed in China and vice versa.

International friendship cities can also be called sister cities, since the mainland of China started its friendly city activities in 1973. As of December 31st, 2018, they account for a total of 2,532 pairs of sister cities in 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities (excluding Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao) with 136 countries. Among these friendly relationships, a total of 164 friendly cities are established within CEE countries.

Table 2. Friendly Cities between China and CEE until 31.12.2017

Country	Province	City	Sum
Albania	0	2	2
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0	1	1
Bulgaria	1	10	11
Croatia	0	4	4
Czech Republic	9	4	12
Hungary	19	19	35
Latvia	0	4	4
Lithuania	0	4	4
Macedonia	0	1	1
Montenegro	0	3	3
Poland	13	23	36
Romania	18	15	33
Serbia	2	4	6
Slovakia	1	3	4
Slovenia	0	4	4
CEE-total	63	101	164
Europe-total	261	643	904
World-total	650	1,882	2,531

Source: data collected from the China International Friendship Cities Association (CIFCA), http://english.cifca.org.cn/ (accessed 1.01.2018).

As of January 2018, China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have jointly formed 164 friendship cities (including voivodeship) relations. However, from the perspective of Europe (including 27 EU countries and 5 Central and Eastern European countries that have not yet obtained formal membership), the 16 countries account for 50% of the total number of Europe, but the number of sister cities accounts for only about 18%. From a global perspective, Central and Eastern European countries accounted for only about 6.5% of all the 136 countries. This is still inconsistent with the prospects for the development of bilateral relations.

Moreover, in the past years, despite the fact that annual quantity shows an overall upward tendency, there is also a stagnation period in the early stages. The figure below shows the changes in the number of China and CEE sister cities each year.

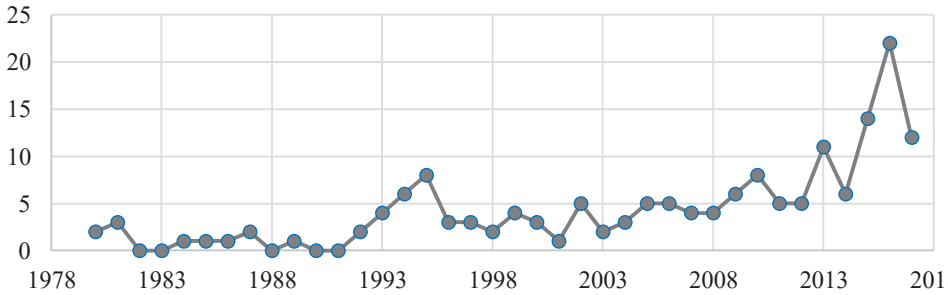

Figure 1. Amount China and CEE Friendship Cities (1980–2018)
Source: data collected from the China International Friendship Cities Association (CIFCA), http://english.cifca.org.cn/ (accessed 1.01.2018).

In 2016, the number of sister city friendships reached a peak of 22 pairs, but during the other years there was still fluctuating and small numbers, and even stagnant phenomena such as from 1990 to 1991. The reason why this problem occurs is that there is a specific correlation between the dynamic changes in the relations between China and Central and Eastern European countries: for example, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the political turmoil in China in 1989. On the other hand, the visits of Chinese President Xi Jinping Poland, Czech Republic, Serbia, and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe have helped to further cooperation. Also, after the occurrence of political protests in China, the relationship between sister cities has gradually resumed. It also shows that city diplomacy, as a semi-official form, can make a useful contribution to the maintenance of bilateral relations even when they are not normalized, and can be a useful supplement to bilateral diplomatic strategies.

Regarding the geographical distribution of friendly cities, the 31 mainland provinces (municipalities, autonomous regions), excluding Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, are ranked as follows:

Table 3. Friendly Cities between China and CEE until 2018 in Provinces

Province	Quantity	GDP (bln)	Share (%)	Population
Guangdong	14	7,951.21	10.69	104,303,132
Jiangsu	12	7,608.62	10.22	78,659,903
Henan	10	4,016	5.4	94,023,567
Shanghai	9	2,746.62	3.69	23,019,148
Hubei	9	3,229.79	4.34	57,237,740
Heilongjiang	8	1,538.61	2.07	38,312,224
Shandong	8	6,700.82	9	95,793,065
Beijing	7	2,489.93	3.35	19,612,368

Guangxi	7	1,824.51	2.45	19,612,368
Fujian	6	2,851.92	3.83	36,894,216
Hainan	6	404.45	0.54	8,671,518
Shaanxi	6	1,916.54	2.58	37,327,378
Sichuan	6	3,268.05	4.39	80,418,200
Hebei	5	3,182.79	4.28	71,854,202
Liaoning	5	2,203.79	2.96	43,746,323
Jiangxi	5	1,836.44	2.47	44,567,475
Gansu	4	715.2	0.96	25,575,254
Hunan	4	3,124.47	4.2	65,683,722
Ningxia	4	315.01	0.42	6,176,900
Tianjin	3	1,788.54	2.4	12,938,224
Shanxi	3	1,292.83	1.74	35,712,111
Jilin	3	1,488.62	2	27,462,297
Zhejiang	3	4,648.5	6.25	54,426,891
Anhui	3	2,411.79	3.24	59,500,510
Yunnan	3	1,487	2	45,966,239
Inner Mongolia	2	1,863.26	2.5	24,706,321
Guizhou	2	1,173.44	1.58	34,746,468
Qinghai	2	257.25	0.35	5,626,722
Chongqing	1	1,755.88	2.36	28,846,170
Tibet	0	NA	NA	NA
Xinjiang	0	NA	NA	NA

Note: Data for Xinjiang and Tibet are not available. Also, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan are excluded.

Source: the data comes from the World Bank (2018) and CIFCA (2018).

Regarding statistical data and geographical distribution, the provinces with the most sister cities (five or more), except Sichuan, are mostly located in the eastern part of China. Cities in networks tend to have both a hierarchical system and a spatial concentration primarily in regions such as Beijing-Tianjin--Hebei, Yangtze River Delta, and the Pearl River Delta region. Moreover, urban networks, under the framework of "Belt and Road", show several significant corridors and more opportunities for more cities, particularly western cities. For example, Guizhou Province, which is developing the big data industry; in fact, the government of Pomerania Province (Województwo Pomorskie) has already cooperated with Guizhou Province in this regard. Also, the Chinese Ministry of

Foreign Affairs holds several events promoting local provinces to the global media. This was the case for Sichuan in 2016, Minister Wang Yi stressed that,

> Sichuan is Connected with Central Asian and European countries to the West, aligned with the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor to the north, integrated in the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Bangladesh-China--India-Myanmar Economic Corridor to the south, as well as reaching the golden waterway of Yangtze River to the east, Sichuan boasts broad prospects in its blueprint for comprehensively opening-up (China MFA, 2016).

City network

A network, as an organizational model that promotes collective action, serves as a global governance approach. The American scholar Zeev Maoz (2009) states that "international relations have become a network relationship". Moreover, the concept of "network power" has come to exist (Grewal, 2011). As an emerging player, the city is involved in various transnational social networks in the era of globalization.

China and Central and Eastern European countries have relatively little cooperation in transnational city networks; however, such initiatives as Global Cities Dialogue, UCLG, Organization of World Heritage Cities, and Mayors for Peace cover many countries in CEEC. China and CEE countries under these networks collaborate on related issues. For example, Guangzhou, one of China's UCLG chairman cities, have been discussing cooperation issues with Lodz in urban governance issues in 2017

Table 4. China and CEE Countries in City Networks

Organization	Date of Founding	Number of CEEC	Number of China	Remarks
Global Cities Dialogue	1999	13	2	City Development
World Association of Major Metropolises (Metropolis)	1985	4	19	City Development
Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40)	2005	1	12	Climate Change
Regions of Climate Action (R20)	2010	2	1	Climate Change
United Cities and LocalGovernments (UCLG)	2004	16	20	Comprehensive
Organization of World Heritage Cities	1993	14	6	Culture
UNESCO Creative Cities Network	2004	8	4	Culture

World e-Governments Organization of Cities and Local Governments (WeGO)	2008	1	7	Information Technology
International Association for Peace Messenger Cities	1988	9	1	Social Issues
Mayors for Peace	1982	16	7	Social Issues
Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI)	1990	9	1	Sustainable Development

Source: summarized by the author.

China and CEE countries are participating in transnational city networks. From a spatial perspective, cooperation in a transnational city network covers different spatial scopes, including the cross-border urban network between Asia and Europe, and also involves participation in multinational city network cooperation such as UCLG. The Chinese central government retains significant control over foreign affairs at the local level. For instance, the state-organized "Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries" coordinates Chinese cities' participation in UCLG. China and Central and Eastern European countries have limited local cooperation through their participation in transnational city networks. It needs to be particularly pointed out that it is still difficult to judge whether there are apparent interactions between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in these networks.

For the participants, i.e., local governments (cities), non-governmental organizations, bilateral or multilateral development agencies, and academic and research institutions, the primary focus is on the low-politics field, especially on environmental protection and sustainable development. Due to its cross-border and diffuse nature, environmental issues become one of the most critical issues for network governance, followed by urban construction issues. At the same time, cooperation in the fields of tourism, culture, economy, and trade, and logistics. It reflects a substantial economic interest orientation. Most urban networks have a strong continuity of cooperation: the standing meetings of each mechanism are being operated for more than ten years, and this continuity is an essential guarantee of effectiveness.

Meanwhile, the merits of network cooperation are its non-binding property. Taking environmental cooperation as an example, China and Central and Eastern European countries have not formed a binding institutional framework based on the treaty system for environmental cooperation. The governance network with local governments (cities) as the leading player is more flexible and can solve common concerns through the use of voluntariness, mutual benefit, and consultation. This kind of cooperation at the local level has its own flexibility and advantages, and it provides a fundamental role in promoting overall regional integration.

Such network cooperation emphasizes the participation of multiple actors and has significant governance characteristics. As the information exchange and dissemination centre, the city is also the core area of information production. Non-government actors can rely on the city to participate in the global governance process. Moreover, the city can participate in the global civil society through non--governmental actors. For example, during the operation of UCLG, it divides into different sections according to regions, and the participation of actors in different fields is fully mobilized.

Finally, the network can promote mutual learning and consensus among participants. For example, the participation of organizations such as the C40 and UCLG gains experience for the development of sustainable urbanization in China and CEE countries, it provides a basis for cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries.

China started relatively late in the process of participating in transnational city networks, and their progress is relatively sluggish. However, the transnational city network is a new trend of local cooperation between China and CEE countries. It helps cities to communicate with each other and share successful practices and governance experienceIt also helps to solve the common problems of both cities.

Case study: Chengdu and Lodz – A local dimension

The subnational relations of Polish regions with Chinese partners are distinctive to some extent. In particular, the cooperation between the Lodzkie region (and its capital city of Lodz) and Sichuan (and its capital city Chengdu) serves as an example of the success of a CEEC region developing strong links with China. It is presented in numerous analytical publications and media reports in Europe (Casarini, 2015; Mierzejewski, 2017; Shepard, 2016; Szczudlik, 2015; Tiezzi, 2016; Kamiński, 2019).

For Poland, the present Polish government desires to change the current *status quo*; and the development of relations with Asia, especially China, is conducive to mitigating diplomatic pressure. Therefore, Poland regards Asia as a new target of its external affairs. Moreover, regarding infrastructural initiatives, the President of the Republic of Poland and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs opens Poland to China as potentially its largest investor and largest market outside the EU. Poland has an opportunity to assume the role of a hub (main distribution centre) for Chinese exports to Europe under the Chinese "Belt and Road" Initiative (Grajewski, 2017).

At the same time, although the economies of China and Poland still maintain an upward trend, the downward pressure on the economy is increasing. China and Poland stated clearly in the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Declaration in

2016 their wish to expand cooperation between the central and local governments of both countries.

Local cooperation is an essential driving force and a new growth point for the comprehensive development of China-Poland relations. Under the impetus of the governments of China and Poland, the China-Poland Local Cooperation Forum, an important symbol of local cooperation between China and Poland, has held six sessions in Guangzhou (2014), Wuhan (2017) and Chengdu (2018) in China, as well as in Gdansk (2013), Lodz (2015) and Warsaw (2016). The local forum continuously expands the cooperation between the two countries in the fields of culture, education, and tourism. In this context, Lodz, a city in the centre of Poland, has ambitions of becoming a transport hub for reloading goods (Mierzejewski, 2017), this coincides with the development strategy of Chengdu.

The Sichuan and Lodzkie provinces signed friendly cooperation agreements at provincial and city levels on June 29th, 2015 and April 29th, 2016 respectively. Lodzkie and Sichuan provinces established friendly relations and the Lodzkie capital of Łódź becomes a friendly city with Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province. Such cooperation between Sichuan and Łódź has been in tandem with China-Poland relations at the national level.

According to China's Xinhua News Agency, in 2014 and 2015, Chengdu and Lodz, the capital cities of Sichuan and the Lodzkie region, were awarded the China-Poland Friendly Cooperation Award by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries in terms of praising the intensive pragmatic cooperation between partners. Currently, Poland is Sichuan's largest trading partner in Central and Eastern Europe, despite the fact that the Sichuan and Lodzkie provinces are completely different in terms of the economic scale. That said, both from an economic and social development level the two provinces are becoming more and more alike. To further cooperation, the Sichuan province in Southwest China is now facilitating cooperation and exchanges with more countries and regions along the Belt and Road, with an intercontinental railway network connecting it to Europe and other parts of Asia. The route stretches 9,826 kilometres, almost along the ancient Silk Road, linking Chengdu with Lodz, an emerging European logistics hub in Poland.

Table 5. Lodz Voivodeship and Sichuan (and Chengdu) in Area, Population, and GDP

Specification	Lodz Voivodeship	Sichuan	Chengdu
Area (km^2)	18,219	486,000	14,312
Population (million)	≈2.48 (2017)	≈83.02 (2017)	≈16.04 (2017)
GDP (billion euro)	25.8 (2017)	469.41 (2018)	176.31 (2018)
GDP *per capita* (euro)	18,600 (2017)	5,668.85 (2018)	9,770.76 (2018)

Source: Statistical Office in Lodz (US w Łodzi) and Statistical Bureau of Sichuan.

The "Rong-Ou+" (Chengdu-Europe) Plan

In most cases, Central and Eastern European countries export raw materials to European markets, and these countries export their goods to China. Thus, Central and Eastern European countries' exports to China are underestimated. In recent years, the opening of the Rong-ou Express Railway enabled the two sides to improve their import and export trade. Due to the spectacular failure of the first attempt at the construction of Poland's A2 motorway by China Railway Engineering Corp (CREC), the Chengdu-Lodz railway did not attract much attention at the beginning. In May 2013, Hatrans, a local logistics services company in Lodz, launched the first regular railway container connection between Chengdu and Lodz. Within three years, the interest of customers increased significantly and subsequently an increase in the frequency of use (Janduła, 2016).

The achievement of the Lodz regional authorities in establishing a connection with various Chinese regions and being potentially able to reach to Chinese markets has significant implications. The arrival of the first cargo train from China on the 2nd January 2013, after a 2-week journey, the arrival of 41 carriages, mostly filled with electronics, was welcomed with hopes that the Lodzkie region could become a significant regional transportation hub.

It may turn out that rail transport is competitively priced with sea transport. In China, many factories are located in the interior of the continent, thus for the transportation of goods by sea reloading takes place, which incurs additional payments. Then in the European ports, it is necessary to reload the cargo in order to transport if further around the continent. Therefore, in the case of a freight train which sets off from Chengdu to Lodz, the whole duration of the trip decreases by one-third compared to sea transportation, and the cargo size is increased by a quarter.

The "Rong-ou+" strategy accelerates the construction of Chengdu International Railway Port and promotes the construction of its logistics, manufacturing, and service industry. The railway created a new bridgehead across Eurasian corridors. As of the first half of 2018, Rong'ou Express Railway (Chengdu-Lodz) operates 153 lines, it fulfils the goal of the daily operation, and carries a total of 5,906 containers. The European terminus extends to Nuremberg in Germany and Tilburg in the Netherlands, and an overseas company and Polish office in Lodz has been established. From the perspective of Sichuan's trade volume with Europe, the effect of the "Rong-ou+" strategy is significant. The proportion of Sichuan's cumulative imports from Europe to Sichuan has increased from 12.9% in 2017 to 13.8% in 2018. The proportion of exports to Europe is maintained at about 18%. Also, the transit time from Chengdu to Lodz is only about ten days; it is lower than the average of 13 days for all China-EU freight trains. It operates 11 services a week (six outwards and five inwards), it achieves bidirectional operation.

By the end of 2018, the Rong-Ou express railway had boosted Sichuan's total import and export trade by nearly 4 billion US dollars. In 2018, the total import and export volume of Sichuan-Poland exceeded US$230 million, a year-on-year increase of 74%. Moreover, with the support of the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine, Sichuan actively set up a designated port for the entry into the airport. In 2018, the first batch of Polish apples was successfully exported to China through Chengdu.

Sichuan Province and Chengdu City have strengthened the mechanism of exchange visits while establishing new mechanisms and platforms, i.e., the Chengdu international railway port and free trade zone. Since 2013, Chengdu international railway port has been continuously upgraded with the Chengdu--Europe Express Railway. Since 2017, the Qingbaijiang railway port in Sichuan inland free trade zone has been successfully approved, it became the first free trade zone area which relies on railway ports to be established.

The Chengdu-Europe Express Railway is an essential instrument for Chengdu to expand its relations with Poland and even Europe. The relationship between Sichuan and Lodz has accelerated since the opening of the "Rong-ou" Express. In 2014, the Lodzkie Province set up an Economic and Trade Representative Office in Chengdu (becoming Poland's second economic and trade representative office in China, after Shanghai) alongside Chengdu's EU Project Innovation Center. In 2015, the Polish Consulate General in Chengdu officially opened, which is Poland's third consulate general in mainland China. Later, Chengdu and Lodz formally signed a friendship city agreement. On November 22, 2018, Poland's economic and trade representative office in Chengdu was inaugurated at the China-Europe Center in the Chengdu High-tech Zone. It enables the representative office to greatly promote investment between the two sides and provide a platform for cooperation in aviation, supermarkets, railways, containers and other fields.

At present, Chengdu and Lodz National Economic Development Zone have signed a strategic cooperation agreement, and the two sides have in-depth cooperation in building a major international logistics channel. With the opening of Chengdu-Europe Express Railway, Sichuan has become the fastest-growing region in China's western provinces. The Rong-Ou Express Railway has connected Sichuan to Europe's major transportation arteries.

Challenges and opportunities for local governments

The goal of local governments to create favourable conditions for the opening and operation of a China-Europe express was mainly to reduce freight costs, so that the China-Europe express can play an active role in overcoming local development obstacles and foster new economic growth points in local provinces and cities.

However, despite the continued willingness of the two sides to cooperate at the local level, regardless of whether this can be sustainability achieved, many problems that hinder development are also encountered. As mentioned earlier, there is a huge asymmetry in the economic scale of both sides. Take the China-Europe express between Chengdu and Lodz as an example. First of all, in the freight cooperation between the two sides, the target market is not subdivided according to commodity cost, time, scale and other factors. On the contrary, in order to maintain or increase the number of trains to transport all technically feasible goods indiscriminately, the operation quality is reduced and the ability for sustainable development is restricted. As a result, some cities in China mainly rely on low prices to compete for the supply of goods.

Secondly, although the existing coordination mechanism has played an important role in promoting the development of China-EU express, its defects also restrict the development of trains. For China, the prominent contradictions between the central and local governments, line platform companies, domestic carriers and other domestic entities are one of the main factors restricting the improvement of the development quality of China-Europe express. The existing coordination mechanism relies more on initiative guidance than enforcement norms to exert its influence. It is difficult to play a significant role in resolving conflicts between the relevant local interests of industries, politics and economy.

Finally, the transport infrastructure in the countries along the route from Chengdu to Lodz is, to varying degrees, backward. These countries either have slow train operation speeds, due to ageing tracks and a state of disrepair of the railways, or have difficulty in keeping up with the increasing demand between China and Poland (and Europe) due to insufficient locomotives, less equipment for changing trains, less line layout, etc.

Therefore, the cooperation and interaction between the two sides at the local level, represented by China-Europe express, need to continue to supplement and establish specific working systems and norms of coordination mechanisms at the transnational, domestic and industry levels, and at the same time, it is necessary to establish an emergency mechanism to deal with unexpected problems so as to provide a basis for better coordination and resolution of obstacles to operation.

Conclusion

In the 40 years since the reform and opening up of CEE countries, local exchanges and cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries have gone through ups and downs. The “16 + 1 Cooperation” initiative launched in 2012 has gradually formed local leaders’ meetings, “Capital Mayors’

Forum", Sister-city cooperation, the China-Europe Express and other platforms. Cities in China's Sichuan, Zhejiang, and Hebei provinces, and cities in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Warsaw (Poland) and Lodz (Poland), have been active in participating in and advancing "16 + 1" local cooperation.

However, there is still room for further improvement in "16 + 1" local cooperation. Such as the demonstration effect and the scale of the economy must be highlighted, country differences should be highly valued, and multilateral cooperation platforms need to be further expanded. There are currently 164 pairs of friendly cities between China and Central and Eastern European countries. However, these friendly cities also have obvious deficiencies, such as insufficient quality of economic and trade cooperation, fewer cultural exchange activities of personnel, less coordination and cooperation between friendly cities, less substantive cooperation, a single exchange mode and the concentration of twinning in provincial capitals or state locations. At the same time, communication is in a more procedural and routine stage. Some cities do not have enough participation in the "16 + 1 cooperation" initiative and their overall influence in central and eastern Europe is relatively weak. Therefore their role in China-central and eastern Europe cooperation is also negligible.

It may be possible to build a cooperative network of friendly cities between China and Central and Eastern Europe, promote cultural and personnel exchanges in friendly cities in-depth, and form a regular exchange mechanism for friendly cities. For example, to strengthen complementary cooperation in specific economic fields, support sister cities in Central and Eastern European countries to host and provide assistance to the "16 + 1" local leaders' meetings, and actively invite more sister cities to cooperate in the EU and international networks in order to broaden local cooperation channels to further enhance the sustainability of cooperation.

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