

# DECENTRALISED COOPERATION AND FRENCH-CHINESE SISTER CITIES: A GEOGRAPHIC APPROACH IN THE OCCITANIE REGION

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*Abstract:* In 1981, the metropolitan areas of Montpellier and Chengdu signed the first French-Chinese sister city (SC) agreement. This type of relationship has historically led to what is termed as “decentralized cooperation” (DC), a concept that has been simplified following the enactment of French decentralisation laws in 1992. The primary purpose of sister city agreements was to enable French local administrations to establish formal cooperation and DC projects with foreign local authorities (Tulard 2006: 7-12, 15-55). Regarding SC and DC, the political ambitions of mayors have facilitated the development of a “global village” since the 1950s across various domains, including bilateral economic cooperation, student exchanges, local and international festivals, among others.

Consequently, this article examines the role of sister city relationships as a potential means of safeguarding international relations (IR) through a microscale perspective. This study adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on the results of thirty interviews conducted in France and China between 2020 and 2023. In the context of the competition between the “West” and the “Global South,” sister city partnerships are increasingly confronted with crises within a complex global landscape characterized by tensions between deglobalization and European strategies of de-risking. While shifts in the global order remain uncertain, glocal tensions persist, oscillating between cooperation and competition (Bartsch, Wessling 2023: 19-55).

*Keywords:* Glocal globalisation, Sister cities, Poly-perma crisis, Decentralised cooperation, Guizhou-Occitanie relationship.

## INTRODUCTION

Torn between the realistic, idealistic, constructivist and pessimistic schools of thought, many concepts and ideologies were born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to describe paradigms of globalisation. Their goal was to spread ideas within the science of international relations literature (IR) and describe a paradox between many visions of the world (Éthier [2010] 2024: 14-74). For in-stance, liberal theories led to multilateralism in globalisation. In opposition to liberalism, Marxism and anti-imperialist activism led to ideas related to deglobalisation (Éthier [2010] 2024: 135-198). At this point, the reality of an “awakened Global South challenging the West”, which might “have lost it”, has emerged (Mahbubani 2018). The Singaporean researcher reflects on many future scenarios and potential challenges that come from Asia to twist the world order established since 1945. However, the formation of the BRICS countries alliances (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) is described as a policy of a hypothetical “dewesternisation” in the IR literature (Mahbubani 2022: 15-85)<sup>1</sup>. Eventually led by China and Russia, the BRICS+ proposal brings up a hypothesis of the West’s loss due to a possible “Asian 21st century” according to the author (Mahbubani 2022: 15-85). However, China’s complex history includes many beliefs that are strongly related to Marxist ideologies. This vision of the world remains in the current multilateral perspective as described by President Xi Jinping’s vision of “the Chinese dream 中国梦” and the example of the Belt and Road Initiative (Cheng 2018: 70-78). This is why, by setting up partnerships with people believing in the 天下 ideology “behind the sky” requires an understanding of mandarin as a language, a multicultural area, and the history of China.

For instance, China was first pictured by Europeans as a strong civilisation related to the name 中国 (middle empire). However, this depiction has undergone many fluctuations throughout history: China was sometimes perceived as an ally, and sometimes as a threat.

The very first description came up when Chinese people were referred to as “the people from Cathay” and associated with the production of silk. As Guillaume de Rubrouck writes,



it is “a place where the thinnest silk ever was produced”. This Flemish Franciscan explorer mentioned Chinese craftsmen while he visited Mongolia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century before Marco Polo did. During one of his trips (between 1271 and 1275), he shares the following description:

Cathay people are of a small breed, and they breathe heavily through the nose when talking. In general, all Orients have only small eye holes. They are excellent craftsmen in all fields, their doctors understand very well the effectiveness of medicinal plants, and they can diagnose wisely from the pulse (Spence 2000: 17-33).

## RESEARCH PROPOSAL

As empirical-inductive research, this paper starts with an overview of French-Chinese relationships at a glocal scale. The aim is to explore what are the consequences for the concerned territories that are linked to an international partnership. They are represented here by the Occitanie region in France, the Guizhou province in China, and the city of Chengdu (also located in South China). Then, by looking at historical exchanges, this research brings up a contextual understanding on how Marshall McLuhan’s notion of global village has emerged.

Likewise, a typology of crises is presented to analyse how local and global exchanges might be related to globalisation, and a plural stakeholder logic. As an answer to this question, a classification of many crises is presented to understand how an overview of French Chinese sister cities can be produced. Furthermore, the Chinese notion of “Guanxi” uncovers some elements of response that helps to understand the selected sample from the Occitanie region by following a qualitative method. After the analysis of 30 interviews conducted with 3 variables of samples, this article offers a different paradigm analysis.

In a nutshell, the first one deals with local public administrations, the second one is represented by French associations, and the last one stands for Chinese partners. An ecosystem pattern unveils a complex architecture from local to global scales that is strongly related to a polycrisis context.

## HISTORY: A KEY TO UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT GLOBAL SYSTEM

Historical exchanges first appeared as a way to keep international affairs “out of the public eye”, according to a realistic school of thoughts. Hans Morgenthau and Raymond Aron were the forefathers of the classical realist school which was inspired by Machiavel’s *Prince* ideology. Indeed, to understand how international relations should be a “matter of states”, realism places sovereignty at the heart of IR to deal with political perspective and city diplomacy concept (Battistella et al. [2003] 2019: 121-168). Former French President Jacques Chirac (presidential term from 1995 to 2007) demonstrated a similar opinion following Hans Morgenthau’s vision “alliances vs. domination” (Morgenthau 1949). This interpretation of realism was defined while the President visited French Polynesia in 2003. President Chirac mentioned, at this time, an urge to cooperate, as demonstrated by this quote: “it would be a better way to construct a multipolar world and prevent political chaos as a means of rethinking international relations” (Battistella 2004: 87-88; Morgenthau 1949: 136-142).

However, while globalisation has expanded after World War II, international cooperation has made room for a global governance led by the United States of America (USA) and some international organisations (IO) such as the United Nations (UN), Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the World Bank, etc.

Through Emmanuel Kant’s or Woodrow Wilson’s idea of positivism, the liberal paradigm took on a universal measure. This enthusiasm generated a complex system where the notion of “glocal” fits perfectly.

As described by the sociologist Victor Roudometof, “globalisation and glocal” refer to a Japanese term which appeared in 1990-1991: “dochakuka” (from Japanese キーワード 土着化), in a “think global, act local” policy (Martin, Woodside 2007: 19-32). Relying on Roland Robertson’s definition, the sociologist Victor Roudometof defines glocalisation as follows:

the global is not in itself the counterweight to the local. On the contrary, what is often called local is essentially understood within the

global. Thus, globalisation, defined in its most general sense as the compression of the world into a single unit, includes the linking of different localities. But it also presupposes the ‘invention’ of the locality, just as we are talking about the invention of tradition (Robertson 1992: 137-138; Roudometof 2021: 45-70).

Due to the rise of non-state stakeholder’s acts in IR, a constructivist ideology has emerged in the 90s on the behalf of this science. After following John Searle’s notion of a “social reality”, the heart of constructivism has first appeared in a governance “from below” (on a bottom-up governance). This contrasts with a top-down governance which appears “following” a capitalist hierarchical legacy questioning “does the real world exist?” (Searle 1995: 149-199). In this context, SCs have first appeared in France to bind together local administration, but evolved to conduct a multi-stakeholder globalisation through a scalar perspective. Abiding by both constructivist and regionalist beliefs, SCs were built from the ashes of “the Christian Road” during the Middle Ages. European Christian cities were peered by Charles Irénée Castel de Saint-Perre’s ideas between 1645 and 1730<sup>2</sup>. During the rise of his diplomatic and academic career, the Abbot promoted “a warless world”. The stake was to preserve “a Christian united confederation” from the expansion of monotheism using the symbol of sister cities (Frey 2012: 455-473). The growth of city exchanges, initiated by religious motives in western Europe, was then developed for political purposes to expand as a multilateral project (Zelinsky 1991: 1-31).

This is why “it would clearly appear complicated to uphold international relationships in the political sphere alone” (Battistella [2003] 2015: 313-348). Besides, these exchanges are already recognised as a destabilising, multipolar and social world torn between competition and cooperation.

Nonetheless, “southern emerging powers” are currently taking centre stage in global inquiries such as water resources, economic debates and new technologies. According to Samir Amin and Emmanuel Todd, this implies the urge of an indisputable “new world order” (Amin, Herrera 2000; Todd 2024). Formerly referred to as “ex-third world countries”, a term initiated by Alfred Sauvy (1952), these countries acquired a less degrading

name: they became “emerging countries,” and then were given the nickname of “global south” in the 1990s (Bouron et al. 2022: 1-19). Incited by China and Russia, BRICS countries are acquiring their own geopolitics. Zhang Weiwei, who believed in a “China Wave”, introduced the rise of a “civilizational state” in 2012. He describes Chinese outperformance over global economic and electronic market as follows:

an ordinary country that carried out reforms in accordance with the Western theory of the market economy and thus enjoyed rapid development, and with a growing middle class [...] and eventually become part of the Western world (Weiwei 2012: 47-71).

Moreover, the rivalry among multinational private companies highlights a multipolar technological competition as it is represented by the BATX trailing behind the GAFAM. Due to an adaptation to the e-market, and a multipolar system that keeps turning immaterial, the constructivist position and the growing competition in the economic field and IT has added weight in multipolar features. As an example, “the rise and diversity of non-state actors” and “the multi-actor global governance” are widespread (Ganapathy-Doré 2015: 117-139). According to the following quote, attributed to Winston Churchill: “History is written by the victors”. It appears that colonialism was the trigger of Chinese nationalism in the 1920s, in reference to the “unequal treaty” signed after the two Opium wars (yā piàn zhàn zhēng 鴉片战争) and the western colonialism influence.

In contrast, the concept of “Yellow Peril”, a paranoid fear of Chinese replacement, described Chinese people as “a new threat” in the 1950s. Yet, it seemed to resurface in the devilish vision conveyed by President Trump during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, who blamed “a Chinese virus”. As an answer, “China bashing” from the West opposed a feeling of nationalism that made its way back in China’s policies. Blaming colonisation, it has become a trend of “West bashing”, resulting from the trauma caused by “this long century of 110 years opened in 1839”, and a current economic conflict on its way back to global governance (Kaufman 2011: 1-10).

Owing to the Opium wars and the loss of a large proportion of its territory, China entered the “century of humiliation”

between 1839 and 1949. It also was nicknamed in Chinese as “a hundred years of national disgrace” (“bǎi nián guó chǐ” 百年国耻) by Chinese officials and remains a current trauma. This part of history proved to be strategic when Western countries imposed an access to China’s harbours. After signing the Nanking treaty in 1842, and the Tianjin one in 1858, France, the UK, the Russian Empire and the USA imposed themselves in China (Stiglitz, Rodrik 2024; Millward 2023: 4-10). The USA has once contributed to strengthen China’s neighbours such as South Korea, India or Japan, “the younger brother”, to build an army “strong enough to defeat China and gain control over Taiwan and portions of Manchuria” in the 1890s (Kaufman 2011: 1-2). This historical fact can be paralleled with current geopolitical events and several tensions occurring in China’s sea. Finally, the unequal treaty legacy seems to have shaped how Chinese intellectuals see the international system and interfere with the current world order. The early realist school of thought describes China as detached from an “inherently” international system and the Western domination. The second view, according to Kaufman, represents China’s adaptation to an existing system and contribution to a cooperative order. The third one is the transformation of the current system to a more “equitable and non-competitive system”, in accordance with the five “principles of peaceful coexistence established in 1950” (Jiali, Thakur 2004: 30-34).

Therefore, globalisation has drastically changed the perception of space and time. Starting from ancient Roman trade, up to the rise of an immaterial market in which commercial apps appear (e.g. Alibaba, Amazon, Temu), the Internet and new technologies has reshaped the representation of “speed” towards globalisation and international trade (Hauer 2016: 2-3). Cohen and Verdier (2008: 7-41) refers to an immaterial globalisation where all domains are concern: 1) international trade; 2) book industry; 3) music; 4) cinema; 5) television, 6) pharmacy industry; 7) computing; 8) law. The growth of information and communication technology (ICT) and glocal partnerships at many scales, such as SCs, have also been simplifying the understanding of a complex global system. When the scale, the scope, and the speed become keys to better understanding commercial settings, more places are opening access to four major

poles: European countries, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southern America and the Eurasian-Pacific region. For example, according to the United Nations Group (G7), the “growing solidarity” of Southern nations contributes to the rise of BRICS countries, and the success of the former “Shanghai Five”, initiated in 1996. Also, the current Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Silk Road plus corridors contribute to a long-term Chinese global strategy (Xue, Mwadi Makengo 2021: 1-17). However, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) strategy might reveal different opinion on the regional area (Cabestan 2013: 423-435).

## CHINA’S SILK ROAD FROM ANCESTRAL TRADE TO NOWADAYS

Located in the current Shaanxi province, the city of Xian (formerly known as Chang’an) used to be the capital of the Chinese Empire during the first imperial Qing dynasty (from 221-206 B.C.)<sup>3</sup>. As a key location for trade during the first Silk Road time, the city was connected to Venice (during the Roman Empire) to begin commercial praxis such as: “the exchange of good ideas between diverse cultures” along the two areas.

Xi’an has delimited the ancient Silk Road, which seems to have been founded between 206 B.C. and 220 A.D. (Brown, O’Brien 2024). The economic link and cultural relationships along that Silk Road could be described as the first international connected areas, comparable to SCs. It can even be described as de-centralised cooperation from the capitals. As this relationship grew, a pluricultural network of trade was established along Eurasian countries. It also facilitated numerous cultural exchanges between the Chinese and Roman civilisations. Hence, this trade might represent ancestral international or regional cooperation. It has inspired current President Xi Jinping’s project when the New Silk Road and the One Belt One Road (OBOR) corridors were launched (Lasserre et al. 2019: 33-48).

OBOR’s initiative was built from the ashes of the ancestral Silk Road in 2014. Its purpose is to create a route from north-east China (in Xinjiang Autonomous Province) to Uzbekistan.

The aim is to develop multiple networks as Chinese corridors rather than starting from scratch (Lasserre et al. 2019: 33-48). China's ambition to develop Central Asia fulfils a quote – unproven but attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte (1816) – who described China as a “sleeping dragon” or “sleeping giant” that will change the world: “When China wakes, the world will tremble.” Likewise, many reforms have taken place in a globalised China: “from Mao Zedong to President Deng Xiaoping and now President Xi Jinping”. This expression inspired former minister Alain Peyrefitte when he visited China after General de Gaulle recognised the Republic of China in 1964. Two books were written (in 1973 and 1996) to explore China's emergence as a major global power during President Deng Xiaoping's term in office.

Furthermore, numerous administrative reforms have been implemented in Chinese local administration from President Deng Xiaoping's term to current President Xi's. Some provinces have been granted more independence due to a global city phenomenon and smart cities ambitions.

In the early 1980s, China's goal was to increase global trade and improve relationships between the federal government and national companies such as Tencent group (1998) and Alibaba group (1999), among others.

China turned into “an indispensable part of the world economy”. This integration was symbolised by its membership in international organisations, such as the world trade organisation (WTO) in 2001 (Songtao 2006: 9-11). At this point, China's strategic partnerships spread all around the world. OBOR's regional initiative turned into global transactions and new trading possibilities opened in Central Asia (from the Xinjiang province to Kazakhstan). A maritime Silk Road has also been settled in the Indo-Pacific region from the Chinese coast to Hanoi and Jakarta (Lasserre et al. 2019: 8).

However, there still remain complaints from both Europe and the US regarding an unfair competition in trading: Chinese exports have grown since 2004 (Niquet, Péron-Doise 2024: 11-20). Indeed, Chinese products have become more affordable and abundant in the global market. The spread of e-shopping mobile commerce (e.g., Temu, Aliexpress, Shein) have reduced the distance between Chinese shops and worldwide households. New

consumption habits have appeared within middle class households. The massive use of these apps lead to suspicion, firstly from the USA, secondly from Europe (Lincot 2019a: 146-153). As a result of this tense economic situation, the USA has decided to ban TikTok (19 January 2025), and increase taxes (customs duty) for Chinese products. However, these sanctions seem to have promoted disobedience from citizens, while the trend #tick-tockrefugees brought more users into another Chinese app 小红书 (little red book, red note) to contest a national political decision (CNN 2025).

However, the degrading Chinese public image has more influence in France than it does in the US. In France, some sister cities decided to cut ties with China or “de-risk” (as the official UE announces) the trade from Chinese partnerships and offers on the European market. For instance, President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, gave two speeches in front of the Mercator Institute of China Studies in March and April of 2023. Since then, the EU Commission has acknowledged the need to approach an EU-China strategy from a European standpoint. This argument remained essential during President Xi Jinping’s visit to Paris, followed by a tour in eastern Europe, including Belgrade and Budapest (CNN 2025).

Subsequently, visa facilities were decided for French, Luxembourgian and Belgian nationals until 2025. This visit was the occasion to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of French-Chinese diplomatic relationships and the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Romanian-Chinese diplomatic relations.

## FRENCH-CHINESE SISTER CITIES IN AN IMMATERIAL GLOBAL VILLAGE

In 2014, Henry Kissinger defined a “world order” in accordance with the united past colonial Empire paradigm. As a diplomat who belongs to the realistic school of thoughts, Kissinger highlighted the need to follow a global setup in the spirit of the 1648 Peace of Westphalia treaty (Aureau 2015: 188-190). As shaping the world appears heterogeneous because of lack of inclusivity (i.e., all territories are not fairly in-

cluded), the latter mollifies alliances such as the ones represented by the BRICS countries. This is why the abundance of international fairs “from the South” are built to preserve “global matters” (Paul 2010: 20-30). For instance, the 2023 BRICS Summit occurred in Johannesburg to reveal the expansion of its members (from 5 to 9 nations). This event demonstrated the will to change “the world order” from countries that suffered from globalisation inequalities and colonialism. In addition to the 5 original members linked in 2001, 10 countries have taken part in a global project to question a system controlled by “Davos” or “the US dollar hegemony”. The South projects englobe many quantitative facts such as “3,6 billion inhabitants, being 46,6% of global population”. Altogether, the BRICS+ economic weight represents 36% of global gross domestic product (GDP), while G7 countries represent 20% (Delcourt 2024: 7-28).

To sum up these facts, Professor Klaus Schwab (2020) has proposed a planification of “the great reset”. After the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in 2020, his theory relies on the stakeholder concept at the WEF the same year.

This analysis resumes a multi-scalar analysis to deal with what is described as: “macro reset; a micro reset to cope with industry and business; and an individual reset” (Schwab, Mallert 2020: 15-70). Moreover, the 20-member group’s reunion, scheduled for 9 September 2024 (in New Delhi, India), represents a competitive multi-aligned nation’s project willing to collaborate with both the North and the Global South.

Currently, Europe remains at the centre of international trade and China’s secondary economic partner. Yet, southern nations and the emergence of an African union appear to have even greater access to the global market. This brings new stakes in China-Africa alliances (Africa 2060) and the newest BRICS +. This is why, in a current multipolar context between regional alliances and global competition, a sustainable key remains: “international coepetition”, which rhymes with both a global and local strategy. As for the transition of governance towards a local level and global challenges, it is represented by a multi stakeholder globalisation (NGO, local public administration, association, companies, etc.).

For instance, France's SCs first appeared in 1952, behind a political desire to unify a pair of cities and local municipalities in order to rebuild peaceful relationships after WWII (Tulard 2006: 6-7). Also, the phenomenon of decentralised cooperation that came forth in the nineties helped local authorities to be part of the debate on international relations. As a matter of facts, the multiple synonyms of this phenomenon in common discourse are important to be noticed. These are: "sister-cities", "international friendships", "town twinning" or even "linked cities". Not only do they refer to local governments, but they also include local business, communities, or the education sector" in general (Franco, Marmelo 2014: 76-88). According to the 2024 French European association network (Association Française du Conseil des Communes et Régions d'Europe, AFCCRE) report: "more than 36 000 local authorities are implied in the movement of twinning ('jumelages') in Europe. As for the representation of these local governments, they remain central in Europe's international development.

As it is defined by the structure of the local government union known as "Cité et Gouvernements Locaux Unis" (CGLU) and the World Federation of United Cities (WFU) (AFCCRE 2024). The first one sits in Barcelona, gathering 136 united nations in a decentralised structure to fight for the interests of local and regional governments at a glocal scale. This organisation stands for the impact of inter-organisational cooperation which includes an institutional aspect.

In fact, "local authorities face increasingly complex situations due to the constant and various social transformations arising from the system's environment" (Franco, Marmelo 2014: 76-88). As for the WFU, it was originally founded in 1957 in Aix-les-Bains (south-eastern France) to gather French representatives and English-speaking countries (intergovernmental and non-governmental organisation) to represent a multipurpose glocal organisation such as North-North, North-South and East-West cooperation. This is the reason why a multiple stakeholder atmosphere remains, as the multi-regional network (translated from French "réseau régional multi acteurs", RRMA).

However, the idealistic goal of SCs remains co-constructive: It aims to work on international cooperation projects, folklore

sharing, and enter a certain trustworthy network in order to create a long-term cooperation and a win-win partnership. But the opposition remains at meso and micro scales, when history has reopened scars that time has not healed yet, such as colonialism and duty of memory.

For instance, the Global South discourse on reforming world order appears necessary: “It’s time for a radical re-imagination of the multilateral system to strengthen global cooperation commensurately” (Coulibaly 2022: 1-12). Marie José Tulard analyses the legal purpose of SCs and DC. She defines the goal of SC as follows: “to share a common vision between at least two authorities at a smaller scale than national authority” (Tulard 2006: 2-10). To ease the impact of SCs, the jurist explains how the development of local authorities is legally conducted by the “orientation law” (the French Defferre Law of 1982). It lets local authorities entering the international landscape (Tulard 2006). In 2021, the law was enriched with a “human sustainable and solidarity aspect”. The definition, add an inch of global inquiries to pursues the debate aimed for “human rights” and “climate change” concerns. This way, multilateralism has allowed the multiplicity of non-institutional stakeholders in the international scene to connect a global village between SCs and the concept of “city diplomacy” (De Giuseppe 2022: 8-12). More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic conditions have imposed the use of virtual connection, as attested by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) report, written in 2023 (Ferretti 2024: 2-41).

Concerning French decentralisation and the neologism of city diplomacy studies as an institutional matter, it has represented an immaterial (or virtual) scale where territory is taking a central turning point: “The final step of decentralised cooperation to contribute to territoriality through a public action working with development strategies” (Djeffal, Laleg 2023: 371-378).

This phenomenon remains related to local and global scale as the example of smart cities demonstrates.

In fact, the relationship between different scales: micro, meso and macro, can be compared to “the linkage between molecules, cells and organism”. The Global village notion

(McLuhan 1962) is an evolving terminology: It eventually became an interconnected or virtual globalisation because of how it is connected by the development of the internet, social network, and now personal assistance from collaborative intelligence (CI) and artificial intelligence (AI) (Cohen, Verdier 2008: 173). Global geography and territorial limits change the game of boundary lines. As Bill Gates noted in 2014: “the internet is becoming the town square of the global village of tomorrow” (Royal Television Society 2014).

The advent of the internet, the transformation of spatial dynamics, has significantly altered the influence of digitally interconnected domains, such as social networks. This evolution has redefined traditional concepts of “community” and “believers”, giving rise to numerous questions concerning “cyber regulations”, “security”, “finance” and “influence”, which continue to be subjects of ongoing debate and analysis (Ogunsipe 2017: 2-18). The widespread utilisation of the internet at the beginning of the 1990s has evolved into a mobile revolution in the early 2000s. Whereby societal issues and diverse news have become magnified, often leading to disproportionate responses. Also, the subsequent century heralds the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, which introduce new challenges without necessarily resolving the issues that predated their emergence. As the geographical and conceptual distance of global concerns has been diminished through the increased interdependencies, they were fostered by these new technologies, as well as the proliferation of multiple communication channels. Currently, various means of communication are available, and they continue to evolve. These include written correspondence, text messaging, email, telephone calls, and video conferencing, among others (Ogunsipe 2017: 2-18). Furthermore, these tools are turning into futuristic projects such as Mark Zuckerberg’s “metaverse” or Elon Musk’s bet to implant sims human brains (e.g., the neura-link project of 2024).

Science evolves, as an immaterial globalisation seems to bring new goals in a multipurpose perspective. As per the German portal Statista, the use of Chinese apps is also increasing and spreading. Tencent’s communication apps, such as WeChat, count 1,67 billion monthly users in 2023<sup>4</sup>. In the same year, Alipay registered 680 million monthly active users in mainland

China. These numbers neither count the diaspora use of Chinese apps nor part time use as tourists or business users, and global university exchanges. Also, with the banishment of TikTok, Red Note's (小红书) stocks market share grew consequently since downloads in the USA have increased "to protest against a US law set to take effect on January 19<sup>th</sup>" (South China Morning Post 2025).

Chinese apps allow to oil the wheels of global economic exchanges in a multi-field strategy, by crossing the border imposed by global diplomacy and geopolitics. As a trademark, Chinese immaterial payment facilities do not require much effort. This is due to the development of facial recognition and fingerprint technology facilities that are becoming a daily way of payment in China (which may extend to the world). The Global village ideology seems to turn into virtual trends which are linking the following points: "social network", "global market", "local folklore" and a "digital aspect". The blast of social media was already proven in 2020 by Facebook (3,03 billion monthly active users), Instagram (2,35 billion monthly active users), and now TikTok (1 billion active users). It allows a community to share contents, cultural codes and it becomes a weapon of information or disinformation (i.e., fake news, deepfakes). It seems to put users at a central addictive place by offering free time-consuming content. However, these addictions create moral control among the user community trapped in a cyber-governance (Arsène 2019: 27-38). This can be demonstrated by Hašová and Varvažovská's work on the role of local and regional authorities in the complex context or post Covid IR context presented by following quote:

The virtual space is further becoming integral as information, participation, cultural resources and municipal services are digitalised [...] with a hardly existing global legal framework for cyber governance, this appearing to remain a fragmented area of international law for the foreseeable future (Hašová, Varvažovská 2021: 2-10).

At this point, many questions remain concerning the use of apps and the legal regulation which should be applied. During the COVID crisis, apps were necessary to ease the need of information but the question of global consequences remained in



a divided global village. Because of the crack and smash of geopolitics in a context of global competition, in which this cooperation is happening, the notion of multiple crises impacts the idealisation of globalisation.

From a multipolar perspective to regionalism, the question of many crises (i.e., “polycrises”, to cite Adam Tooze), and risks is essential while cooperation and alliances cross over an uncertain future.

#### AN INDUCTIVE POLYCRISES TYPOLOGY: FROM A LOCAL CASE STUDY TO A GLOBAL ANALYSIS

Coming from ancient Greek, the word κρίσις (krisis) is a polysemous term which could be defined as the “tipping point in a predicament, the moment when paths diverge, only one leading to recovery” (Grasso 2022: 1-12). Thucydides, forefather of European strategic analysis, interprets it as “a need to take risks in order to provoke new decisions and solve a problem”. The consequences of a crisis lead to the necessity of changing perspective and a strategy to solve a problem.

The notion of risks must be taken into consideration to reach the route of situation solving. A situation of crisis embraces multiple scenarios of solution (Gilbert 2003: 1-11). The Chinese strategic paradigm of a crisis is represented by two characters: the risk is symbolised by the character “wēi” (危) and an opportunity by the character “jī” (机) as an answer (i.e., a way or direction) that is conducting a new opportunity (i.e., altogether 危机). Fumio Ota compares Sun Tzu’s philosophy (between 475 and 221 B.C) to current Chinese strategy, introducing how pragmatism is adapted to understand warfare. She confirms the influence of *The Art of War* strategy on the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) education as follows: “the PLA decided to use *The Art of War* as the educational textbook not only for officers but also for all enlisted soldiers and sailors” (Ota 2014: 76-80).

The polysemous understanding of a crisis can be applied when dealing with French local decentralisation and local resilience planning. To illustrate this concept with a concrete example, Bertrand Gallet<sup>5</sup> discusses how European and French de-

centralisation can be related to urban planning and humanitarian crises. Managing global crises operating across multiple scales, he highlights the evolving roles of international institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank while he establishes a connection between resilience and decentralised cooperation. The urge to develop national and local organisations such as CUF and AFCCRE can remind the Chinese concept of a crisis (危机) as an opportunity to answer local territorial crises. As Gallet states: “This is where the necessary establishment of a common body of know-how, experience, procedures, and evaluation methods becomes imperative. It is the national role of CUF and AFCCRE and the regional role of the coordination bodies that are being established under the aegis of the Regional Councils” (Gallet 2005; my translation).

Following this logic, the sociologist and economist Sasika Sassen’s studies on global cities proved how the impact of metropolises have evolved at a regional scale. Her work questions how local companies and a competitiveness can be evaluated by the Global Power City Index (GPCI) (Body-Gendrot 1992: 310). It takes six measures into consideration to represent cities’ analysis criteria: economy, research and development, cultural interaction, liveability, environment and accessibility at a global scale.

Furthermore, the United Nation (UN) program integrates 25 global issues that will have to be answered in the near future and could only be fixed by global cooperation between IR stakeholders. It is by following the multiple fields, nature, and the multi-level theory that an inductive approach is taken into account for the purpose of this article.

## RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS AND CRISIS TYPOLOGY

To pursue the reflection at a local scale, an observation of a case study of SC in the Occitanie region aims to analyse a micro phenomenon and compare two samples: one from the Occitanie region, and another one from the Guizhou province and the city of Chengdu (in the Sichuan province). This paper suggests four central fields in which major topics are decided in an interview guide, using a generalist classification (i.e., also called





Fig. 2. Main occurrences reflected on interviews with associations from the Occitanie Region (South of France).

Chinese partner. After interviewing five institutions (corresponding to 10 hours of transcription), they were first transcribed using the ICOR convention<sup>7</sup>.

Then, they were anonymised as a first variable called “INST”. From the INST group, results emerged and then were squeezed into a world cloud (Fig. 1). As a result, the main occurrences in this variable are: “China”, “Chinese”, “cooperation”, “level”, “still” and “borders” (Fig. 1). The transcription reflects every detail of the interview; the non-verbal communication is also described.

#### *Variable n. 2: French association stakeholders*

The second block of selected interviews identifies either local French associations which have concluded a twinning relationship, or have contributed to French-Chinese partnership (some projects do not include a public financial participation). Then, they were anonymised as a first variable called “ASSO”.



transcription), they were first transcribed using the ICOR convention. Then, they were anonymised as a first variable called “CN”. From the CN group, results emerged and then were squeezed into a world cloud (Fig. 3). As a result, the main occurrences in this variable are: “exchanges”, “visa”, “student”, “national”, “ethnic”, “NGO”, “term”, and “crisis” (Fig. 2). The transcription reflects every detail of the interview; the non-verbal communication is also described.

The three word-clouds (Fig. 1, 2, 3) pave the way for an analysis of the main occurrences appearing during the interviews. The first results are linked to the state: “China”, “Chinese” and “ethnic”. The second results imply the lexical field of IR and the kind of relation as it is proved by the terms “cooperation” and “relation”. Moreover, the use of modal verbs such as “can”, “should” and “may” suggest a desire to keep the relationship growing as a long-term partnership. The interviews also include the participation of universities, as shown by the occurrences of “student”, “exchanges”, “visa”, “borders”, “region” and “local”. However, the stakeholders’ concerns are not obviously presented. But they seem to be related to a local phenomenon (to the location), as the following occurrences reveal: “city”, “local” and “level”. Also, the need to adapt appears as a common concern shared both by French and Chinese.

The interviewees’ relevant occurrences are: “particular”, “situation” and “crisis”. Altogether, these terms are the most important ones that the transcription of the interviews have revealed. They are classified in Fig. 4, split into four categories, and four sources. The purpose is to highlight the distribution within the typology of major polycrises, based on the case of twinning relationships between French-Chinese SCs in the Occitanie region. As can be seen in the first graph below (Fig. 4), the four general topics previously announced can be classified as qualitative variation. In fact, statistics is the only way to analyse and identify them.

However, all variation components are connected together as “global inquiry” (i.e., the United Nations official classification). They are all linked and mutually dependent.

	<u>Scientific literature and conferences</u>	<u>Institution and public administration interview</u>	<u>French Association's interviews</u>	<u>Chinese twinning partners from Guizhou province</u>
<u>Social and Human condition</u>	30%	30%	40%	30%
<u>Sustainability and global warming</u>	40%	20%	30%	30%
<u>Local economy</u>	20%	20%	5%	30%
<u>Physical and immaterial borders</u>	10%	30%	25%	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Fig. 4. Distribution of the major polycrises thematic between French Chinese sister cities in the Occitanie in an anchored theory method.

For instance, “social matters” and “fundamental rights” cannot be answered without resolving “inequities” and “global warming”. “Global economy” issues cannot grow while a “sustainable threat” exists, and “local issues” cannot be solved without the four above-mentioned notions fixed. The historian Adam Tooze made popular the term “polycrises” as a worldwide concern since the 1970s.

#### *The first poly-perma crisis situation: global human inequities*

The concept of “permacrisis,” from which it derives, is defined by Armand Collin dictionary (2022) as “an extended period of instability and insecurity.” These two notions can be combined to generate a third interpretation: the phenomenon of “poly-perma crisis.” On one hand, “perma” refers to the temporal dimension, indicating the ongoing nature of the crisis over time.

On the other hand, “poly” relates to space and the multiplicity of fields or domains affected (Razouk et al. 2023: 125-185). To be more precise, the current period can be more accurately characterised as a “poly-perma crisis”. By using this term the primary objective is to identify, with the greatest possible accuracy, the variations in the influence of social capital (SC) on the typology of crises – specifically, to define the characteristics of contemporary poly-perma crises.

The typology presented in this paper aims to address the following question: how can French local authorities and stakeholders be involved in social capital effectively meet international ambitions within a context characterised by poly-perma crises? Additionally, it raises the question of whether an ostensibly “obsolete” micro-phenomenon can persist beyond the landscape of international relations. These questions remain crucial for understanding the mechanisms involved in the protection of peace within the realm of international relations.

The first poly-crisis: social inequities, human right matters and solidarity (Amnesty International 2024: 20-71). This notion is the most current topic discussed in the UN assemblies. It especially stands for the question of hosting refugees (war, climate refugees, migrants etc.) and may deal with the hardship situation proper to the COVID-19 crisis (Paton, Bottiaux 2020: 4-22).

Indeed, SC and decentralised cooperation have both opened a solidarity axis since the French national commission on 10 May 2017 (2017-939 Decree). As for the human condition facing wars (e.g., Syrian, Ukrainian, Palestinian crisis) it increases food inequities, political instability or environmental phenomena which created a tendency of solidarity from a bottom-up governance. For instance, the influence of major public figures such as Greta Thunberg has become symbols of protest in two kinds of situations: activist’s marches for climate change, but also online events such as the 2024 Eurovision protests (Mai 2024). Also, social networks took a major impact during the Ukrainian-Russian war, and the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many user accounts (partisans or opponents) were created to broadcast information about the

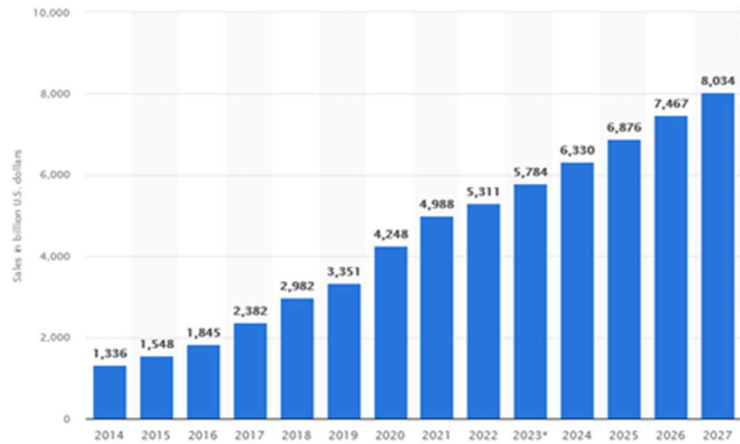


Fig. 5. Retail e-commerce sales worldwide from 2014 to 2027 in billion US dollars, Statista (Chevalier 2024).

conflicts. The videos and photos shot unveil the increasing inequality between war zones and safe ones. The first “online broadcast war” showed images of poverty and inequalities throughout the world, featuring starving children and families separated because of the war. But it also brought to light the growing gap between extremely poor and rich countries (Chancel 2002).

For example, since the Israeli-Palestinian crisis has been mediated in European media, TikTok has become the cradle of solidarity in the Middle East situation and social media the theatre of an “online war”. Indeed, the hashtag #Gazaforsolidarity, calling for peace, was generated by a feeling of general compassion nourished by many celebrities and their fan base (such as the Spanish actress Alba Flores, the Chilean-American actor Pedro Pascal). The social question constitutes the basics of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the first global concern after WWII. As far as SC are concerned, masks were sent to the connected territories during the pandemic crisis.

*The second poly-perma crisis situation: environment, agriculture, water resources, global warming*

After the alter-globalisation protests and the 1987 Brundtland Report, the Earth Summits have been gathering countries to share concerns about global environment. The 1992 Rio Summit, known as the “United Nations Conference on Environment and Development” (UNCED), took place in order to establish a solid cooperation between world leaders to face climate change together. To quote General Secretary António Guterres during the 2019 UN climate crisis program: “We fool ourselves if we think we can fool nature” (Guterres 2019: 1-9). Since the first summit, every meeting about climate change was known as the annual Conference of the Parties (COP). Even companies are now included with a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program to measure the sustainable impact of their production. Moreover, climate changes and multiple pollution impacts from countries highlight a recent urge for water resources (water risks and supplies). Indeed, the lack of water truly endangers agriculture, as pointed out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report in 2020 (Danielson, Gamper 2020: 1-4).

*The third poly-perma crisis situation: economic exchanges (material, immaterial flows)*

As an interdependent globalisation that occurred with the spread of capitalism and liberalism, the global economy suffered from a butterfly effect triggered by the 1929 Wall Street crash. In a similar fashion, apps have considerably changed the rules of the economic market and opened the way for e-shopping opportunities.

However, it also threw into disorder a whole physical, systemic and global economy by implementing a certain dependency into the network. It started by the end of the 1920s with the depression of industrial revolution caused by overproduction. These crises kept growing, to such an extent that the pandemic situation led to “the worst economic downturn since the great depression”, according to economist and first deputy



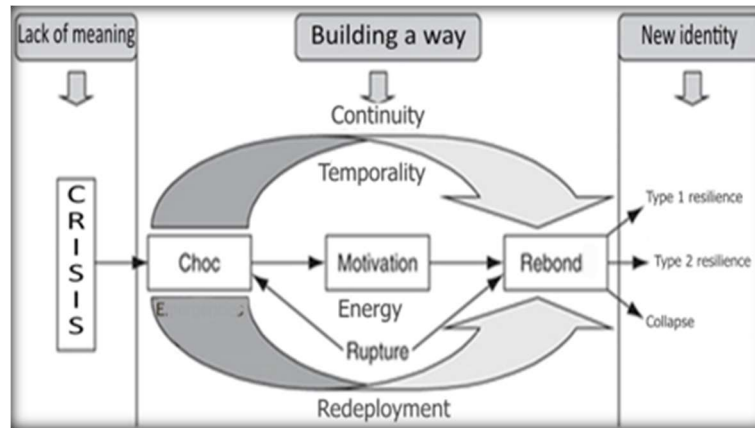


Fig. 6. From choc to rebound (Koninckx, Teneau 2010).

managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Gita Gopinath. E-commerce sales have thrived since 2014 to reach a global capital of 5,8 trillion US dollars. Even during the COVID-19 great lockdown, immaterial exchanges remained constant (Chevalier 2024).

#### *The fourth polycrisis: physical, material and immaterial borders*

Physical and immaterial borders both exist. The first ones are delimited by administrative cartography or natural borders (Danton 1793). Virtual ones are not decided by any political treaty since “with the Internet, some degree of corporeality is lost” (Jiménez et al. 2010).

They might both be monitored by a national directive (sovereignty), but only the latter can be avoided through the use of a virtual private network (VPN). Indeed, the physical border is defined by geopolitics, diplomacy, strategic and economic alliances in a geography of cyberspace (Doge 1999).

However, the virtual border is controlled by engineering (nowadays becoming AI oriented) in order to affirm cyber-sovereignty, in a cyberspace that is extremely well guarded in some

countries (i.e., China and Russia) (Arsène 2019: 27-38). The cyclic perspective of a crisis can be explored on the basis of three models. The first one is the Measure of Crisis Indication (MCI), which allows for organisational malfunction. The second one is the Measure of Indication of Resilience Management (MIRM), a tool that explores a cyclic representation of crisis as demonstrated by the Chinese concept of crisis (危机). The last one indicates resilience management. Known as Business Continuity and Resiliency Planning (BCP), the classification of these phenomena allows to generalise and draw a parallel with the phenomenon of crisis in a cyclic perspective (associated with the notion of risk management).

Lee et al. (2013) have analysed in an active and passive way this phenomenon by suggesting two planification factors for an adaptive model. They were inspired by McManus's (McManus et al. 2007) and Lee's (Lee et al. 2017) works but added a two factors analysis: adaptation capacity and planning. These items linked to these same factors to complete the analysis on a long-term crisis cycle. In addition to this approach, Rigaud et al. (2013) evaluated residences' level in function of "strategy logic" which constraints on anticipating a crisis long before it happens. This proposal evaluates the rebound opportunities when the crisis situation appears stable (Koninckx, Teneau 2010). It relies on the Chinese conception of a crisis (i.e. 危机).

Teneau (2023) recommends thinking of an "active resilience" as he introduced a cyclic approach. In his view a crisis should be taught ahead of time regarding the phenomenon of organisational resilience by adopting the "Crisis, Resilience, Changes" (CRG) model. The loop begins with an anticipation of this phenomenon. "The birth of the crisis" shows the first signs of change in the system. After that, the development or "explosion of the crisis" follows the strategies to adopt, which assure the solvation of the crisis; this will eventually lead to a new identity. Solving the crisis does not entail a step backwards but the return of a casual rhythm. The last step depends on the strategy decided. If it is efficient enough, the crisis ends up in a "solved state", and a new regulation is worth considering. On one hand, the risk of a coming back is possible, and so is the possibility of a mutated phenomenon. On the other hand, if the

strategy fails to solve the main problem, danger keeps threatening. In this case, a new perspective must be explored by adding new parameters or factors as an emergency matter (Teneau 2023: 122-136).

To put it in a nutshell, the main world crises could be split up into four essential categories. First, there is the question of social issues based on the approach of equal human rights. The second category supports education on environment and sustainability issues. As it was protested by the “One Health” program (WHO, 2022) it questions the impacts of globalisation in sustainability, and “environmental justice” (Coutrot, Nizzoli 2023: 3-21).

It is related to the major question of global warming and climate change. The third one is bound to the scalar question from local to global economy. It also remains strongly associated with national perspectives, and immaterial flux that led to a geographic dimension. The fourth notion indeed redefines the limits of borders. At the same time, space is evolving in two ways. One depends on “physical borders”. It may be illustrated by cartography, geomatics, as an approach to official countries’ limitations.

The second one includes immaterial limits which depend on how the networks are set. Crucially, the two of them happen to be interdependent (e.g., submarine fibre-optic cable). The second border may be classified as virtual or immaterial and is linked to the development of the internet. A cyber-space activity does exist. This idea is sustained by the existence of a history browser which may trace back information as well as the continuous data sharing with a personal Internet Protocol (IP) address. An immaterial identified IP belongs to social spaces like social networks. This concept of community was inspired by the development of cooperative online videogames (1996-1997), especially Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs).

Although this concept expanded on other gaming platforms (e.g., PlayStation and Roblox network community, Gather metaverse, etc.), a similar phenomenon seems to occur in social networks communities (e.g., YouTube and TikTok communities, etc.).



To sum up, this online “immaterial border” grew considerably within a community relatable to national citizenship. It is now seemingly changing the perspective of space and time, just like glocal disturbs spatialisation. Every aspect of this typology is interconnected and needs to be acted in a pluri-actor logic, involving states, institutions, city councils, associations, organisations, NGOs and activist citizens (from the below) to change the structure of society. The influence of the internet in our contemporary society may have created a tool in favour of the lack of borders but does not change any cultural beliefs (Engelhard 2012: 111-122).

#### DECENTRALISED COOPERATION AND SISTER CITIES IN TIMES OF POLY-PERMA CRISES

In order to develop a long-term cooperation, SCs set in stone formal agreements (contract) developed in many contexts (i.e., peace treaty, a political alliance, cultural share etc.). Territories are linked in many aspects or infrastructures (e.g., Paris “Gare de Lyon” and Seoul “Korail” train stations have a SC relationship since 2015. It illustrates how “roads can be twinned” (Deshaies et al. 2016). However, this term appears to be obsolete in the vision of many French elected representatives (not in the IR stakeholders).

French officials reject the use of a “eurocentric” term “traditionally” related to the French-German SCs’ relationship established in 1951 (Vion 2003: 559-582). As far as the global village theory is concerned, the immaterial turning point is brought to light by Lithuanian artist Benediktas Gylys.

Inspired by the videoconference process, he linked a series of portals which he baptised “sculpture attractions”. More recently, the 2024 Portal joining New York City and Dublin (BBC 2024). It was made possible by a full-time live stream connection. This artistic set, which consists of two circular screens (one installed in each city), allows pedestrians to interact with one another.

Nonetheless, this relationship is more of an artistic expression than a common praxis that city councils and SC could develop. Also, tripartite relationships are evicted from the process

while they remain in the official definition of an SC relationship. Even though this relationship is not a call for peace anymore (different from French-German SC), it provides a chance to open and represent local aspects from a given territory. SC cooperation aspects include: culture, folklore, ethnicity and local habits on long-term cooperation. It is also an opportunity to build solid relationships in different types of exchanges: strategic, economic, technical, educational (i.e., schools, universities). For example, the UK-Ukraine SCs has given birth to numerous partnerships: “100 twinning partnerships between universities in the UK and Ukraine” (Moore 2023: 1-6).

As a model of international solidarity action, this SC relation included a moral aspect:

it is about being mindful not just about what practical help we can provide now but what we can do in the months and years ahead to build social and economic resilience in Ukraine after the war. Whether that be in marine engineering or mental health support, UK universities can play an important role in helping Ukrainian Universities to make their own vital contribution to the future of Ukraine, and it has been a privilege for us in Plymouth to be a part of that (Moore 2023: 1-6).

## DECENTRALISED COOPERATION AND SISTER CITIES TO PRESERVE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS?

Created in the mid-1990s, transnational theories have allowed many local public authorities, such as NGOs and private organisations, to take part in local international cooperation. Cadée completes the official definition of SC in the following way: “Twinning is a cross-cultural, reciprocal process where two groups of people work together to achieve joint goals” (Cadée et al. 2016). This relationship still remains in an “unstable political world order”, in which all countries have not equally faced the pandemic COVID-19.

In an international conflictual atmosphere, opposite tendencies meet: rivalry, competition, strategic cooperation and SCs. The IR ecosystem is defined by public and private actors interconnected inside a complex system (Fig. 5). Anthropologist Laguerre (2019) assumes that “twinning in the digital age”

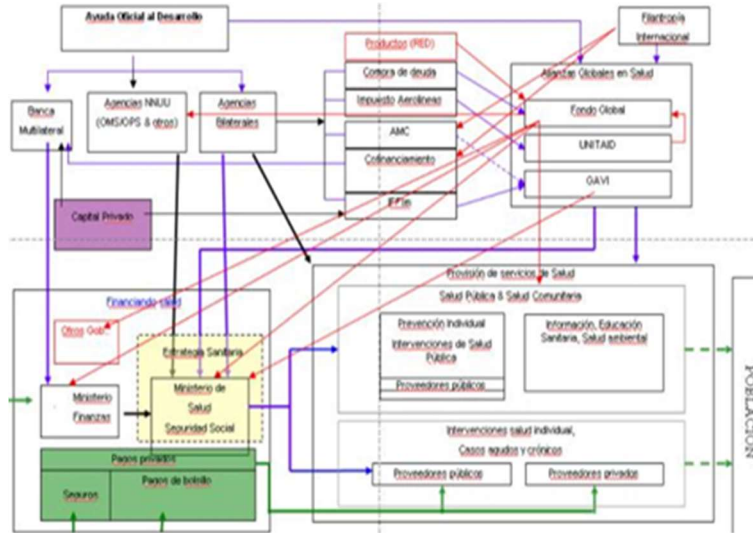


Fig. 7. Actors in international cooperation (Peñate 2014).

have imposed itself in an already complex global system. As a result of his researches, the evolution of SC agreements seems to be “losing its unicity”. He added the hypothesis of multiple intertwined globalisations: “There is not one globalization but rather multiple kinds of Globalizations” (Laguerre 2019: 8-10). With this aim in mind, the digital fluctuation is hinted in Cohen and Verdier’s studies of “an immaterial globalisation”.

The authors analyse the impact of globalisation in the everyday life of every sector (e.g., information technology, software, cinema, publishing, etc.) under the supremacy of “the American way of life”. The spread of global liberalism in international organisation (IO) and the world order established on the basis of the multilateralist school of thought (Cohen, Verdier 2008: 7-41). By using the term “cyber activities”, the famous pioneer in “soft power” theory, Joseph Nye (1990) highlighted an interconnexion between cities by invisible canals, or as he says “through network” (Nye 2014: 5-11). However, to adapt a modern vision that encompasses Chinese “soft power”, this approach does seem to be incomplete. The notions of “soft

power” (SPW), “smart power” (SMPW), “sharp power” (SHPW), “hard power” (HPW), and “natural coercion” (NC) can be interconnected in a figure (Fig. 8), altogether, shaping the overall praxis of geography.

Between an essentially nationalised “sharp-trending” and an immaterial SPW, China’s influence and strategies appear to be constrained by a set of realities in the race to global domination. Also, the use of economic sanction as an application of HPW, combined with “smart” strategies, synthesised into a cross-disciplinary approach. The SHP or “smart” trend is therefore punctual and strategic: it conforms to any cultural initiative of any type of state. This is why President Xi Jinping’s “Chinese dream” (中国梦) is inspired by both “the American dream” and the Zhou dynasty concept of “political legitimacy”.

These elements of persuasion acted as a national booster for internal innovations, fuelled with the west domination and its unfair treaties (i.e., Opium wars). Within this continuation, to expand a regionalist vision, China is influencing a “global south composed of former colonised countries”, in order to a guide them and reform a globalised systemic already identified as “the world order” (Williams 2024).

Therefore, the link between SPW, SMPW, SHPW and HPW, as they are identified by Nye’s (1990) concepts, translates into a complex system that still remains. As far as the NC are concerns in SCs’ affairs, this article puts forward, the dependency of natural matters (i.e., natural resources, water supplies, etc.).

The challenges generate a problem also related to natural and immaterial borders (Fig. 4). Denoted as a strategic subtlety in the influence trends sharpening, “the power that permeates, penetrates and pervades the political and information environment of target countries” (Lincot 2019b: 68-92).

Also succinctly carried by an independency of South-South solidarity (e.g., international fairs conducted without western countries from 2001 to 2024). The answer of technology, sustainable energy, and local resources has given more influence to China. However, the purpose of a potential Chinese global south’s governance does not fit the hegemonic US ambition. According to Benezaf, Chinese purpose “corresponds more to an opportunistic approach to serve the interests of the Chinese state and Chinese economic actors than to

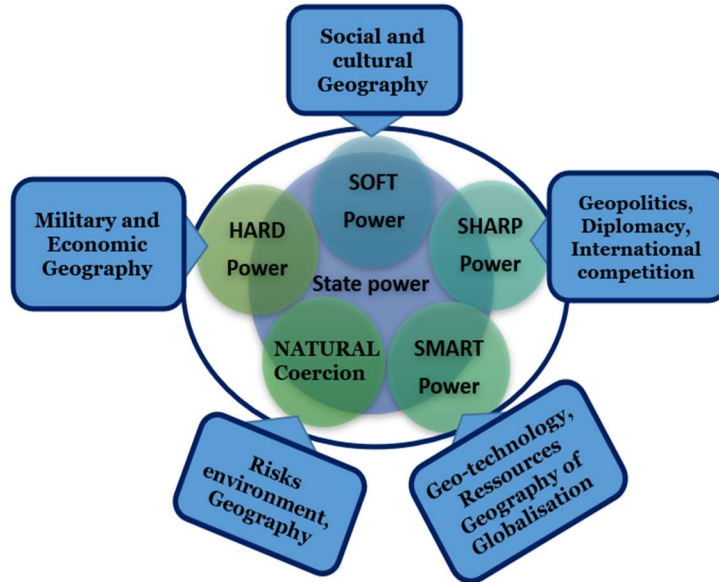


Fig. 8. Correlation between state power ecosystem and geography subfields as an international relation analysis tool. Author's elaboration

a hegemonic aim of cultural influence in the way of American soft power” (Benezaf 2014: 2-36). Rooted in an economic, commercial and diplomatic perspective, the emergence of Chinese SPW is inspired by neo-Confucian values at the international level. However, it is also related to the will to link SPW to a cultural richness through Chinese ethnic group’s values.

A strong “cultural”, “traditional”, “folklore” policy is carried on by national and provincial authorities, and the signature of SCs partnerships. For instance, the Chinese e-market is based on a policy of influence in which Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) are essential elements of cultural marketing matters. Similar to economic and cultural “soldiers”, KOLs’ aim is to contribute at a meso phenomenon: they brighten up national economy (by selling products on livestream platforms) and make people dream by illustrating an ideal life of luxury and comfort. Furthermore, Chinese ethnics groups also use this tool

to gain more attention (i.e., viewers, subscribers) at a national level (e.g., Miao festival in Liupanshui).

Considered ambassadors of Chinese popular and commercial culture, KOLs are mostly represented on Chinese platforms such as TikTok (nationally known as Douyun) and on streaming platforms (e.g., iQiyi, Youku, Xiami) (Lincot 2019a: 18-34). Their “community’s loyalty” represents an amount of 100 billion yuan for luxury product transactions in 2021 (i.e., e-commerce, social tools and live streaming purchases sectors) (Lai Lin 2024). This is why the “giants of the net” from China and the US can both (i.e., BATX and GAFAM + NATU) embody many risks related to national and global influence. In 2017, current President Poutine already made the statement that the future leader of artificial intelligence would “rule the world”, as he urged a renew of tech industry. In the same spirit, Emmanuel Todd claimed that “the third global war” had already begun (Devecchio 2023: 1-11). The data strategy in which NC is involved requires the strategy of an economic and cultural art of war.

#### OCCITANIE-CHINESE SISTER CITIES THROUGH THE CHINESE PRAXIS OF GUANXI (关系)

SCs’ authority evolves at a micro territorial scale. Hence it abides by decentralised cooperation laws (Tulard 2006: 13- 26). Nonetheless, it is related to a duty of memory, a shared history defined in politics as a niche phenomenon: “city diplomacy”.

For instance, French-Chinese history is filled with educational cooperation, political, cultural, and economic exchanges. This relationship is symbolised by the building of Montargis’ (Centre Val de Loire region) museum which (as a witness) hosts many historical Chinese figures when they studied in France. At the time, a “working-studying” program was launched by the Chinese government (1902).

Indeed, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping studied and worked in Montargis where they were introduced to the fundamental Marxist ideology and literature. This journey triggered an ambition to change their own hometowns’ living conditions.

That being said, France and China have both benefited from this experience:

France's ambition was to keep the first place in the training of future Chinese elite: in Chengdu (French medical mission,), in Shanghai (Aurore university), in Beijing (French-Chinese university) without forgetting Montargis, Paris, Lyon (French-Chinese institute) following Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping and their companion's steps to recognise the world as it is (Dumasy 2014: 2-30).

Nowadays, at a national level, nearly 90 French cities are engaged in a SC relationship with Chinese stakeholders. This situation brought an opportunity to sign the first French-Chinese SC convention in 1981 between Montpellier and Chengdu. Although this practice was set up in urban areas (i.e., metropolises, smart cities), it also sparked interest among rural areas. Mende, the administrative centre of the department of Lozère (the least populated in France) signed a SC convention with the Chinese province of Guizhou (the least populated province in China) to share common urbanism techniques, environment habits, tourism issues, etc. (Fig. 10). SCs are supposed to be long-term partnerships. So implies the Chinese philosophical and economic term of *guanxi* (关系). Lovett defines "guanxi" as a network formed essentially in Asia due to informal and interpersonal exchanges of services for the purpose of developing economic activities (Lovett et al. 1999). The terminology could be associated with "Guanhe" in Vietnamese, to refer to a system in which the cultural part is as important as economic intelligence.

Gao classified Chinese *Guanxi* into three degrees of incremental relevance from highest to lowest (Gao et al. 2010). According to the author, the most important matter is "oneself", followed by the "people in the circle" (i.e., those we share a common purpose with) and "team members". Then came the "outsiders", who are under the protection of "the equity rule" (i.e., trustworthy people). And finally, at the bottom of the hierarchy, come the "strangers" (i.e., those who have different values) (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Guanxi networks circles theory adapted from (Hwang 1987; Gao et al. 2010).

This hierarchy draws on Sun Tzu's (7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) philosophy, as described in his work *The Art of War*. Guanxi implies an ability to demonstrate an understanding of a complex environment to make the right decision (Liu 2012).

As the hierarchy places strangers on a pedestal, the highest position invites in respect social norms and interpersonal relations. Interpersonal relations, or network, is known as "Guangxi" (关系) in business culture. "Renqing" (人情) is translatable as "friendly associates", while the meaning of "Xinren" (信人) is closer to the concept of "trustworthy people". The "Guanxi, Renqing, Xinren" (GRX) model predates the arrival of communism in China but still fulfills the same personnel values. GRX could be measured and analysed to understand business in China (Yen et al. 2017: 1-3).

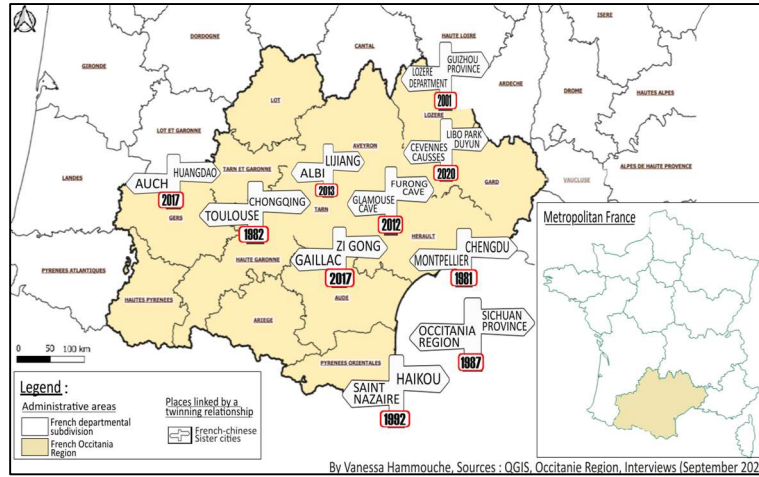


Fig. 10. Twinning relationship between the Occitania and Chinese stakeholder. Author's elaboration

### GENERAL CONCLUSION

Associated to the signature of the first French-Chinese twinning relationship, Guanxi created a multimodal link between Montpellier and Chengdu in 1981 that still remains nowadays. The two cities were bound by the desire to share cultural and educational aspects, influenced by former mayor Georges Frêche (Mayor of Montpellier from 1977 to 2007). Indeed, Chengdu became the first Chinese city ever twinned with a French one. They were followed by Toulouse-Chongqing in 1982 (Fig. 10). Nowadays, French-Chinese SCs' relationships remain in the Occitania region. Some of them are not active any longer (because of COVID-19), while others abandoned the development of projects with Chinese partners. As a third case scenario, some SC have remained bound to one another and are still developing numerous projects.

French Chinese SC present in the Occitania region are listed as follows: 1) Toulouse and Chongqing's SC have remained asleep and no projects were established after the

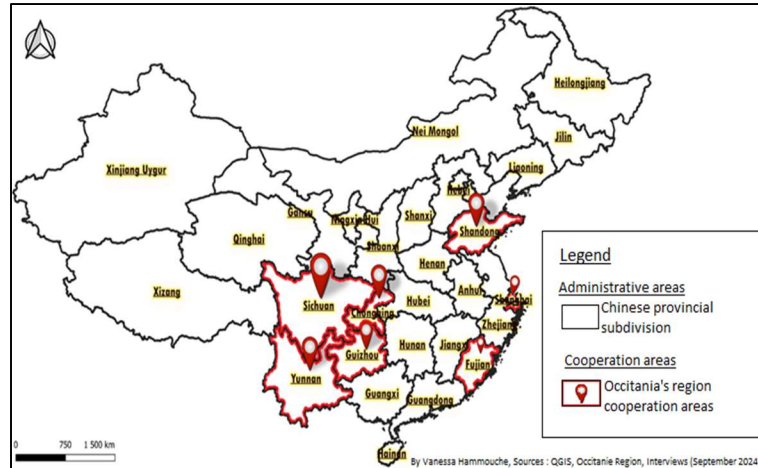


Fig. 11. Twinning relationship between the Occitanie and Chinese stakeholders. Author's elaboration

COVID-19 crisis; 2) the Occitanie region established a twinning relation with the Sichuan province in 1987, but the SC is in a sleepiness state and does not seem to be productive anymore; 3) the Department of Lozère has been linked with the Guizhou province since 2001, and the relationship is still active, working on university's student exchanges; 4) the Clamouse cave and Furong cave (Wulon, Hunan province) have been linked since 2012 and the relationship is still active; 5) the city of Albi has been linked to Lijian (Yunnan province) since 2013 and the relationship is still active. The planification of scientific exchanges is currently in discussion between the two cities; 6) Gaillac has been linked to Zigong (Sichuan province) since 2017 and the relationship is still active; 7) Auch and Huangdao (Qingdao Shandong province) have been SC since 2017 and the relationship is still active; 8) the interdepartmental agreement of Causses and Cevennes is in discussion of a SC relation with Libo's Duyun national park in Guizhou province. The agreement was interrupted because of the pandemic crisis but the momentum was signed.

In another perspective, by checking on China's provincial overview (Fig. 11), the French Occitanie region has participated in international relationships or cooperative projects. Scattered throughout China (e.g., from Shandong province to the city of Shanghai), these projects reach economic and cultural purposes. Known as "the house of the Occitanie region" (from French "la maison de la région Occitanie"), this office unifies economic matters as a subsidiary of the Agency for economic development, (from French "Agence de développement économique qui accompagne l'ensemble des entreprises de la région Occitanie", AD'OCC) which supports Occitanie region companies trading in China. Furthermore, a look at the map of China (Fig. 11) reveals the location of the Occitanie region DC projects. The relevant Chinese provinces are all located at the littoral part of China (the most developed one in global trade), except Guizhou and Sichuan.

Also, the special city of Chongqing used to be a partner of Toulouse metropolis. However, this relationship is now presumably "asleep", as no DC project has emerged since 2012. This is why SCs were developed at a micro scale to ease relationships between local stakeholders in a long-term perspective. As the two maps show, some relations are still productive and allow the development of many projects such as the extreme sport festival "Fise". This project, initiated in Montpellier, has extended an office in Chengdu since 2019 (as an Asian subsidiary of the Hurricane group).

This paper explored the condition of a sample of French Chinese partnerships in Occitanie region. The concepts raised are decentralised cooperation projects, French Chinese sister cities, and city diplomacy in which resulted many activities. These agreements led to glocal multiple cooperations: 3 French-Chinese childcare centres, 66 French-Chinese primary schools, 500 French-Chinese secondary education, 29 international sections and 153 Chinese studies department in French universities.

The link between multiple stakeholders also helped to develop a local bilateral education and a long-term relation remaining on these days. As for the Occitanie region, the economic aspect is related to the Chamber of Commerce and In-

dustry opportunities. Indeed, networking offers many opportunities to keep updating news on local businesses, cities partnerships, and regional economic market. In order to develop economic trade between Occitanie and China, the Chinese office of the AD'OCC agency organises workshops in which either local company can sell their merchandise. As the concept of glocalisation has emerged between 1990-1991, the relationship between French-Chinese sister cities in the Occitanie region has been confirmed. This correspondence is also illustrated in Roudometof's (2021) vision, in which multilateralism represents a need to work together in a scalar view.

At this point, interpersonal relations (关系) are related to the French Occitanie region to build a web of guanxi (network), essential to enter the Chinese market.

For this matter, Guanxi (关系) reveals “one of the words that make up the Chinese term for international relation *guoji guanxi* (国际关系)”. It is by following the need of mutual trust in business that a win-win relationship translates the idea of an unlimited timeline partnership (Wang, Karjalainen 2016). This is why the regionalist and global south projects reveal a similar purpose to that of the idea SCs try to establish. This same regionalist perspective is occurring in an international context of polycrises, where principles such as resilience management appear as essential in order to value this niche cooperation.

However, western and eastern conceptions of a polycrisis situation diverges accordingly with each country's paradigm (e.g., language and history). China and France may share a common past, but their cultural, linguistic, and geographic identities differ. Hence the results of this analysis zoom in international relationships at a local scale, and reveals an efficiency at a glocal scale because of the distance between theory (concepts) and productions on the field.

Furthermore, this paper highlighted how local authorities have no experience nor educational background in Chinese markets specificities. So do many companies, universities, and stakeholders interviewed for the purpose of this research. They do participate in the French-Chinese ecosystem market at a local, glocal, and a global scale. In the sample selected for this research, only 4 interviewees out of 30 did have an academic



background related to Chinese studies, Chinese market, or Chinese culture. For instance, it was complicated to twin the Cevennes national park with the Chinese park of Duyun (Libo, Guizhou Province) for this reason. This is why the notion of *guanxi* is not and cannot clearly be understood by French and European stakeholders. The influence of native Chinese speakers and not only the diaspora would be a must and a necessity to demystify this “Asian concept”. As a glocal overview, the current BRICS+ encompass nearly 40% of worldwide population; 3,2 billion of people fan out across 29,5% of the world’ land surface, and 26% of the global GDP in 2022 (World Bank resources 2023).

The development of dematerialised facilities is not equal between Asia and Europe. This is the reason why “multiplicity out of the prison of political sciences” has emerged (Rosenberg 2019).

Finally, the multidimensional influence of politics, geopolitics and diplomacy are criteria which exhibit no stability in international relations. The representative elected signatory and ambassadors, from a national to a local perspective, can run an opposite policy from one elected politician to another. So do ministerial decisions. This underscores the notion that the fragility of political contexts should not impede long-term collaborations such as strategic collaborations (SCs). Such collaborations represent long-term relationships that may be temporarily suspended or rendered inactive due to tendencies toward protectionism (or poly-perma crisis). Nevertheless, as human civilization has historically oscillated between war and peace, the question of collaboration and strategy appears to follow a cyclical pattern, as evidenced by classical literature (e.g., Plato’s *The Republic*, Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, Abbé de Saint-Pierre’s *The Art of War and Perpetual Peace*, and Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*).

Citing Cyril Ramaphosa, President of the African National Congress (ANC), this paper argues that the main challenges can be addressed for SCs by promoting equity among international stakeholders and fostering mutual respect. In reference of Baheta (2005) ethic is the main element in developing SC and decentralised cooperation. This approach allows glocal cooper-

ation without infringing on the political sovereignty of individual nations. Ramaphosa highlights the significance of BRICS+, the role of a common history (colonisation), in shaping global affairs, emphasising their central role in creating a more balanced international new:

New realities call for a fundamental reform of the institutions of global governance so that they may be more representative and better able to respond to the challenges that confront humanity (Resende Carvalho 2023).



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Since the 15<sup>th</sup> Johannesburg Summit in August 2023, BRICS countries have included more members: Iran, The United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, Egypt, Argentina, and Saudi Arabia (Loizzo 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Irénée Castel de Saint-Pierre was known as Abbé de Saint-Pierre in his writings.

<sup>3</sup> The first Emperor Qin Shi Huang ordered the building of Xian as a capital to unify the Empire of China under the first imperial Qin dynasty.

<sup>4</sup> This number does not include WeChat pay.

<sup>5</sup> Bertrand Gallet is the former President of French united local government “Cité Unies France” (CUF), and the current President of the NGO ACTED.

<sup>6</sup> Full methodology is available in my thesis manuscript, entitled: *French-Chinese Sister cities between Globalisation and Deglobalisation: case study in the Occitanie region*.

<sup>7</sup> The transcription guide was created by the UMR 5191 ICAR from the University of Lyon 2 (CNRS-Lyon 2-ENS 2013) to note verbal and oral phenomenon.

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