

A Study in the City Diplomacy of the Silk Road Cities

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The study of diplomacy against current situation and theoretical research of international relations, especially the study of traditional diplomatic theories, has been involved in a monotonous repetition and circulation. In the circulation, the diplomatic theories of politics are restricted to the area of inter-country diplomacy, which has prevented public diplomatic relations from further development. Though countries still play major roles in Eurasian continental diplomacy, city diplomacy between the Asian-European countries that just sets off inter-country diplomacy has yielded further advancement of public diplomacy, which will have a great significance for cultural exchange, economic development, social civilization, and political comprehension (the inclusiveness of political ideologies). Therefore, against the era of “The Belt and Road” in today’s China, the study of diplomacy based on cities can exert a positive effect on the ease of sovereignty dispute, adaptation of globalization, the alleviation of conflicts by means of cultural soft power, and even the integration of regions.

Keywords: public diplomacy, city diplomacy, cultural soft power, “The Belt and Road”

The Beginning of City Diplomacy

Diplomacy, an old but fashionable instrument, originates from interpersonal communication between individuals and has developed to national association between countries and a political tool based on the formation of international relation systems and the advent of international affairs. At the very beginning, diplomacy has possessed strong characteristics of state-centralism. “Without the command of the emperor, dukes can’t have any diplomatic act or contact with each other¹” (Gu, 1997, p. 2) from the *The Spring and Autumn Annals*. Diplomacy will be legalized only by the authority of the emperor. While in the western semanteme, the diploma or the special identity certification promulgated by the sovereign or the senate² (Huang, 1995, p. 6). Traditional diplomacy centers on the states while the unconventional diplomacy focuses on the cities, divisions, individual, and so on, developing to the direction of diversification, professionalization, and openness (Zhao, 2013, p. 102). It is noted that, it is outdated to equalize the object of diplomacy to the foreign states on some particular issues like the Taiwan question. In this respect, we should draw a clear distinction between diplomacy and foreign policy. City diplomacy is not restricted to cities in two different

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¹ No one in the state could meet with a vassal without an order from the emperor. Without good diplomacy, there can be no national system.

² Diplomacy refers to a double fold certificate or a copy of a diploma, which is used by the ancient Greek monarch or the Senate to prove his or her identity when sending an envoy

countries but cities within a country or some controversial areas. The introduction of this viewpoint has a close relationship with the socialization of the diplomacy in the research of current international relations, which can get rid of the simple view—equalizing diplomacy to foreign policies and strategies—in conventional theories.

Based on the trend of “The Belt and Road” in the framework put forward by our country, city is the supporting unit and an important role in the construction. In the mainland, B&R relies on the international great route and requires the center cities along the line to be upholders. In this systematic project, countries along the line will promote regional economic cooperation, economic prosperity, and exchanges among different civilizations, aiming to the peace and development of the world. According to the principles of discussing together, building together, and sharing together³(National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015), we will build communities, and the building of each community cannot separate itself from city, the action agent.

Cities’ functions and status are always inferior to their own countries and central governments in most situations. In recent years, some researchers in the field of public diplomacy noticed the phenomenon and put forward that we should pay more attention to city served as an important diplomatic role. At the same time, diplomatic functions of cities are growing increasingly important day by day in the practice of national public policies. Compared with the development of city diplomacy in western society, it is necessary for policy makers to involve city diplomacy to the construction in the era of social transformation in China.

In the B&R construction, it is believed that only a high level of mutual trust and cooperation can promote the development of each other and even the entire Eurasian Silk Road economic belt. In the beautiful vision of the Silk Road economic belt, we should also see the deficiencies and defects. The cultural conflicts between countries along the way, economic differences, and political distrust are limiting the development of the Silk Road economic belt Asia. Contradictions between nations are produced by themselves, but dialogue and exchanges between countries in the field of public diplomacy have been evolving to a certain but limited extent, so it is necessary to seek more breakthroughs in inter-country diplomacy. Looking for a different way from traditional diplomacy like unconventional city diplomacy is a new style. As the main body of diplomacy, under the new mode in the new era of diplomacy, city’s main meaning for the present situation of contemporary international situation is looking for a more suitable diplomatic way in the conflicting or moderate situation so as to promote the development of the city, society, and state in the area under the background of building socialism new diplomacy in an all-around way.

Cities, in public diplomatic activities, for the country as a whole, carry less characteristics of sovereignty but more properties of civil society on the behalf of social economic and cultural cooperation. In terms of nation or city, it will remind you of different groups of people. Nations have more official color like central category, governments, politicians, while cities tend to remind you of citizens, citizens’ groups, etc. At the national level, the property is competition, while at the civic level is cooperation. Relationship is as shown below.

³ The Belt and Road initiative is a systematic project. It should follow the principles of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits, and promote the complementarity of the development strategies of countries along the Belt and Road

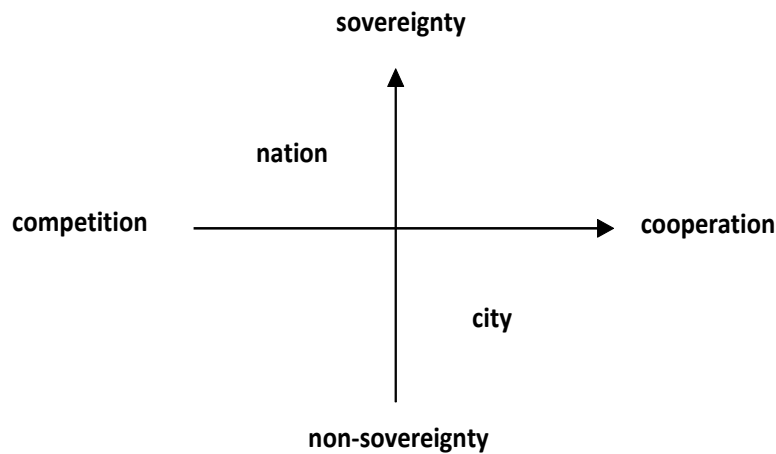


Figure 1. Nation diplomacy and city diplomacy.

Under the impression with the characters, the city can make the communication of the both sides smoother. Thus in both of conflict and ease cases, cities as the main body of diplomacy, can play a unique advantage and function, which is different from the central government.

The Developing of City Diplomacy

The basic scenarios of the international system include continuing as usual and transforming. In 21st century, the international system keeps developing, with which traditional actors—states, state allies as well as international organizations like the United Nation and the World Bank—gradually fail to keep up. Therefore, cities are taking more and more responsibilities for promoting the transformation of international system.

City, the basic functional actor, utilizes the fundamental resources and connects the domestic economy to the global cycle (Sassen, 2002). From a historical perspective, city is born to take in wealth from rural areas; organize and coordinate agricultural population; create the division of labor and relative knowledge; as well as nurture delicate culture and religions. It not only weighs significantly in trade network and military mobilization but also is management and control center (Buzan & Little, 1994, p. 231). Many cities actually play the role of their nations and help seize national interests: for instance, Athens and Sparta during the Peloponnesian War, Florence in Medici Family's Italy, Northern Germany cities in the Hanseatic League like Kolner, Luebeck, Hamburg, and Bremen. Nowadays, thanks to the global network, nations enhance the ability and chance for their own interests, but they are also restrained from intervening domestic economy and even political affairs too much. As a result, the original state-centered diplomacy is weakened⁴ (Tang, 2011, p. 20). In contrast, city diplomacy meets the new demand for its various subjects, flexible goals, and rich means.

According to different roles that cities play in diplomacy, scholar Zhao Kejin divides the development of city diplomacy into three stages—people-to-people diplomacy (1919-1980), initiative diplomacy (1980-2001), and city diplomacy (2001-). The third stage features the rising of various city organizations and global cities. For example, in 2001, the Global Forum was established. In 2004, the United Cities and Local Governments was founded. Taking advantage of these organizations, global cities like New York, London, and Kyoto not

⁴ State-centered spatial relations can no longer meet the needs of development

only establish the international network but also write the rules of city economy and social life⁵ (Zhao & Chen, 2013, p. 65).

China's city diplomacy is growing to maturity, given the facts that some local governments have joined in UCLG as founding members and many cities have established friendly relations with each other. The reform-and-opening-up policy determines the transformation of Chinese economy, changing the profit distribution between the central and the local to some extent. The local government gradually becomes independent with its own interest pursuits. Due to the unique status and angle, the local governments or the cities have different advantages. The mutual help in local governments has increased Chinese local city's foreign contact in the past decades. For example, Nanning held the China-ASEAN Exposition in 2016; the construction of China-ASEAN Free Trade Area is speeding up; the interregional economic cooperation in Zhujiang River Delta is strengthened, so is Guangdong's cooperation with Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan⁶ (Yang, 2007, p. 45).

The key to this Neo-Medievalism is to build up the logical link, telling how cities can push the transformation of the international system and to realize the independence of cities in the system. To achieve independence, city should weaken or eliminate its attachment to its nation. The process relies on the city itself and happens only in a network instead of the outer power's appealing⁷ (Tang, 2011, p. 21). Scholars have different voices—liberal parties claim that cities and local governments should take the lead, and even carry out their own diplomacy irrespective of the central's policy; conservative parties believe that diplomacy still belongs to the central while city is just executor; compromising parties abandon the two extreme opinions and focus on different merits of both sides in different situations.

In his article "Local Factors in Chinese Foreign Diplomacy", Yang Yong (2007) put forward that the central and the local's foreign activity can be explained by Hao Jing's Multi-Level Diplomacy Theory. And in the multi-level system, the diplomacy game between the central and the local can be non-zero-sum one.

Abroad, Japanese city—Kyoto began its city diplomacy in 1960. After it first established sister city relation with New York, it continues building the friendly relation with other cities like Beijing and Paris. The operation field includes education, culture, and administration. As shown in the figure.

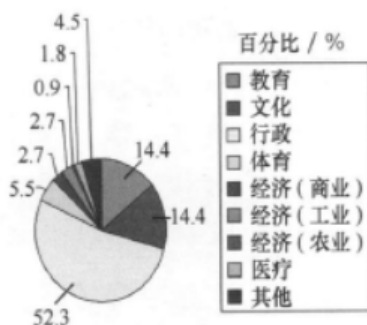


Figure 2 Percentage of Tokyo Sister City Exchange Activities (1999-2004) Source: Zhou, 2010, p. 51.

⁵ Global metropolises such as New York, London and Tokyo not only build networks of relationships in virtually every corner of the world, but also control the rules of the game for the economic and social life of global cities.

⁶ In order to promote the mutual cooperation between local governments and local cities in China's foreign exchanges, in the past decades of China's continuous development, such as the China-ASEAN Expo settled in Nanning, the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area construction process accelerated, the pan-Pearl River Delta regional economic cooperation, Guangdong, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan cooperation and exchange further strengthened.

⁷ The key to eliminating or weakening dependence on the state is not the city itself but the pull of external forces on the city, and that pull can only happen in a network.

The city diplomacy of city—Kyoto has made full use of the superior resources of different sister cities and conducted different exchanges. Both sides attach more importance to cultural and economic exchanges with various forms, continually deepen mutual cooperation, and export technology and culture to impress the sister city favorably, to improve local city's and even the country's image, and to achieve diplomatic win-win between the local and the center or the native country and the foreign country.

A typical example of city diplomacy in China is the Expo diplomacy in 2010 bridging itself on the World Exposition. Generally speaking, the Expo diplomacy refers to the sum of all diplomatic activities related to politics, economy, safety, technology, and culture, which are carried out by international agents and center on or rely on the World Exposition⁸ (Ma, 2010, p. 24). Compared with traditional diplomacy, the culture embodied in city diplomacy appears more inclusive and affinitive. Besides, against the background of globalization, smooth information flow has promoted the communication between people all over the world so city diplomacy has become more effective and convenient. The association built between cities can carry the characteristics of individual counties and, in turn, foster friendly relations between the local and country. The Expo diplomacy has improved the relations between countries and, at the same time, displayed China's national image, further showed Chinese culture on the world stage, and strengthened China's soft power so as to improve national hard power via mutual technological complement and cultural exchanges. The civil society represented by city diplomacy can narrow the distance between the people of different countries.

Another instance is international public diplomacy of Kunming. Zhang Jinping mentioned that in the essay "Public Diplomacy in Regional International City Strategy of Kunming" given Kunming's regional economic situation in Yunnan Province and to respond to the construction of bridgehead, the regional international city strategy of Kunming is put forward, which reads that "conducting public diplomacy requires to display Kunming's achievements and advantages to outside world and people, and to shape values, systems, administrative efficiency, city civilization and cultural deposits into powerful motive force of the international construction of Kunming city"⁹ (Zhang, 2011, p. 151).

However, with regard to the development of city diplomacy in China, most cities' diplomatic activities are just limited to economic cooperation and foreign investment. Moreover, the civil society is far away from maturity and cannot be involved in city diplomacy. The city diplomacy restricted to economic level can only lead to short-term economic cooperation and insufficient cultural exchanges between cities, and community construction can only remain at the stage of interest community.

In harmonious or mitigated situation, city diplomacy can be used as a diplomatic means of promoting regional cooperation and development, different from the traditional diplomacy, so as to achieve bilateral or multilateral collaboration. Similarly, under conflict, city diplomacy can still play an important role in talk and negotiation. For example, the important principle—shelving disputes—adopted in addressing the South China Sea Issue and the Taiwan question has stand out in the talks and negotiations between cities or local governments, which is quite different from traditional diplomacy seen as direct confrontation between center authorities. One more example is the dispute between Huangyan Island and Fiery Cross Reef. Though the

⁸ The so-called "Expo diplomacy", in a broad sense, refers to the sum total of political, economic, security, scientific and technological, cultural and other diplomatic activities carried out around the theme of international activities or with the help of the Expo.

⁹ Carry out public diplomacy, show the achievements and advantages of Kunming to the outside society and the public, and form a strong driving force of kunming's international construction with value concept, system model, administrative efficiency, urban civilization and cultural implication.

negotiation between states hit bottleneck, the cities of the two countries in the controversial areas can cooperate with each other individually, which also embodied the principle—shelving disputes. Furthermore, after the new “president” of Taiwan came into power, Taiwan question has appeared trickier. On September in 2016, eight counties and cities of Taiwan went to the mainland of China and had exchanges with Beijing, and Taiwan Affairs Office took every measure to promote the exchange, which is also an illustration of city diplomacy breaking the deadlock of traditional one.

The Construction of “The Belt and Road” City Diplomacy

The tradition diplomacy has put long-term emphasis on the state actors, causing problems of global governance. As Tang Wei said, city diplomacy has succeeded in moderately reducing dependence on country, and urban network demands more builders, who inevitably include governmental agencies, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and media enterprises, and create space of flows to make city and country engage each other¹⁰ (Tang, 2013, p. 97). In addition, they should choose a compromising way to enable city to carry out exchange and cooperation without separating itself from national sovereignty so as to build the three-stage communities in One Belt One Road: community of common interest, common responsibility, and common destiny, and to make city become a flexible mediator in a conflicting or less conflicting situation.

The development of city diplomacy is a partial victory of that of civil society. The maturity of civil society is a crucial factor in successful city diplomacy, as well as its subject. During the process of constructing One Belt One Road in Asia and Europe, city diplomacy can combine the specific conditions in cities of both sides to obtain complementary advantages and mutual progress. Humanistic diplomacy is a considerable part of what hides behind civil society. Humanistic diplomacy shares flexibility with city diplomacy so the cultural integration carried by humanistic diplomacy can yield diplomatic achievements between civil societies, cities, and even countries. Meanwhile, under the gloom of globalization, the cooperation between Asia and Europe can outshine others in the international community via the construction of city diplomacy. Some of the biggest barricades between Asia-Europe cooperation are listed below. First, the internal unity within Asian countries is far away from that of European ones. Second, that European countries hype up Myanmar Issue and South China Sea Issue has caused disharmonious dialogue. Last but not least, the progress of European integration has suffered a setback (Dai, 2016, p. 140). All of these bottlenecks remain to be settled with the breakthrough of city diplomacy.

After the proposal of constructing One Belt One Road, a number of cities in China respond one by one and suggest building a new start and bridgehead for Silk Road economic belt. Similarly, if the abutting joint of Silk Road cultural belt can be forged based on city diplomacy, the development space and potential will be tremendous. At the same time, the interaction between the cultural soft power of both sides must center on these factors: humanistic sensitivity, diplomatic fragility, and social legitimacy. Furthermore, the core questions are right to explore why there are chasms between different civilizations and culture, how to narrow the cultural gap between different cultural values, and how to resolve the priming effect of tension international relations resulted from cultural differences (Zhao, 2015, p. 139).

As the interest community based on economic cooperation has come into being, it is more necessary to build responsibility community and destiny community through cultural exchanges based on city diplomacy in

¹⁰ Including government agencies, international and non-governmental organizations, as well as media and information enterprises, to create a flow space for them to 'mesh' with each other.

the construction of One Belt One Road. To obtain mutual political trust by the means of cultural exchanges and clarify the responsibilities and destinies of both parties in diplomacy is the original intention and end of the proposal: constructing One Belt One Road.

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