

Neglected Agents: Elucidating Chinese Social Actors' Role in Thai-Sino Smart City Diplomacy

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Abstract

This paper argues that Chinese social actors play a crucial role in advancing Thai-Sino diplomacy through Chiang Mai's smart city initiatives. As an initiative, a focus group workshop involving transnational Chinese from People's Republic of China (PRC) has been organized. From the inputs of Chinese participants who have been residing in Chiang Mai as students, investors, parents and entrepreneurs, this paper elucidates Chinese contributions as multifaceted covering technological, socio-cultural, economic and soft power dimensions for both Thailand and PRC. Against a delimiting scope and research scarcity of social actors in smart city diplomacy within an intra-Asian context, this paper seeks to recover the significant role of Chinese as neglected agents. Situated in-between dual-embeddedness, Chinese social actors transcend the fixation of single sovereign state's interests. With growing protectionism and precarious global landscapes, this paper proffers states' engagement of Chinese social actors in creative platforms to facilitate positive win outcomes.

Keywords: *Chinese, social actors, smart city diplomacy, Thailand, Chiang Mai*

1. Introduction

This paper argues that Chinese social actors play a crucial role in advancing Thai-Sino diplomacy through Chiang Mai's smart city initiatives. The recent meteoric rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has inadvertently attracted attention from politicians, academics, economists and other professionals. Juxtaposed between resisting and romancing, countries worldwide scramble to find ways to establish diplomatic relations while seeking positive win situation. Situated within this geopolitical shift, social actors actively organize themselves in collaborating with the state to promote the interests

of Thai-Sino diplomatic relations. Through the case study situated at Chiang Mai, one of Thailand's designated smart cities, this paper explores the role of Chinese social actors as oft-neglected unofficial agents, and accentuates their multifaceted contributions in enhancing Thai-Sino bilateral relations.

The significance of this qualitative research-based paper lies in its epistemological contribution to diplomacy through articulating Chinese social actors' voluntary involvement in Thai-Sino smart city diplomacy. Besides, from an intra-Asian lens, this paper contributes to the existing lacuna in Chinese migrant studies from the intersecting domain between the fields of smart city and diplomacy. Against the backdrop of increasing protectionism and global trade competition, this paper seeks to proffer an alternate vision in promoting win-win situation across different countries through optimizing the critical role played by the Chinese communities.

In the following section, this paper provides a literature review problematizing smart city and diplomacy in existing studies, while establishing the conceptual framework employed in this paper. Next, the dynamic historical Thai-Sino relations against PRC's developmental rise will be presented. Subsequently, this paper establishes the method and data by situating Chiang Mai smart city initiatives against the overarching backdrop of Thailand's smart city policies. Thereafter, the research findings of the contributions by the Chinese social actors are succinctly presented. In addition, preliminary reflections and policy implications will be proffered. Finally, this paper concludes by reiterating the contributions and recommendations while acknowledging the limitation of the current research.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

This section problematizes the narrow definition, limited role and scarce exploration of social actors in existing studies related to the smart city and diplomacy while proposing a conceptual framework in capturing the multifaceted contributions of Chinese social actors in Thai-Sino smart city diplomacy.

2.1. Traditional Approach: Delimiting Identification and Research Scarcity of Social Actors in Intra-Asian Context

Traditionally, smart city studies have revolved around digital technologies for enhancing physical and communication infrastructures. Information technologies (IT) aspects, such as sensors and Internet of things in data collection and analyses (Cardone et al. 2013; Jin, Gubbi, Marusic and Palaniswami, 2014; Kitchin 2014; Perera, Zaslavsky, Christen and Georgakopoulos, 2014) as well as organizational management, governance and policy context

(Chourabi et al., 2012) have often been the focus in the discussion of smart cities. Over the years, some scholars have advocated a sense of inclusivity and have developed the concept of “smart city for all” (Townsend, 2013; Paskaleva, Cooper, Linde, Peterson and Götz, 2015; Kaika, 2017). However, such inclusivity in existing smart city studies ironically bears an exclusive element for these studies tend to emphasize residents, while leaving the voice of tourists to smart tourism studies (Khan, Woo, Nam and Chathoth, 2017). Further, exclusivity is exacerbated with a narrow definition of “residents,” while dichotomizing the terminologies of “residents” and “tourists or visitors.” Such flawed dichotomy in omitting the overlapping nature between the two will inadvertently delimit the identification of social actors in smart city development.

In terms of diplomacy, this paper first briefly discusses digital diplomacy, which can be understood as the use of Web, information communication technology (ICT), and other social media tools for the engagement of diplomatic activities to fulfill foreign policy objectives (Sandre, 2013: 9). Due to increasing global connectivity, diplomatic ministries have adopted digital diplomacy strategies for the connection of cultures, increasing awareness and advocating policy positions (Sarukhan et al., 2012). A distinctive example can be found in Hilary Clinton’s 21st Century Statecraft Initiative, which has embraced a far-reaching vision of digital diplomacy programs and tools (Lichtenstein, 2010; Sandre, 2015). In a nutshell, digital diplomacy has drastically changed the role and conduct of diplomacy (Graffy, 2009; Seib, 2012; Bjola and Holmes, 2015; Sandre, 2015). It has a positive impact in enabling politicians and officials to gather multiple perspectives pertaining to their policies and programs (Gilboa, 2016: 542). However, while digital diplomacy can be employed to reach and engage internal, domestic and foreign audiences, the definition of foreigners is still restricted to “people in another country” (Gilboa, 2016: 545). In other words, conventional digital diplomacy has decidedly neglected foreigners who are categorically wedged in-between local residents and temporal tourists. Hence, with the predominant literature situated in the American context (CPD and Clingendael, 2014), this paper seeks to explore the role of in-between foreign social actors with significant national, cultural and idiosyncratic differences (Gilboa, 2016: 540) in the intra-Asian context.

In complementarity to digital diplomacy and smart city studies, this paper briefly explores literature related to city diplomacy. According to Acuto, Morissette and Tsouros (2017: 14), “city diplomacy” is commonly referred to as “city networks,” which are “formal and institutionalized governance structures” facilitating the cooperation between city-to-city and city-to-other actors. Yet, as an academic discipline, it is still a scattered and anecdotal scholarship (Acuto, 2016: 513). There is still much room to explore how city

diplomacy should be conducted with more integrative and strategic stance at both local and international levels (Acuto et al., 2017: 14). Further, while there is an increasing awareness of a new reality where non-state actors are “exerting increasing influence over the means and goals of international diplomacy” (Acuto, 2016: 518), scholars often delimit non-state actors as “municipal officers, international organizations and business entities” (Acuto, 2016: 514). Hence, there is a dearth of research on the contributions of social actors in city diplomacy within the intra-Asian context.

Finally, extrapolating the convergence of digital diplomacy, city diplomacy and smart city studies, this paper situates conceptually at smart city diplomacy, where research is still at its infancy. With the Internet search, the only available academic work is a conference article by Mursitama and Lee (2018) proposing a new framework of smart city diplomacy. Its main argument lies in the decentralization implicated by globalization that results in smart cities being a sub-national actor in search of investments, business partners, technological knowledge and socio-cultural exchanges internationally (Mursitama and Lee, 2018: 6). According to its recommendation, smart city diplomatic activities at government to government, government to non-governmental organizations, government to business, and business to business levels should expand in the scope of stakeholders to include “local government, local businesses, associations, academia, journalists, non-governmental organization, and individual” (Mursitama and Lee, 2018: 4-5). Hence, this paper takes a leaf from this and seeks to elucidate the roles of Chinese social actors in Thai-Sino smart city diplomacy. Moreover, what makes this paper interesting is that instead of confining social actors as locals, this paper unravels how foreigners could serve as unofficial dual-accredited citizen diplomats.

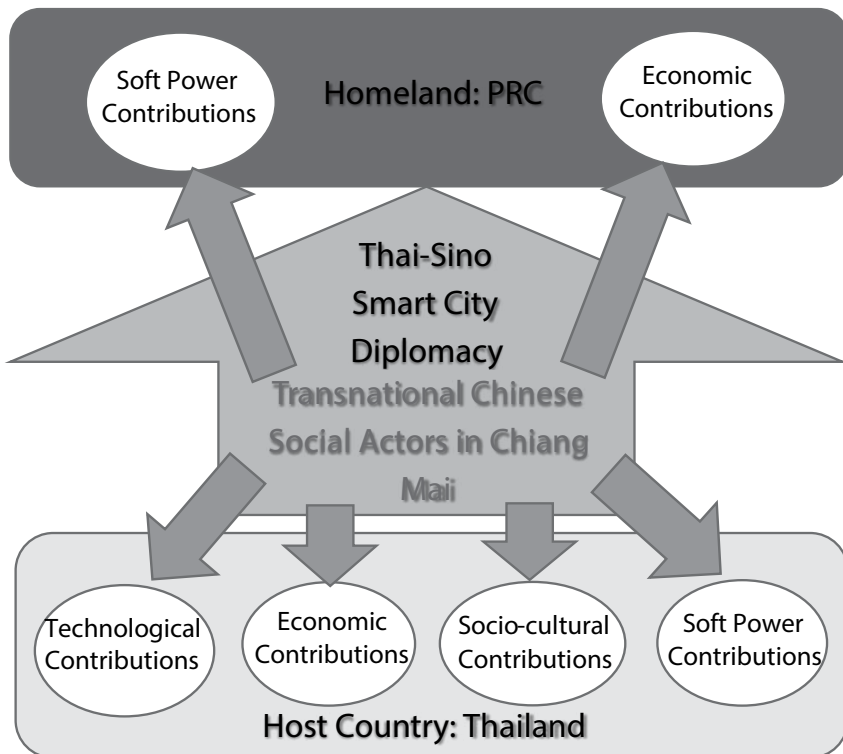
2.2. Conceptual Framework: Exploring Multifaceted Contributions by Chinese Social Actors

In recent studies on Chinese transnationalism, Liu and Ren (2017: 58) coined “dual-embeddedness” to depict how some Chinese conducted activities in both origin and settlement societies. However, existing intra-Asian migrant studies tend to focus on how the new Chinese migrants navigate transnationalism and integration to accumulate economic and social resources for survival and career development (Liu and Ren, 2017). Hence, this paper seeks to elucidate the multifaceted contributions of Chinese social actors to both Thailand and PRC through a peculiar lens of smart city diplomacy. Besides, from an international relations perspective, Nye defined “soft power” as the ability to attract or co-opt countries to one’s will (Nye, 2013). Thus, the underlying fixation of soft power accumulation is often portrayed as

unilateral and restrictively confined within a certain state's sovereign interests. Literature revolving around China's soft power influence tends to focus on the "appeal as either a state-led project to boost its image overseas or simply a 'passive' notion of China's growing 'charm'" (Ham and Tolentino 2018: 47; see also King, 2013 and Kivimaki, 2014). Hence, this paper departs from the delimiting conceptualization of soft power by articulating how Chinese social actors are contributing soft power in both host country and homeland. Based on the preceding discussion, Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework employed in this paper. In a nutshell, this framework depicts how transnational Chinese – engaged in Thai-Sino smart city diplomacy – are making technological, economic, socio-cultural and soft power contributions to both Thailand and PRC respectively. By employing "social actors" as operational concept, this paper seeks to unravel the vital involvement of

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

MULTIFACETED CONTRIBUTIONS BY CHINESE SOCIAL ACTORS



Source: Author's Own Compilation.

diverse common individuals while departing from the conventional scope of non-state actors as cities, organizations, associations and leaders.

3. Dynamic Thai-Sino Relations against PRC's Developmental Rise

Thai-Sino historical relations began as early as the Sukothai era when the Chinese conducted economic activities and later expanded into Thailand's entire economy by the late nineteenth century (Wu and Wu, 1980: 66). However, by 1939, Thailand began implementing restriction on Chinese activities in the areas of remittances, employment, population control and joint ventures (Wu and Wu, 1980: 71). It was not until 1999 that bilateral trade relations were formally forged through the signing of the "Joint Declaration on the Cooperation Program of the Twenty-first Century" (Chinvanno, 2015: 14; Freedman, 2014). Since then, Chinese entrepreneurs have been increasingly visible in the Global South including Thailand acting as a staging post for the Chinese to other developed countries (Smith, 1997; Zhou and Benton, 2017: 16-17). With the turn of the twenty-first century, this trend continues with a re-emergence of new Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia (Sung, 2015: 41). This is in line with PRC's international strategy that purportedly aims to promote peace, development, regional stability and integration while seeking to achieve the grand "Chinese Dream" (Zhang, 2016: 55).

Currently, PRC stands as the world's second largest economy and will be expected to become the world's largest economy before 2030 (Tambunlertchai and Tambunlertchai, 2015: 27). To Thailand, PRC plays an important role as her export market. Since 2010, PRC has been the largest importer of Thai goods and has held the top position in the source of tourists for Thailand (Tambunlertchai and Tambunlertchai, 2015: 36). Besides, Thailand has increasingly been attracting FDI from PRC over the past decade (Tambunlertchai and Tambunlertchai, 2015: 36). Even in challenging years, Thailand has also benefited from PRC's many constructive efforts including buying surplus agricultural products and supplying tourists (Chinvanno, 2015: 14). Most recently, Thailand is expected to gain from PRC's "Belt and Road Initiative," which seeks to forge integrated and extensive network with PRC as the hub (Yu, 2017: 117).

In spite of these promising signs, Thailand needs to avoid being overly dependent on PRC and exercise discernment towards the consequences of "China's rise" (Chinvanno, 2015: 14-16). While adopting this cautionary stance, Thailand should not neglect in enhancing her attractiveness as the PRC's economy undergoes a period of transition, restructuring and rebalancing where quality growth is sought (Tambunlertchai and Tambunlertchai, 2015: 36). Thailand needs to actively demonstrate that she can be PRC's real and reliable partner as the hub of mainland Southeast Asia (Chinvanno, 2015:

17). In an increasingly digitalized era, Thailand's neighbouring countries that border PRC are progressively positioning themselves as competitive alternatives. Hence, situated against the developmental rise of PRC in historical context, this paper explores how an unexpected group of transnational Chinese social actors has operated within Thai-Sino smart diplomacy while making multifaceted contributions to both Thailand and PRC.

4. Method and Data

This section provides the research context by examining how Thailand's smart city policies are situated in the national endeavour to gain competitive advantage in global digital business. Besides, Chiang Mai, the research site, as a designated location for smart city development is introduced. Finally, this section concludes with the description of how Chiang Mai's smart city initiatives provide a creative space for the planning and execution of a Chinese workshop.

4.1. Thailand's Smart City Policies

To understand Thailand's smart city policies, one has to appreciate the context of Thai national development strategy. In 2016, Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha cited the "Thailand 4.0" policy as the new direction of the country in line with the nation's 20-year strategy for economic reform under the vision of "stability, prosperity and sustainability" (Naprathansuk, 2017: 342). Thailand 4.0 is a new economic model to develop Thailand into a value-based economy with an equilibrium between environment and society while pulling itself out of the middle-income trap (Naprathansuk, 2017: 342). Within this national road map, Thai government's smart city development serves to build the country with a high capacity of digital infrastructure where digital technology is utilized to boost the economy, create equitable society, transform government practices, develop workforce, and build trust and confidence (Naprathansuk, 2017: 343). From a macro perspective, the smart city project is embedded in Thailand's Digital Economic Policy where it seeks to develop better smart digital service and industry while supporting the bigger plan in becoming a digital services hub of ASEAN in connection with global digital business (Digital Economy Promotion Agency, 2017; Khianmeesuk, 2017: 82).

4.2. Chiang Mai as Designated Smart City

Phuket, Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen are the first three cities selected in the pilot smart cities program (Ariffin, 2018). While the project in Phuket appeared in 2016, smart city initiatives in Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen only

began in 2017, which will then pave the way for developing smart cities at Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor as well as Bangkok (Ariffin, 2018). Since 2016, the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society has planned to spend 200 million baht for subsequent years and Chiang Mai has received 36.5 million baht (Leesa-Nguansuk, 2016). Similar to Phuket, Chiang Mai has been chosen as a pilot smart city due to its preparedness, location and international ties (Smart Cities Council Staff, 2016). In terms of preparedness, Chiang Mai has bold plans in becoming a development centre in the following areas: enterprise software, digital content and animation, the Internet of Things (IoT), embedded systems for automation and connected vehicles, and tech startup businesses (Naprathansuk, 2017: 344). As a result, Chiang Mai has been slated as a testing ground where new ways of ICT are applied for optimization of local strengths (Leesa-Nguansuk, 2016; Naprathansuk, 2017: 343). In terms of location, Chiang Mai is geographically conducive to implement concrete smart operations in combating environmental problems, such as smoke and haze problems; improving agriculture in a spatial coverage of more than 80% of total areas; and enhancing city management to solve transportation problems and support tourism (Naprathansuk, 2017: 344). In terms of international ties, Chiang Mai, the most culturally significant city in northern Thailand, stood at number 2 on World's Best Awards survey, Travel and Leisure 2016 list of "Top 15 cities" (Lieberman, 2016). With reference to Chinese tourists travelling to Thailand, the figure jumped from 1.7 million in 2011 to 4.7 million in 2013 (Wolfgang, 2016). While the figure might have even skyrocketed to 9 million in 2017, many of these Chinese visitors have compound identities as they are investors first before becoming tourists in Thailand (Chompoonud, 2017). Empirically, the Chinese have registered 570 companies in Chiang Mai where 83 tourism-related companies have invested US\$86 million in 2017 alone (Siriphon, 2019: 273).

4.3. Initiating Chinese Workshop in Smart City's Creative Space

Against this setting, this paper examines the creative space within Thailand's political will where social actors play catalytic roles to accomplish multiple objectives. In this particular case study, a Thai academic was instrumental in providing consultancy to the Thai government in developing Chiang Mai into a smart city. At that infancy stage, there was abundant space and freedom in expressing what smart cities mean to Thai society and economy. The figurative "painting on a white canvas" had provided impetus for the Thai consultant in initiating and shaping the underlying principles of Chiang Mai's smart city initiatives. Perceiving the predominance of smart city discourses that precariously tilted towards the emphasis of technology gravely

neglecting the soul of the city, the Thai consultant presented the twin pillars of “inclusiveness” and “just” to the main and vice provincial governors. Being favourably accepted, she joined the smart city committee set up by Chiang Mai’s provincial government in mid-2016. Subsequently, in August 2017, the committee received financial funding from the Office of Strategic Management (OSM) under the Thai national government. Mandated to draft the smart city idea for Chiang Mai, this Thai consultant kick-started the project with the involvement of academics and other professionals in view of designing a website amongst other smart initiatives. This has been consistent with Digital Economy Promotion Agency’s (DEPA) initiatives to develop mobile application to augment reality through providing historical information of tourist attractions in Chiang Mai (Ariffin, 2018). Moreover, in line with the essential ingredient of inclusivity, the Thai consultant recruited the author of this paper, a lecturer from Chiang Mai University, to garner feedback from the Chinese pertaining to Chiang Mai smart city project in general, and a website in particular. From the onset of the project, the Thai consultant had already gained the support of Chiang Mai’s provincial government office to have three languages incorporated in the website as part of the smart city’s initiative. According to the Thai consultant, Chiang Mai’s provincial office had increasingly valued the Chinese community. The provincial governors’ favourable orientation towards Chinese was premised on their recognition of Chiang Mai’s intricate economic reliance on Chinese tourists and investors. As Chiang Mai is situated proximally to Southern China and seated at the corridor of China’s latest One Belt One Road initiative, it bears geo-economic significance for both countries.

Subsequently, the Thai consultant contacted and requested the author to play the principal role in drawing feedback from the Chinese community through a special workshop. Held at the Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration, Chiang Mai University, the workshop was conducted from 0900 to 1330 on 19 December 2017. Through relational snowballing technique and multiple avenues of publicity, the workshop has attracted a total of 45 Chinese who have dwelt in Chiang Mai for at least three months. The career profiles of these participants were diverse in wide distribution. They include fifteen university students, twenty-one entrepreneurs (one real-estate; three tourism-related industries; two education-related industries; one digital business; seven freelance businesses; two food & beverage businesses; three hotel lines; one interior design service; one auto-mobile business), two investors, one translator and six parents/guardians who are accompanying children for studies. After the workshop, a special interview session was conducted for selected Chinese individuals representing different vocations in Chiang Mai.

5. Research Findings

As the key coordinator, the author emphasized to the forum – comprising the Chinese workshop participants – that their views are important. In specific, the author explained that their views were needed for constructing a smart city website as well as building Chiang Mai smart city in general. After explaining the overarching idea, the author divided the participants into small groups for discussion. Subsequently, all groups took turns to present their opinions through their representatives. After listening to all presentations, the coordinator opened the floor for further comments, which was followed by getting all participants to each fill a survey form. Thereafter, a special interview session was conducted to get anecdotal reflections from a representative group amongst the Chinese participants. This section includes a succinct summary of the workshop as well as the multifaceted contributions made by the Chinese community in Chiang Mai.

5.1. Summary of the Chinese Workshop

First, the Chinese perspectives for Chiang Mai's smart city website are consolidated as follows: (A) Home Page and (B) Other Comments. For the website's "Home Page," the forum suggested the mode of presentation, the language setting and the calendar management system. As for "Other Comments," the forum provided expertise on Internet speed as well as website promotion strategies. Besides the website, the forum also discussed ideas for Chiang Mai's administration in building itself up as a smart city. In this part of the workshop, the various Chinese perspectives are gathered and organized by the nature of their residence in Chiang Mai: (A) Tourists; (B) Investors; and (C) Long-Term Residents. In terms of "Tourists," the forum covered the following: (1) Transportation; (2) Attraction Sites; (3) Food & Beverages; (4) Security; (5) Language; and (6) Shopping. Next, with regards to "Investors," the forum spelt out the following aspects: (1) Visa Matters; (2) Laws and Regulations; (3) Consultation Services; (4) Government-related Ministries; (5) Advertisement Channels; and (6) Communication. Finally, the forum discussed "Long-term Residents" with regards to the following: (1) Traffic Issues; (2) Medical Services; (3) Visa Matters; (4) Language Acquisition; (5) Food & Beverages; (6) Housing Services; (7) Overseas Education Services; and (8) Retirement Plans.

5.2. Technological Contributions

Throughout the workshop, Chinese technological contributions to Thailand have permeated in many aspects including city network system, security system, online services, online website promotion, transportation system,

and big data management system. To begin with, the forum highlighted that Internet speed is important in this digital era. The forum cited that 5G has already been tested in Guangzhou, China, and that several major Chinese cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, are covered by optical fibre system. Hence, the forum suggested that the Chiang Mai government should consider implementing the advance network system covering the entire city. In addition, the forum offered security advice on setting a monitoring system at public places and ways to protect tourists' confidentiality. Moreover, the forum suggested online services such as facilitating online business forums, online booking systems in immigration-related issues, and other online interactive platforms to ease daily commute. In terms of promoting the use of website, the forum raised several possibilities through the creative use of technology. These publicity strategies include: (1) organizing activities at crowded places where Chinese visitors can experience VR (virtual reality) technology and experiment with the website's popular sites and routes; (2) cooperating with airlines to advertise the website through distribution of flyers or video demonstrations; and (3) partnering with WeChat to combine web pages and mobile applications as WeChat is the main social software used by most Chinese users. Another interesting technological contribution is related to transportation. The forum suggested the inclusion of online traffic information (for travelling around the city and at peripheral districts; vehicle types used in Chiang Mai; locations of designated bus stations; different modes of transportation; and routes to neighbouring cities), implementing an "All-in-One" card (where tourists can use to pay for accommodation, entrance tickets for local attractions, transportation fees and others), and stating vehicle rental laws (including information for official vehicle rental companies). Further, the forum proposed that big data platforms organized in specialized fields be provided. For instance, medical big data covering critical information related to hospitals' locations, emergency contact numbers, hospital services, available forms of vaccinations, medical insurance policies, and dental care services should be made available. In another example of big data management, the forum suggested a system curated to provide information related to education services covering reputable Thai language learning centres, renowned international schools, recommended consultation agencies, and private and government education institutes.

5.3. Socio-Cultural Contributions

With regards to socio-cultural contributions, Chinese workshop participants provided smart suggestions that could enhance their integration into Thai society and their adoption of Thai cultural norms. In so doing, they contributed to the reduction of socio-cultural misunderstandings, animosity

and conflicts while assisting the Chinese in appreciating and respecting the cultural and social aspects of the host country. In this respect, the forum proposed a specific section known as “Long-Term Residents,” which reflected the intention of many Chinese workshop participants to stay in Thailand. Under this section, the forum offered many practical suggestions. To begin with, the forum highlighted that traffic issues guidelines in acquiring driving license should be provided. Besides, the forum proposed information pertaining to language acquisition and translation services so as to facilitate their communication with the Thai locals. Being resident foreigners, the forum highlighted the need to include information pertaining to medical amenities, and accommodation services, which include information for getting reliable agents and brokers so as to purchase and rent properties. Finally, the forum discussed on “Retirement Plans” where retirees could access information related to applying retirement visa, medical coverage, physical facilities, nursing homes, hospices, housekeeping and funeral matters. Summarily, the Chinese workshop participants’ comprehensive suggestions have demonstrated their collective will in offering socio-cultural contributions as they seek social integration of Chinese long-term residents in the Thai society.

5.4. Economic Contributions

In terms of tourism industry, the Chinese workshop participants provided many suggestions to attract tourists from PRC boosting Thai economy. First, commenting on the website “Home Page,” the forum recommended having a symbolic picture that captures Thailand’s cultural heritage and unique character such as significant events, festivals and prominent landmarks. Besides, the forum highlighted the need for language setting to be perfected so that Chinese tourists could easily access and understand the information provided. Further, the forum proposed a designated icon named “Attraction Sites” so that Chinese tourists could browse through the historical and cultural content, as well as ticketing and other crucial logistic-related information. Related to these sites, the forum suggested a “Food and Beverages” section to display the recommended Thai and Chinese restaurants with reviews and GPS (Global Positioning System) locations. Finally, the forum commented that the “Shopping” section must be included to introduce innovative local shopping malls, duty-free shops and special zones for purchasing local specialties. In terms of business opportunities, the forum also massively contributed ideas that could draw financial revenues into Thailand. Having a specified section on “Investors,” the forum reiterated that the essential information dealing with immigration matters, housing services, business consultation services, commercial law and regulations, and key government ministries related to investments should be accurately provided. With clear information regarding

legal procedures, the forum argued that potential Chinese investors would be attracted to conduct business and invest in Thailand.

Nonetheless, the Chinese economic contributions are not unilateral in direction. With enhanced tourism industry in Thailand, Chinese tour operators running Thailand tour packages in PRC will also stand to benefit. With the Chinese-friendly website, PRC-based Chinese tour operators could also access helpful Thai information that would facilitate their tourism business in PRC. In addition, to enhance business collaboration, the forum suggested establishing digital platforms where potential investors could interact with existing Chinese business persons. In other words, PRC-based Chinese entrepreneurs could expand their networks overseas and gain business profits prospering PRC's economic landscape.

5.5. Soft Power Contributions

The workshop has served as a platform for the Chinese residents to express their diplomatic role in making soft power contributions to both Thailand and PRC. Though having access to the Chinese community in Chiang Mai, the author had initial concerns in drawing participants to the workshop due to the perceived pragmatic and industrious nature of Chinese with many commitments. On the contrary, the author was pleasantly surprised at their spontaneous response and strong support. In less than a month's publicity, 45 PRC Chinese respondents of diverse backgrounds turned up punctually at the workshop. It simply demonstrated the value of this topic to them, which bore significant Thai-Sino diplomatic implications. From Thailand's soft power perspective, the potential influence of these Chinese workshop participants in PRC is extensive. This is because these respondents come from various provinces including Guangdong, Yunnan, Sichuan, Fujian, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Zhejiang, Anwei, Jiangsu, Chongqing, Shanxi and Jiangxi. With diverse and expansive network connections in PRC, these respondents could easily proliferate Thailand's soft power as a country with progressive nature in smart development while retaining herself as culturally distinctive. During the interview session with the selected iconic respondents, the Chinese shared how their ideas would improve the image of Thailand. For instance, a parent accompanying child-student shared how Thai media would be greatly sharpened in credibility through the smart city initiatives: "With an official smart website, false impressions and fake news will be removed" (Interview: 19 December 2017). Another interviewee, a graduate student at Chiang Mai University, indicated how Thailand as an attractive education destination would be further uplifted: "With information like Thai public holidays and travel recommendations, student life experience will be enhanced" (Interview: 19 December 2017). In the same vein of education soft power, a teacher-

entrepreneur in education industry articulated it as enhancing “future bilateral interactions between the two countries’ education industries” (Interview: 19 December 2017). Further, a Chinese restaurant owner directly attributed soft power increment to the enhanced conduciveness of residence in Thailand: “We will understand and love this place more... and help us to be better assimilated with the society” (Interview: 19 December 2017).

From a bilateral perspective, PRC also stands to gain soft power from the Chinese workshop participants’ contributions. The initial spontaneous and altruistic response of the Chinese in volunteering to participate in this workshop completely took the Thai organizers by surprise as the latter felt humbled by the Chinese proactive willingness to assist in this project. Later, during the interview session, the Chinese continued to show the helpful side of PRC. For instance, an investor cum entrepreneur expressed: “We hope to be able to work together with the organizers in making Chiang Mai a smart city” (Interview: 19 December 2017). In demonstrating a keen attitude in collaborating with the Thai authorities, the Chinese interviewee conveyed a positive image of the Chinese community. In summary, the Chinese were perceptive to see the diplomatic benefits through their efforts as expressed by an entrepreneur in tourism sector: “We live in a world of increasing mobility and the investment of smart infrastructure will aid economic penetration into the PRC Chinese community” (Interview: 19 December 2017).

6. Reflections and Policy Implications

Earlier, this paper problematizes traditional conceptualization in smart city and diplomacy as delimiting identification and research scarcity of social actors in the intra-Asian context. Through a smart city initiative involving Chinese residing in Chiang Mai for at least three months to design a website, this paper unravels the multifaceted contributions of the neglected agents in technological, socio-cultural, economic and soft power dimensions across both Thailand and PRC. This section seeks to delineate the reflections and policy implications as (1) resisting the stereotypification of Chinese as exploitative predators, (2) recognizing the diplomatic potential of dual-embedded Chinese residents, and (3) revving up of opportunities for Chinese social actors’ involvement through collaborative platforms.

First, this paper proposes resisting the stereotypification of Chinese as exploitative predators. Over the past decade, such biased notion has gradually been developing in concomitant to the recent rise of PRC’s influence. In “Impact of China’s Rise on the Mekong Region,” Santasombat (2015: 2) highlighted that increasing Chinese influence has brought about “negative reaction from the grassroots and the public, many of whom have become victims of land-grabbing and resource enclosure in the name of

development” (see also Lee, 2019: 93). Besides, based on a research study, Laungaransri (2015: 143) decried the “deterritorialization” of Lao residents and Burmese workers by the Chinese neoliberal project at Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone. Consequently, Lee (2019: 93) argued that existing scholarship has unwittingly promoted a “‘flight’ or ‘fight’ approach, in which drastic avoidance or extreme confrontation through economic battles are subtly encouraged.” Hence, this paper proposes the rectification of the biased stereotypification through elucidating the multifaceted contributions of the Chinese workshop participants.

Next, this paper proposes the recognition of the oft-neglected potential of flexible foreign residents as diplomatic agents. Elsewhere, Lee (2020: 17) aptly problematized traditional citizen diplomacy as “fixing ‘citizens’ within a single nation-state sovereignty as well as to rectify overlooking the transformation of embeddedness in view of changing global socio-economic and political circumstances.” Departing from such limitation, Lee (2020: 17) argued that transnational Chinese ethnopreneurs “adopt unofficial dual-accredited roles for the enhancement of bilateral relations.” However, this paper extends the scope of Chinese citizen diplomats as beyond ethnopreneurs to include other vocations that reside long term in Chiang Mai through this research project. The respondents’ attested diplomatic capacities are congruent with what Nyiri (2004: 120) has postulated where new Chinese migrants are legitimized and even celebrated in PRC for having dual social embeddedness or dual “allegiance.” Though they are physically located in Thailand, these new Chinese migrants retain adherence to their cultural and political attachments to PRC as their fatherland (Santasombat, 2015: 4). Hence, this paper recommends that state agencies should recognize the diplomatic potential of such dual-embedded Chinese social actors as they seek to develop bilateral relations for both Thailand and PRC.

Finally, this research report opines the revving up of opportunities for Chinese social actors to be involved through collaborative platforms. This paper has shown how a smart city initiative has created a space for the Chinese to contribute in many ways. According to the Thai consultant that initiated this project, “Chiang Mai is not just a condensed urban space... but it is embodied with the pillars of being inclusive and just” (Interview: 18 June 2018). Chiang Mai’s smart city development would have been much poorer if the Thai state had ignored the growing interest of Chinese residents in offering multifaceted contributions. The Thai state would have missed out opportunities to attract Chinese investments into Thailand. Hence, this paper recommends that state agencies should have a far-sighted perspective in examining various existing and future developmental projects where Chinese social actors could be included to provide sustainable solutions while promoting Thai-Sino bilateral relations.

7. Conclusion

In reiteration, this paper has elucidated the crucial role played by Chinese social actors who are dual-embedded residents in-between PRC and Thailand. Through an organized workshop as part of Chiang Mai's smart city initiatives, this paper articulated the multifaceted contributions of Chinese social actors bearing positive-sum gains for Thai-Sino bilateral relations. Against the common fixation of unilateral and parsimonious soft power accumulation based on a single sovereign state's interests, Chinese social actors have demonstrated their capacities for multiple win-win outcomes across countries. Based on the sample size, the author acknowledges the paper's limitations in capturing all Chinese transnationals in Thailand with their variegated occupations and interests in the host country. Hence, this paper recommends that further research should be carried out to explore the dynamism of Chinese social actors in their contributions through public-private engagements. As for this paper, there are several contributions accomplished in this process. From an epistemological perspective, this paper calls for a departure from casting an overgeneralized negative depiction of Chinese as economic predators while simultaneously awakening the general public to recognize Chinese multifaceted contributions for the enhancement of bilateral relations. The inclusion of Chinese as dual-embedded residents has expanded the traditional scope of the dichotomous definition of social actors as either static locals or detached foreigners in smart city diplomacy. From the methodological perspective, this paper elucidated the vital roles of Chinese social actors through a workshop as Thai smart city initiative, thus providing a platform for farther creative expressions in the future. Hence, the research findings of this paper have contributed to overcome the research scarcity and delimiting nature of social actors in existing approach to smart city diplomacy within an intra-Asian context.

Note

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