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Twinning and contact between British and Chinese cities

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Twinning and contact between British and Chinese cities

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Contents

Executive summary	4
1. Introduction	5
2. The origins of twinning in Britain	6
3. The twinning relationship between British and Chinese cities	7
3.1. Building relationships between British and Chinese cities	7
3.2. Northern cities and China relations	9
3.3. Decision making in British/Chinese city twinning processes.....	11
4. The economic and civic implications of Sino-British twinning relations	12
4.1. Civic benefits of twinning relations	12
4.2 Economic benefits of Sino-British twinning relations	12
4.3. Sino-British university partnerships and town twinning.....	14
5. Conclusion: Key messages	16
References	18

Executive summary

The practice of town and city twinning serves many functions in Britain. Whilst twinning between British and European cities is primarily focused on cultural and educational exchanges, the Sino-British twinning relationship emphasises economic collaboration. Relations between British and Chinese cities are often facilitated by a variety of local interest groups such as businesses, educational institutions and community organisation.

The compatibility of the local economies between cities also plays a role in whether economic partnerships can be forged. In addition, national government makes use of twinning as part of their national strategy to create closer economic partnerships between China and the UK. City twinning therefore has become a mechanism for Chinese and British entrepreneurial governments to promote the city and the country as a destination for investment. However, the evidence for economic collaboration so far is fairly modest compared to the numerous twinning relations created, as only few city authorities have been able to generate substantial commercial activities.

Twinning relations, particularly those created in the last decade, have been unable to meet their economic aims, indicating that deeper collaboration requires more time to nurture. In comparison, cities that have been in a twinning partnership for a long time and are involved in a variety of twinning activities such as educational exchanges or sending and receiving delegates, tend to be economically more successful. This finding indicates that a successful economic partnership between Sino-British twin cities needs to be established on traditional values of hospitality, trust and reciprocity which in turn are facilitated through non-economic twinning activities and time. The recent trend of joint Sino-British research degrees and British university expansions into China can be a helpful way to deepen economic engagement, although better coordination between city authorities and universities is required.

I. Introduction

City twinning, also known as sister cities in the US, is a widespread practice amongst contemporary city authorities. There were more than 2525 twinning links between the UK and international cities in existence by the year 2006 (Clarke 2008). The initial purpose of twinning was the reconciling of Britain with former enemy countries following the Second World War. Town and city twinning has been further enriched by the emphasis on economic partnerships especially with countries possessing market potential such as the US and China.

Sino-British twinning relations have started to proliferate since the 1980s and so far the China International Friendship Cities Association counts 52 formal twinning partnerships between Chinese and British cities, ranking China amongst the top twinning destinations for British cities (CIFCA, 2015). Against the general assumption that twinning is outdated, in a globalising world where cultures and businesses are already intertwined, the continually rising number of twinned cities signals that city authorities regard twinning as more than symbolic signs of intercity friendship. Civic and economic gains have become increasingly the key focus in contemporary twinning agendas and China's huge market potential has made Chinese cities a very popular choice for city twinning.

Similarly, Chinese city officials also regard the UK as a desirable partner for closer partnerships and hope to benefit from Britain's knowledge and expertise in a variety of fields ranging from medical research to city development. The purpose of this report is to explore the twinning relationship between British and Chinese sister cities and how they have benefited the economy and civic society of both countries. The report will firstly provide a general understanding of the concept of city twinning and how its purpose has changed during the last decades. The report then moves on to discuss the Sino-British twinning experience with regards to what factors have facilitated the large number twin city relations between British and Chinese cities. Finally, the last section examines both the civic and economic implications of Sino-British twinning partnerships and how university collaborations can assist in deepening the relationship between twin cities.

2. The origins of twinning in Britain

Before delving further into the topic, it would be useful to firstly define what 'twinning' means. The practice of twinning encapsulates a wide array of partnerships ranging from joint cultural activities, education support programs to exchanging knowledge on urban development (Zelinsky 1991). It can include both formal and informal agreements between cities to work more closely in cultural, educational and economic areas and involves an exchange of hospitality such as sending and receiving twin city delegates on a regular basis.

British cities have a long tradition of forming twinning relations with cities from other countries. After the Second World War, twinning was often used by British cities as a means to rekindle their relationships with their European neighbours (Clarke 2011). City twinning during the 1950s and 1960s was also characterised by a strong sense of European solidarity and often involved symbolic exchange visits, cultural activities and support for rebuilding war-torn cities. Unsurprisingly France (1080 links counted in 2006) and Germany (500 links counted in 2006) rank as the first and the second most twinned countries with the UK (Clarke 2008). Similarly, Poland and Italy can also be found at the top bracket of the most frequent twinned countries with the UK. Following UK's entrance into the European Economic Area and the economic downturn in the late 1970s where government placed more emphasis on financial viability, an economic mindset was also added to city twinning (Clarke 2011). In addition, media reports of city delegates 'junketing' public money to visit sister cities (Griffin, 2011; Kelly 2012) had also forced government authorities adopt an entrepreneurial approach that focused on economic gains when choosing their twinning partners.

Consequently, during the 1980s twinning relations with American and Chinese cities, both being markets of vast economic potential, had started to flourish in the UK (Clarke 2008). However, it is important to note that twinning according to Clarke (2011:117) "is not a history of stages, in which later forms of partnership have replaced earlier ones, but a history of supplementations, in which early forms...continue to thrive alongside later ones". This is well illustrated by Manchester city government's website where it is possible to see the focus of each of the city's international twinning relations. Whilst Manchester's twinning relationship with St Petersburg (Russia) emphasises on cultural exchanges and Chemnitz (Germany) on social and community links, the Manchester authority describes their twinning relationship with Wuhan (China) as based on economic activities (Manchester City Council n.d.). Whilst grassroots organisations and other interest groups primarily maintain cultural and educational exchanges, the city authorities concentrate more on economic twinning partners (Jayne et al. 2013). However, it is important to note that the boundaries between the twinning forms are not always clearly delineated. For some twinning relations, non-economic partnerships have also evolved into deeper economic collaborations such as in the case of Manchester and Wuhan. Twinning relations in Britain have therefore evolved into a multifunctional device that can be used for a variety of purposes ranging from promoting local businesses to facilitating cultural and education exchanges. These functions can be completely separated activities but at times they also reinforce each other.

3. The twinning relationship between British and Chinese cities

3.1. Building relationships between British and Chinese cities

Sino-British twinning relations have started to increase since the 1980s with Cardiff being the first city to twin with a Chinese city, Xiamen. Many other relations soon followed suit. For British cities, creating twinning partnerships with Chinese cities has predominantly been a means to develop economic relations. This intention was also met with great enthusiasm by Chinese city governments since China's lack of know-how in various fields such as green technologies also meant that Chinese cities are in need of twinning partners who already possess such knowledge. Chinese city officials were particularly eager to learn from industrialised cities such as the UK and the US and keen to acquire the most up to date technologies and ideas. Although China is not the only country with large market potentials, the image of fast developing Chinese cities that are able and prepared to spend vast amounts of money is well known amongst the international community (Zelinsky 1991:24).

Since the 1980s, 52 formal twinning relations were formed between British and Chinese cities (see Annex 1), whereby a large share of twinned Chinese cities is located along the coastal area (see figure 1 and 2). Especially cities in the economically advanced regions of the Pearl River Delta and the Yangtze River Delta such as Guangzhou, Shanghai, Taicang and Zhuhai have created twinning relations with British cities in the past thirty years (see figure 3).

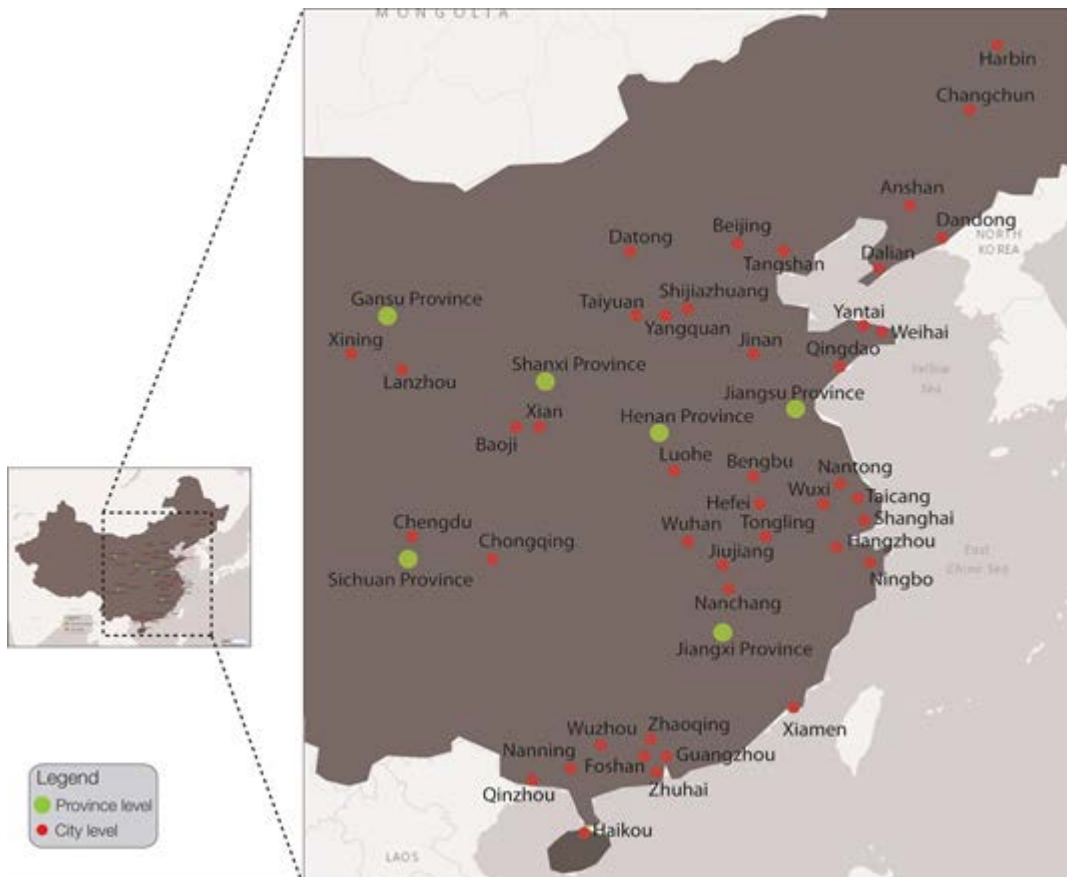
Figure 1: Mapping Sino-British twinning relations



Figure 2: An overview of Chinese cities and provinces with British twinning relations



Figure 3: Chinese cities and provinces in a twinning relationship with the UK

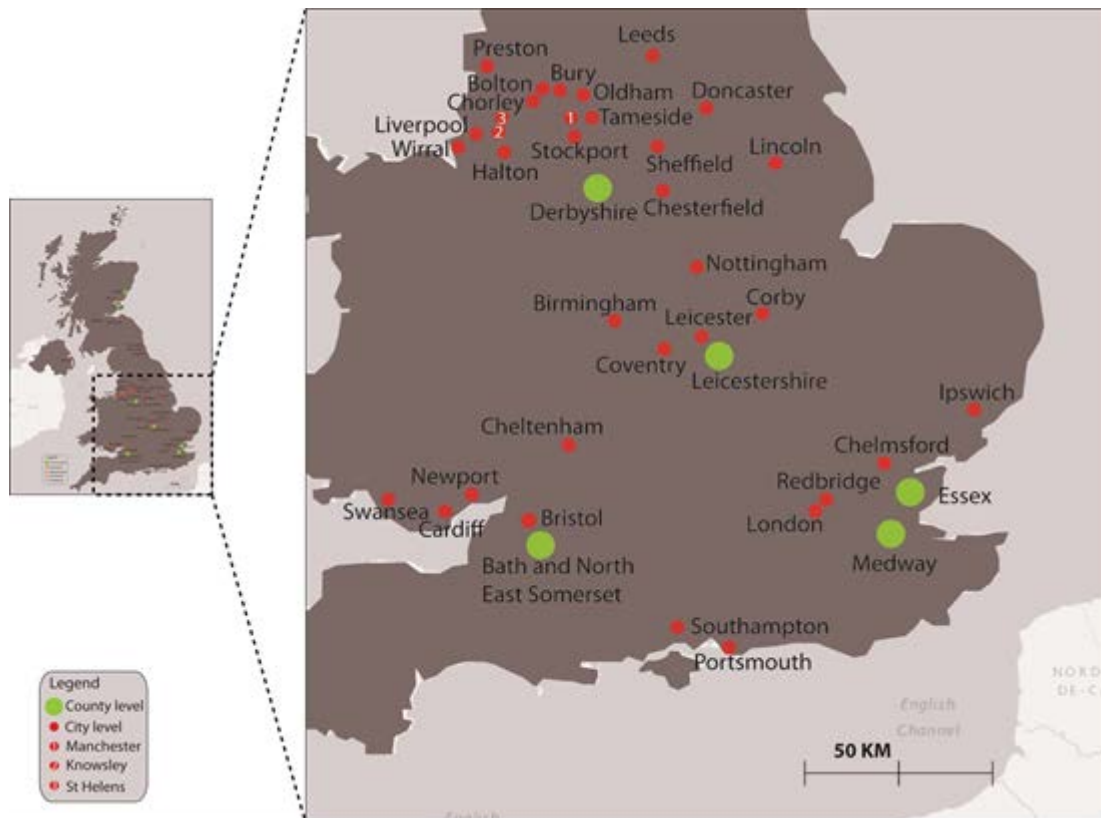


3.2. Northern cities and China relations

In comparison, a sizeable share of British cities is located in England where, especially Northern English cities such as Manchester and Liverpool with a strong industrial heritage have many twinning relations with Chinese cities (See figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4: An overview of British Cities with Chinese twinning relations



Figure 5: English and Welsh cities and counties in a twinning relationship with China

There are two reasons why especially Northern English cities were keen to establish twinning relations with China. First, cities such as Manchester, which is known for its industrial heritage, had more in common with economically advanced Chinese cities, which are reliant on industrial developments as a facilitator of economic growth. Secondly, in light of a British economy that is dominated by the tertiary sector, Northern English cities are also keen to find alternative economic development strategies to supplement their weakened manufacturing based economies. Foreign investments and commercial partnerships for their local businesses are therefore of great interest to Northern English cities. This is evident from the case of Manchester where the city itself and many of its greater metropolitan borough authorities including Bury or Oldham have formed twinning relations with Chinese cities. On the other hand, twinning with Northern English cities can also be beneficial for Chinese cities, which are reliant on their industrial sector. Cities such as Hangzhou (twinned with Leeds) or Taicang (twinned with Wirral) with a large manufacturing base are keen to exchange knowledge regarding industrial developments and the coping strategies of Northern English cities in a post-industrial economy.

Overall, it may be appropriate to describe many Sino-British twinning alliances as a supply and demand relationship whereby British cities focus on supplying existing knowledge and resources whilst Chinese cities place more emphasis on acquiring knowledge and technologies (Jayne *et al.* 2013).

3.3. Decision making in British/Chinese city twinning processes

With respect as to how cities have chosen their twinning partners, there exist a wide variety of reasons although they can be largely categorised into local factors and national influences. Locally driven initiatives often include the lobbying of business or civic organisations as well as educational institutions for the establishment of a twin city relationship. In such cases, local organisations on both sides have usually already been cooperating with each other for some time and twinning is regarded as the next step forward to strengthen city-to-city relations. For instance, the Sheffield-Chengdu twin city relationship was formally signed in 2010 and mainly facilitated by the existing relationship between the football clubs Sheffield United FC and Chengdu Blades football club (Bartram and Xiang 2013). Sheffield's local Chinese community also played an important role as its appeal to support Chengdu after the earthquake in Szechuan in 2008 has helped to create closer connections between both cities.

Educational bonds between cities have also facilitated twinning such as in the case of Sunderland and Harbin, where both cities signed a formal twinning agreement following various interactions between local schools such as visiting schools in Harbin.

Furthermore, the compatibility of local economies can be used as a guide to select twinning partners. For example, the Taiyuan-Newcastle twin city case is based on the cities' common coal resource and collaboration revolved around the sale of heavy equipment from redundant north-east coalfields to Taiyuan where coal mining is still an active part of the local economy. In addition to locally initiated twinning relations, support from the national and supranational tier of government have also encouraged more Sino-British twinning relations. Both the Chinese and British national governments have used city twinning as a device to enhance existing relationships between the two countries. For instance, the former Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao facilitated the agreement between the Welsh government and Chongqing in year 2000 in his function as the Vice Premier responsible for the Western Provinces (Personal Communications 2015). Similarly, the UK chancellor George Osborne has also delivered a speech encouraging more business partnerships between China and Northern England and highlighting the existing twin city relations between Sheffield and Chengdu as proof of the close Sino-British relationship (Osborne 2015).

Sino-British twinning is thus by no means restricted to locally driven factors but also underlies a national strategy that pursues deeper engagements with certain countries. In addition to national interest, Sino-British town twinning is encouraged by the European Union, which provides financial support to certain twinning schemes under the Europe for Citizens Programme (EACEA 2014). Similar to the British national strategy, town twinning can be a helpful practice for the EU to create more economic ties with China.

4. The economic and civic implications of Sino-British twinning relations

4.1. Civic benefits of twinning relations

Sino-British twinning relations have been beneficial for the development of deeper understandings between Chinese and British cultures. Educational exchanges have been a particularly popular means of intercity collaborations. For instance, the twinning relationship between Cardiff and Xiamen has resulted in the establishment of the Cardiff Confucius Institute, which offers Chinese language lessons and exchange programs with Xiamen University to the local population (Cardiff Council 2006). Public interest in the international links between Cardiff and Xiamen are further facilitated through various cultural activities such as the China Xiamen show garden (Stone 2014) that remind the public of the city's friendly relationship with Xiamen. The Chinese public has equally benefited from twinning links. The Manchester-Wuhan partnership for example has funded five delegates consisting of 107 people to receive special training courses in Manchester University (Wuhan Government 2013). Furthermore, the city partnership has fostered the relationship between Wuhan's and Manchester's schools which organise annual visits to both cities and language exchange courses for its students (ibid).

Moreover, twinning is useful in raising the international profile of cities. Especially for economically more advanced Chinese cities such as Guangzhou or Ningbo, establishing an international twinning relationship is often a very effective means to promote the city both as a tourist destination and as a promising area for investment. Twinning also offers an opportunity for city authorities to showcase the city's prosperity to its own population and thereby underline the local government's achievements. For instance, the Gansu Province has already hosted two International Twinning Cities conferences where 15 sister city authorities were invited to discuss future collaborations and exchanging experiences in city developments. Media reports on such events have assisted the provincial government to highlight Gansu's international standing to the local population (Zheng 2014).

4.2 Economic benefits of Sino-British twinning relations

Whilst civic benefits of Sino-British twinning are evident, there are fewer evidences indicating the economic benefit of Sino-British twinning relations. Although there are no specific economic targets for city governments, tangible economic benefits are nonetheless expected in order to justify twinning related expenses. However, many of the 52 twinning relations have remained at the level of cultural and educational exchanges whilst fewer British city authorities report economic benefits such as inward investments. Especially twinning relations that have only been created in the recent decade are less successful in terms of deeper economic and business engagements. For instance, the survey conducted by the Local Government Association (LGA) in 2013 reveals that the Oxfordshire county council's twinning agreement with Guangdong province, which focuses on business partnerships, has resulted in little direct economic benefits, since the relationship had only been in place for three to five years (LGA survey 2013). The local government of Basildon also reported similar outcomes in terms of their connection with the city of Changzhou. The informal twinning relationship between Basildon and Changzhou was agreed through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) which focused on promoting trade and cooperation in the manufacturing and engineering industries as well as medicine. However, the LGA survey reveals that Basildon's partnership has resulted in

limited financial benefits in 2013 by which time the authority had already been twinned with Changzhou for three to five years.

One reason why economic benefits have been limited may be related to the length of twinning relations, as cities that have had a partnership for more than a decade have been more successful. For example, Angus and Yantai, a city in the Shandong Province, have had a twinning relationship since 1999 and have produced some significant economic successes so far. According to the Angus council, five trade visits to Yantai and four trade exchanges hosted in Angus have enabled many local businesses to secure some form of business alliances. Business deals included new investments into manufacturing plants in Yantai and Chinese orders in excess of £1 million for Angus businesses (Scottish Executive 2006).

Long-term partnerships give local companies more opportunities to assess the key strength of each other's market and to identify relevant market needs. Another economic advantage of twinning is its ability to connect key decision makers between two cities. For foreign companies that wish to enter the Chinese market, being able to identify the relevant departments or key decision makers is often an obstacle that is hard to overcome. Twinning in this sense is an effective means to meet top tier city authorities. According to Manchester council authorities, their twinning relationship with Wuhan also helped Manchester to forge stronger links with other major Chinese cities such as Beijing and Shanghai (Jayne et al. 2013:245). Chinese twin cities therefore serve as an entry point to a much wider network of key decision makers of other Chinese cities although time is required for creating a more trusting relationship.

The case of Shanghai and Liverpool's twin partnership, which was formed in 1999, is another useful example of how long-term twinning relationships can assist in accessing the Chinese market. During the Shanghai Expo in 2010, apart from the UK pavilion, Liverpool was the only British city allowed to open a pavilion due to its longstanding twin city relationship with Shanghai as fellow port cities (BBC 2010). Although it remains to be seen whether Liverpool has been able to secure any substantial investments from China, this case shows that the close relationship between Shanghai and Liverpool can help to advertise Liverpool to potential Chinese investors. The political stability and consistency of city leaders is another important element for a successful twinning relationship. When local leaders change after electoral cycles in the UK, it may require some more time for decision makers from both sides to get to know each other. Furthermore, different local leaders may have very different visions for the economic development of their city. This is particularly the case for new Chinese city leaders who would initiate their own grand vision for the city and its economic development and often abandon development plans of their predecessors (Wu 2015). Timing and considerations of the local development strategy therefore need to be taken into account when devising plans for economic partnerships.

In addition to long-term relationships, the availability of opportunities and compatibility of cities are also important factors for a successful economic collaboration. For example, in recent years urban development has become one of the key areas where Chinese and British city authorities are seeking more collaboration. The reason for this is grounded in the view that Chinese cities can learn more from Britain's regeneration strategies. The frequent exchange visits of twin city delegates have also made sure that both sides are familiar with the challenges and strengths of each other's city. The visit of the Welsh Minister for Housing, Regeneration and Heritage Huw Lewis to Chongqing's largest social housing project (Welsh Government 2013) further indicates the potential for joint collaboration in regenerating cities. The Manchester-Wuhan and Bristol-Guangzhou twinning cities are useful illustrations of how long-term city twinning can contribute to deeper business relations. Both city pairs have become part of the EU-China smart-cities

program. The program originates from the agreement between DG CONNECT and the Chinese Ministry for Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) to explore “Green Smart City” cooperation by selecting pilot cities from China and the EU, and to create a technical experts group to conduct research and cooperation (EU-China Smartcities 2015). Amongst 15 Sino-European pilot projects, Manchester-Wuhan and Bristol-Guangzhou were the only two Sino-British projects. As part of this partnership, the Wuhan government has commissioned the Manchester based Architecture firm BDP to plan and design the new Central Business District in Wuhan. Similar forms of business cooperation are also expected to happen between Bristol and Guangzhou. Although the twinning relations between both city pairs were not explicitly mentioned as reasons for their inclusion into the EU-China smart cities program, the twin city relationship may have nonetheless played a crucial role. Manchester formally established a twin city relationship with Wuhan in 1986 whilst Bristol officially signed a sister city contract with Guangzhou in 2001. Years of exchanging visits and hospitality may have helped both sides to establish a better understanding of each city’s potential for collaboration and provided an edge when competing for EU-Chinese financial and political support.

From an economic perspective, these two successful cases show that twinning relations may require a longer period of time before yielding any economic returns. Extended periods of cultural and friendly exchanges are indispensable in order to create a trusting relationship that is conducive to economic collaborations. On the other hand, more recent twin city relations that solely focus on inward investments may be less successful both due to the unrealistic prospect of large-scale direct inward investment but also the lack of a deep understanding of each city’s strength and potential for development.

4.3. Sino-British university partnerships and town twinning

One form of intercity partnerships that has been regarded as useful to finding suitable town twinning partners is the recent success of UK universities collaborating with their Chinese counterparts. Sino-British joint research and teaching programs have started to proliferate since the mid 2000s and the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) now lists 257 collaborations between Chinese and British universities that are formally approved by the MoE (MoE 2015). Most of the partnerships involve joint teaching degrees that are accredited by universities from both cities.

Aside from the numerous joint teaching programs, Liverpool University and Nottingham University have also established two new universities in China. The Ningbo Nottingham University was established in Ningbo in 2004 and Xi’an Jiaotong University located in Suzhou was founded in 2006. The implication of these university expansions for the twinning of cities is relatively mixed. So far, the collaboration between Liverpool University and Xi’an Jiaotong University has had little impact on the relationship between Liverpool and Xi’an and no formal twinning agreement has been signed by both cities. On the other hand, Nottingham and Ningbo have formed an official twin city agreement due to the establishment of the Ningbo Nottingham University in Suzhou. The Nottingham city authority supported Nottingham University’s expansion at a very early stage and took part in negotiations with Chinese authorities. Better coordination between political, economic and academic interests can lead to more economic opportunities as this twin city agreement has resulted in more partnerships between Ningbo city and Nottingham University. Examples include the recent research agreements between the Ningbo Nottingham University and Ningbo’s hospital and Centre for disease control (Nottingham Post 2015). In addition, the Nottingham city council has also opened a trade and investment office in Ningbo in the hope of attracting more commercial activities outside of the research area (Nottingham Post 2015).

Although Ningbo and Nottingham is a promising case that may warrant other cities to follow suit in establishing twin city relations based on existing university collaborations, some caution is also needed. Firstly, by contrasting the 257 MoE approved university collaborations against the current number of Sino-British twinning relations it becomes evident that not all university partnerships have sufficient potential to create more economic relations. Before entering any twinning agreement, city authorities need to ensure that there is a high compatibility between each city's economic strength and demand in order to ensure an economically viable twinning partnership. Another trend that calls for caution in terms of relying on British universities to generate closer city partnerships is the current priority of the Chinese Ministry of Education. University expansions of the scale of Ningbo Nottingham University or Xi'an Jiatong Liverpool University are not likely to occur en masse since the Chinese government has in principle ruled out any further British university expansion in China (Fazackerley and Worthington 2007). Instead, university collaborations are likely to move towards a less resource intensive direction such as partnerships focusing on certain specialities of a university rather than offering a range of degrees. However, this trend does not necessarily rule out effective twinning but instead could be beneficial to more economically fruitful twinning outcomes. More sector-specific academic partnerships in fact highlight the respective city's strength and specialty and therefore helps narrowing down potential areas of economic collaboration.

5. Conclusion: Key messages

Twining serves many functions in Britain ranging from strengthening bonds with their European neighbours, showing political solidarity and increasingly also for forging economic alliances with emerging markets such as China. Sino-British twining started in the 1980s due to concerns for the financial viability of British town twining. In response, the government under Thatcher encouraged cities to use twining as an entrepreneurial tool to attract economic growth. Especially British cities with a strong industrial heritage were keen to attract Chinese investment and commercial activities in order to strengthen their weakened local economy. Chinese cities in fast developing regions such as the Pearl River Delta and the Yangtze River Delta were also eager to acquire more advanced know-how and technologies that Britain had to offer in various fields such as medicine, science as well as urban development.

Twining partnerships between Chinese and British cities were often facilitated through many local actors such as businesses who already have Chinese commercial partners, British universities collaborating with their Chinese counterparts and local Chinese communities. Although many twining agreements were driven by local initiatives, the Sino-British twining alliance also needs to be understood in the context of a wider collaboration between the UK and China at the national level. Leaders of both countries have often used twining as one of its devices to create a closer partnership with each other.

In respect to the civic and economic implications of Sino-British town twining, many students and locals have benefited from the cultural and educational exchanges such as school visits or teaching institutes such as the Cardiff's Confucius Institute. Twining also assists authorities to promote their city's potential and success to international and domestic audiences, which in turn contributes to local tourism and informs the local population of their own city's international standing. With regards to the economic implications, most of the economically rewarding twining relations have been existent for at least a decade or more such as Manchester and Wuhan in 1986 or Shanghai and Liverpool in 1999. Time and traditional values such as hospitality and reciprocity are required to build up a trusting relationship between city authorities in order to open up more economic opportunities. Recent twining relations in contrast have been less successful but apart from the short twining time, other factors such as market compatibility may also be obstacles to further economic collaborations. In this sense, Sino-British university partnerships can be a useful approach in identifying suitable Chinese twining partners although caution is needed since it remains to be seen whether twining relations formed through university partnerships can also benefit other local businesses.

Key messages

1. Twining is a multi-functional tool that serves various functions ranging from creating cultural and educational to symbolic and economic relations with other cities. In some cases these function also reinforce each other and lead to deeper economic collaborations.
2. Facilitating economic prosperity has become a major reason why so many Sino-British twining relationships are emerging.
3. Economically advanced Chinese cities are keen to learn from the expertise of the UK whilst many twinned British cities wish to supplement their local economy by promoting their expertise and local resources to their Chinese twin cities.

4. From the British perspective, town twinning enables city authorities to create ties with key decision makers and is a crucial point of entry to a larger Chinese market.
5. The compatibility of each city's economy, local organisations as well as national strategy to strengthen Sino-British relations all play important roles in facilitating twinning relations and help select suitable twin partner cities.
6. Time, hospitality and consistent exchange visits can help generate economic collaborations from twinning relations since feelings of trust and reciprocity require long-term commitment to twinning partners.
7. Many economically successful twinning partnerships have evolved from non-economic twinning activities such as educational and cultural exchanges.
8. The recent surge of academic collaborations between China and the UK can be supportive to generate Sino-British twinning relations and also help identify potential areas for deeper economic partnerships. However, this will require a better coordination between city authorities and academic institutions.

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