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## **An Analysis of Obstacles, Problems, and Sustainable Development Strategies for “City Diplomacy” Operations Between Chiang Rai and Yunnan**

Pornpawis Lhapeerakul and Yunke Zhai \*

*School of Sinology, Mae Fah Luang University, Thailand*

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative research provides a descriptive analysis of city diplomacy operations between Chiang Rai, Thailand and Yunnan, China. It aims to identify obstacles, problems, and sustainable development strategies.

The findings reveal that the city diplomacy relationship is influenced by national policies, governmental strategies, and local development plans. Challenges arise in the international context, the operations of relevant agencies in Chiang Rai and Yunnan, and the involvement of the private sector and the public.

Fostering understanding and implementing sustainable development strategies are crucial to overcome these challenges. This requires support from the central government for budgetary allocations and public relations. This includes shaping the “sister city relationship model” between Chiang Rai and Yunnan into a developmental blueprint applicable to other Thai provinces engaged in similar relationships with Chinese provinces. The focus is on fostering effective international cooperation for mutual benefits that align with global and local dynamics, as well as economic and social development policies at both domestic and international levels. This initiative ultimately aims to build resilient cities and communities, contributing to the achievement of sustainable development objectives.

### **Keywords**

City Diplomacy, Chiang Rai – Yunnan, Sister City, Sustainable Development

## **Introduction**

Present-day diplomacy encompasses various dimensions and perspectives, spanning political, economic, cultural, social, business, sports, technological, educational, and many other realms. Data from Diplomacy360 (2022) has categorized a total of 13 types of diplomatic patterns in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, demonstrating the comprehensive and multifaceted nature of contemporary diplomacy. One of the most promoted and actively pursued forms of diplomacy is “city diplomacy” (Diplomacy360, 2022). City diplomacy refers to the role of cities in international relations and their role in connecting regions (Charoensri, 2022). In each country, city diplomacy is conducted by leaders at the provincial, municipal, and city levels, who emphasize elevating their location’s status and importance on the international stage. The focus is on developing and fostering collaboration within more specialized and targeted scopes to maximize benefits for their respective cities, municipalities, and regions (Vaz & Reis, 2017). This conceptual shift has led to increased intercity relationships and formalized collaborations worldwide, all of which are evolving within the framework of city diplomacy. This trend is evident in various countries, including Thailand and China.

Thailand and China are prominent participants in city diplomacy initiatives facilitated by the “sister city” cooperation policy, wherein municipalities from both countries engage in collaborative efforts aimed at fostering cultural exchange, economic cooperation, and mutual understanding. Thailand and China have established 39 official sister city partnerships and an additional 35 informal partnerships (Naraphanlop, 2017). Among these collaborations, the most well-defined and formalized cooperation is observed between Chiang Rai Province in Thailand and Yunnan Province in China. This collaboration has been in operation since 1998 (B.E. 2541) under the “Establishment of Friendly Cities” initiative between the Chiang Rai municipality and the Chiang Rung municipality (a self-governing district under Yunnan province). Subsequently, in 2000 (B.E. 2543), both governments further formalized their relationship under the “Agreement on the Establishment of Sister City Relationships.” This collaborative effort focuses on the development and promotion of cross-border trade, investment, tourism, Thai-Chinese cultural exchanges, overseas Chinese communities, and Chinese teaching (Chiang Rai Government Center, 2020).

In the realm of political geography, Chiang Rai stands as one of the border provinces, seamlessly connected to two neighboring countries, namely Myanmar and Laos. With the flow of the Mekong River through its terrain, the province is home to several overseas Chinese communities. From an economic and geographical perspective, Chiang Rai maintains intricate connections with cross-border trade and culture with China, particularly the Yunnan province.

This distinct characteristic has fostered collaboration and the promotion of various activities through city diplomacy under Thailand's sister city policy with China. The province

has actively engaged in cross-border trade activities, resulting in an improved economic outlook for Chiang Rai. Cultural exchanges between Thai and Chinese communities have flourished, facilitated by various routes such as R3A and R3B, river transport along the Mekong river, and air travel between Mae Fah Luang International Airport in Chiang Rai and Kunming International Airport in Yunnan (Meechaiyo & Guo, 2023). This ongoing and formalized collaboration has significantly enhanced tourism, trade, and investment in Chiang Rai, fostering continuous people-to-people exchanges. Furthermore, this partnership has led to advancements in education, research, and language and cultural studies between the two regions. The consistent flow of Thai students to Yunnan and Chinese students to Chiang Rai has increased steadily each year (Foreign Affairs Office of Yunnan Provincial People's Government, 2022).

However, despite the numerous benefits city diplomacy brings Chiang Rai and Yunnan, significant challenges in development and collaboration persist. These challenges include environmental management and resource management issues, such as dam construction and island blasting, as well as the smuggling of agricultural and illegal products. Additionally, ongoing challenges include the effective management of the COVID-19 pandemic, the efficiency of administrative work, and the clarity and continuity of collaboration between the local governments of Chiang Rai and Yunnan.

This study aims to address the following questions: 1) Why has the implementation of city diplomacy between Chiang Rai and Yunnan over a period of 26 years (1998-2024) not been as successful as it should have been? 2) What are the obstacles, problems, and challenges of implementing cooperation under city diplomacy between Chiang Rai and Yunnan? 3) What types of operations are necessary for Chiang Rai and Yunnan to engage in sustainable cooperation?

This study explores the functions and forms of city diplomacy between Chiang Rai and Yunnan. It examines the obstacles, problems, and sustainable development strategies for city diplomacy operations between Chiang Rai and Yunnan. In the final, to provide thoughtful commentary and propose viable strategies to bolster collaboration between Chiang Rai and Yunnan. These strategies will be situated within the sustainable city diplomacy framework, advocating for a cohesive and sustainable model of city diplomacy.

## **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

### **City Diplomacy**

The phenomenon of city diplomacy traces back thousands of years, evident in the interactions among city-states in ancient India, China, Babylonia, and Greece. During the Renaissance in Italy, city republics like Venice, Milan, and Florence were recognized as early practitioners of professional diplomacy (Zhang, 2017). Notably, in 1919, Kerry in England and

Poix in France established the world's first "sister city" with the aim of post-war reconciliation (Verma, 2014).

Alger (1977; 1979) "The Impact of Cities on International Systems" since the 1970s, using Columbus, Ohio, as a case study, emphasizes cities' impact on international relations. He argues for prioritizing cities as significant actors in diplomacy. City diplomacy involves collaborative exchanges between cities, recognized by organizations like United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group. The concept is that the evolution of cities is linked to diplomacy. Furthermore, the city plays an increasingly significant role in the arena of international relations worldwide. This concept gained recognition from the University of Southern California (USC) Center on Public Diplomacy. Initially focused on trade and tourism, city diplomacy has helped to shape global interactions and now includes cultural exchange and conflict resolution (Verma, 2014; Wei, 2017).

"City Diplomacy: The Role of Local Governments in Conflict Prevention, Peace-Building, and Post-Conflict Reconstruction" by Sizoo and Musch (2008) highlighted city diplomacy as a comprehensive activity led by local governments. The form of diplomacy focuses on conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and post-conflict recovery through collaborative frameworks. Sizoo and Musch's book highlights the importance of local authorities' governance methods, particularly in regions with better development. It emphasizes the unique characteristics of cities in promoting cooperation for peace and describes the interconnection between state-level and city-level diplomacy as inseparable.

Former Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi (2011) asserts that cities play a significant role in promoting soft power through city diplomacy and a country's national image. He emphasizes the importance of introducing national conditions and concepts to foreign audiences and implementing diplomatic strategies. City diplomacy focuses on enhancing the national image of a country and strengthening their soft power.

Kuznetsov (2015) asserts that city diplomacy falls within the realm of paradiplomacy, involving sub-national entities in international affairs. This participation includes various practices such as city twinning, transnational networks, decentralized cooperation, and supporting international conferences. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, local governments play an increasingly influential role in international politics, forming cross-border connections for mutual benefit and developing their own foreign policies. Subnational entities, including states, provinces, and cities, aim to promote collaboration, cultural exchange, education, trade, and partnerships through diverse methods and objectives, shaped by power distribution, culture, and socio-economic context (Paquin, 2019; Tavares, 2016).

Contemporary city diplomacy diverges from past objectives focused on post-war conflict resolution and rehabilitation. Instead, it emphasizes collaboration between cities across countries, prioritizing mutual benefits and leveraging each city's unique capabilities

(Mapendere, 2000; Yang & Narot, 2017). This pragmatic approach contrasts with traditional national-level diplomacy, often involving non-governmental, citizen-based interactions. City diplomacy now focuses on explicit problem-solving and collaboration, especially between bordering or similar cities, addressing issues like cultural exchange, trade, pollution, and climate change (C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, 2021).

Van der Pluijm and Melissen (2007) argue that cities are assuming roles surpassing countries, resembling international organizations, and gaining significance on the global stage due to their flexibility and adaptability. Despite this, city diplomacy operates under national supervision, with collaborative initiatives requiring approval from national governments. City networks are increasingly influential in climate policies, impacting governments globally (Sánchez & Pérez, 2020). Marchetti (2021) challenges the traditional view of states as exclusive global actors, highlighting the diplomatic activities occurring within cities, including economic growth, political reform, and social innovation.

City diplomacy is no longer confined to traditional diplomatic activities; it now extends to various aspects of urban life. Economic and investment activities, political reforms, social innovations, protests, and even criminal activities such as acts of violence, opposition movements, armed attacks, and conflicts often have city centers as their focal points. Notable examples include the protests in Hong Kong from 2019-2020 which had city settings as central points of contention.

### **Characteristics of City Diplomacy**

City diplomacy, as outlined by Keji and Wei (2013), possesses four key characteristics. Firstly, it aligns with a country's overall diplomacy, operating under central government guidance for enhanced effectiveness. Secondly, it mirrors traditional diplomacy, with economic diplomacy being central. Thirdly, it engages in various multilateral and multipolar relationships, such as sister city arrangements and multilateral meetings between regions. Lastly, it demonstrates innovation through its semi-official nature, allowing flexible navigation of international relations and pioneering new collaborations (Zhao & Chen, 2013).

Leffel (2022) identifies four determinants shaping contemporary city diplomacy trends: First, cities intervene to enforce international norms. Second, democratic regimes empower municipalities or localities to dissent from national foreign policies. Third, social movements align local officials' views with those of their constituents on foreign policy issues, thus enabling diplomatic activities between cities without restrictions. Fourth, cities tend to prioritize economic growth by seeking benefits for their own urban areas. Cities should enforce international norms when national governments fail to do so, as seen in adherence to agreements like the "Paris Agreement". Democratic governance systems empower local municipalities to resist national foreign policies, while non-democratic systems, like China, use municipal diplomacy to expand international influence. Social movements align with local

officials' perspectives on foreign policy, leading to unconstrained city diplomacy, such as U.S. sanctuary cities. Cities prioritize economic growth, promoting local products, boosting exports, and attracting tourism and investments for local development (Leffel, 2022).

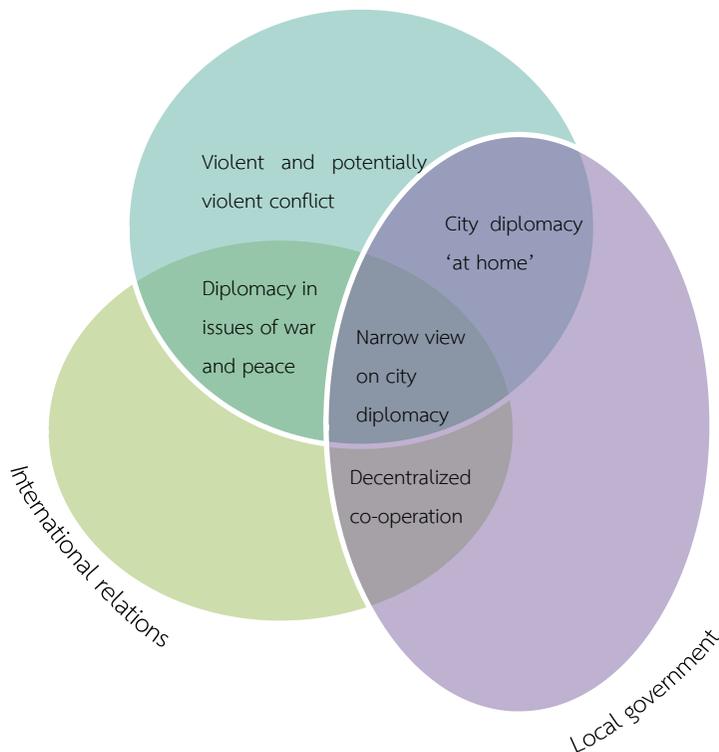
City diplomacy operations, as outlined by Zha (2015), encompass six dimensions: security, development, economics, culture, networking, and representation. These operations aim to promote both city and national interests, attracting investments, fostering cultural exchanges, facilitating tourism and education, establishing city-to-city networks, and addressing challenges related to security and border protection (Diplomacy360, 2022; Zha, 2015).

In summary, city diplomacy involves the participation of various city institutions and international political relations. It aims to promote a mutually beneficial relationship on the global stage. It signifies a diffusion of power in managing international relations, with cities serving as primary representatives. Key factors such as mayors, city officials, and municipal advisors contribute to city diplomacy by engaging in international diplomatic activities (Pluijm & Melissen, 2007).

Understanding the processes and outcomes of city diplomacy is crucial, going beyond mere post-implementation assessments. It's essential to address encountered problems and assess the overall benefits derived from city diplomacy. However, successful city diplomacy operations or agreements may not always translate into significant collaboration or joint activities. Despite longstanding efforts, there could be a lack of tangible cooperation or shared activities between cities.

### **The Functions of City Diplomacy**

City diplomacy holds significant global relevance, particularly in regions where countries share borders and a common history. It plays a crucial role in fostering peace at the grassroots level through citizen participation, facilitated by local governments promoting social cohesion (Song, 2020). To achieve this, there must be a well-established platform for operations, such as sister city relationships, supported by the central government, with adequate funding and sustained, effective, and ethical activities. This study emphasizes the role of city diplomacy in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. It proposes a framework for action supported by consistent and sufficient funding (Sizoo & Musch, 2008).



**Figure 1** The perspective on city diplomacy

**Source:** City diplomacy: The role of local governments in conflict prevention, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction (Sizoo & Musch, 2008)

Modern city diplomacy represents a shift where municipal governments step into political and foreign policy domains traditionally managed by national governments, termed “Municipal Foreign Policy.” Cities initiate actions to uphold international standards, as seen in adherence to the Paris Agreement post-U.S. withdrawal under Donald Trump (Leffel, 2022). Global challenges like climate change are influenced by city interactions. Cultural, religious, and identity dynamics within and between cities shape the global landscape. Rising cities foster networks, collaborative projects, data sharing, and policy formulation, engaging in development assistance and disaster relief (Marchetti, 2021).

Charoensri (2022) explores the challenges posed by global interconnectivity on regions and international actors, focusing on the significance of regional connectivity and transportation issues, particularly in border areas. The research underscores the impact of COVID-19 on economic linkages between cities, especially in land-locked countries, highlighting the importance of inter-city connectivity for businesses and people. Small cities, often overlooked, play a significant role, particularly in border regions like Chiang Rai in Thailand, Luang Prabang in Laos, and Yunnan in China, addressing border disputes and

cross-border trade. Despite their importance, large and small cities have distinct roles in connectivity, with implications for political geography and geopolitical contexts.

The study indicates that city diplomacy often signifies collaboration and problem-solving between cities, especially those located near each other, in addressing global warming issues and climate change, including cross-border haze problems. However, there is a noticeable absence of genuine collaboration in addressing these issues. Specifically, city diplomacy, such as the “Chiang Rai-Yunnan” city collaboration, primarily focuses on cultural exchanges, tourism promotion, or trade rather than addressing critical issues directly (Foreign Affairs Office of Yunnan Provincial People's Government, 2022). This observation raises interesting questions and prompts further investigation into the operational aspects of city diplomacy within the “Chiang Rai-Yunnan” framework.

From the study of Sunanta (2022) and Chiang Rai Provincial Government Center's Policy Brief (2020), it is found that the implementation of city diplomacy through the sister city relationship-building policy represents a viable strategy. However, upon assessing the practical application of the sister city relationship-building policy in Chiang Rai, it is evident that progress has been limited, and there exists a deficiency in the policy's continuity. The collaboration between the two cities has materialized predominantly in a unidimensional manner, specifically within the educational sector. Nevertheless, various challenges and impediments persist in the execution of the sister city relationship-building policy in Chiang Rai and Yunnan.

This study also reveals challenges, issues, and obstacles that hinder progress and tangible outcomes of the “Chiang Rai-Yunnan” city diplomacy. Notably, a predominant focus on cultural and tourism exchanges or trade has taken precedence over fostering educational and cultural understanding. This has become a key area of interest for researchers to explore and delve into the operational dynamics of Chiang Rai province under the “Chiang Rai-Yunnan” city diplomacy framework. The study further emphasizes the need to overcome challenges and enhance collaboration, particularly regarding the promotion of Chinese language and culture, which is beneficial for building understanding between the populations of Chiang Rai and Yunnan. This understanding serves as a critical foundation for sustainable development strategies and the elevation of the efficiency of city diplomacy between Chiang Rai and Yunnan.

## **Research Methods**

This is a qualitative study, employing a phenomenological analysis through the examination of secondary data obtained from documentary studies. The secondary data sources include literature, academic articles, research studies, news, policy statements, governmental documents, and contractual agreements. The researcher has meticulously organized the research process, methodological framework, data collection, and data

analysis related to city diplomacy, while specifically focusing on the “Chiang Rai-Yunnan” city diplomacy cooperation framework.

This study adheres to a rigorously defined research process and methodological framework for the systematic collection and analytical evaluation of data that is relevant to the study's aims. In the analytical discourse, the attributes and operational dynamics of "city diplomacy" serve as the analytical lens through which the present state of urban diplomatic engagement between Chiang Rai and Yunnan is explored. The findings from Sunanta (2022) on the operation of Chiang Rai's sister city program were examined to illustrate the obstacles, problems and challenges encountered in the diplomatic operations between Chiang Rai and Yunnan. Additionally, the concept of city connectivity, as proposed by Charoensri (2020), is invoked to emphasize the role of cities in international relations, particularly in the context of city diplomacy involving Chiang Rai and Yunnan.

Following the analysis, the researcher presents a comprehensive summary of the findings, providing recommendations and guidelines. The intent is to offer insights and future directions for other provinces in Thailand to adapt and implement sustainable city diplomacy practices. The aim is to encourage the integration of city diplomacy initiatives, particularly in areas beyond Chiang Rai-Yunnan, for continuous and enduring diplomatic activities.

## **Findings**

### **The Operations Employed in “City Diplomacy” Between Chiang Rai and Yunnan**

The provinces of Chiang Rai and Yunnan have had a longstanding relationship, originating from the establishment of a “sister city” partnership between the municipality of Chiang Rai and the municipality of Chiang Rung (a self-governing district in the Yunnan Province) in 1989 (B.E. 2541). Subsequently, an official sister city relationship was formalized in 2000 (B.E. 2543). This relationship has involved various activities such as cross-border trade facilitation through the R3A and R3B routes, cultural exchanges, people-to-people connections through tourism, as well as the promotion of Chinese language learning in Chiang Rai and Thai language learning in Yunnan (Chiang Rai Provincial Government Center, 2020; Sunanta, 2022).

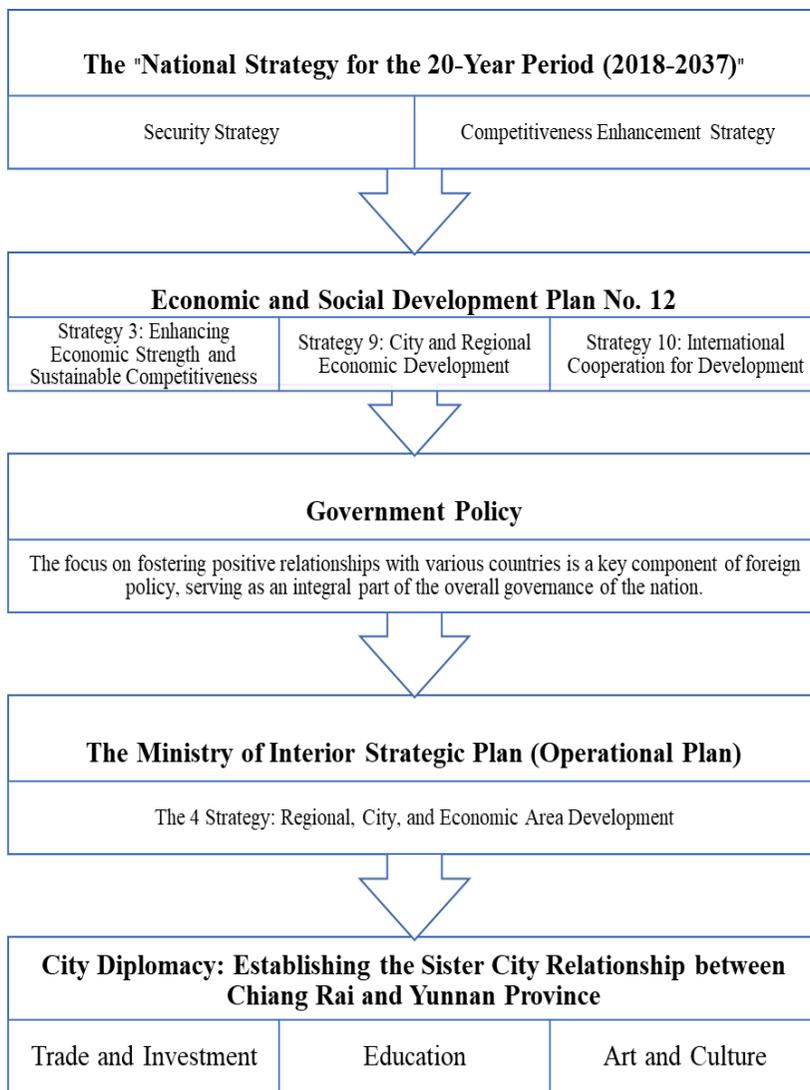
City diplomacy between Chiang Rai and Yunnan is a conceptual framework that has evolved from government-level relations to a collaborative development approach at the municipal level, often referred to as “sister city” cooperation (Xu, 2021). This framework serves as a diplomatic tool for the Ministry of Interior of Thailand to foster friendly relations and mutual development. It involves Thai provinces establishing relationships with provinces (or cities, regions, etc., of equivalent status) in other countries (Ministry of Interior, 2018). This collaboration is based on the similarity of the two entities, both being cities and shared interests, aimed at promoting effective and impactful development strategies in each

respective region. Additionally, it stimulates grassroots economic development, contributing to the overall enhancement of international relations (Ministry of Interior of Thailand, 2019).

The operations in Chiang Rai, following the framework of sister city development with Yunnan, are aligned with Thailand 4.0 and the National Strategy (2018-2037). This interrelation is in line with the national strategy's focus on international cooperation, environmental sustainability, and developing collaborations with foreign nations (Saengin, 2018). It also supports the objectives of Thailand 4.0, emphasizing economic growth and sustainability through multidimensional enhancement and fostering competitiveness (Royal Gazette, 2018).

This municipal-level collaboration integrates the 12<sup>th</sup> National Economic and Social Development Plan, which focuses on economic and social development. Furthermore, it is also aligned with the 3<sup>rd</sup> strategy of city-to-city development for sustainable economic growth and competition. The 9<sup>th</sup> strategy emphasizes urban and regional development, while the 10<sup>th</sup> strategy emphasizes international cooperation for development (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2017). This interconnectedness reflects the government's policy to strengthen and cultivate positive relations with various countries, using foreign policy principles as a foundation for holistic governance. The outcome of these efforts is evident in the diverse and continuous activities undertaken within the sister city relationship, contributing to efficient and effective municipal-level cooperation (Chiang Rai Provincial Government, 2023).

The outcomes of the initiatives are summarized in two primary points. One is the execution of diverse activities within the framework of the sister city relationship. The province of Chiang Rai has engaged in a variety of activities under the establishment of the sister city relationship with Yunnan over an extended period. These activities adhere to a norm and exhibit a continuous nature. Second, the promotion of mechanisms for driving oversight and effective monitoring and evaluation of sister city relations at the provincial level. Efforts have been directed toward fostering mechanisms to propel the supervision, monitoring, and evaluation of the effectiveness of sister city relationships at the provincial level (Chiang Rai Provincial Administrative Center, n.d.).



**Figure 2** Conceptual Framework of the Linkage with the Development Direction in Implementing the Sister City Relationship between Chiang Rai and the Yunnan Province  
**Source:** Sunanta (2022), Policy brief summary report, Chiang Rai Provincial Government Center, (2022).

The operations of Yunnan are aligned with national-level policies under the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), which is a crucial principle in conducting foreign policy. The approach emphasizes “cooperation” and “connectivity” as fundamental elements in executing these activities (Liu, 2023). The primary objectives include promoting prosperity, social progress, and maintaining global peace. The implementation of these policies empowers local governments to take the lead in fostering relationships (Regional Foreign Affairs Office,

2022). Actions have been made from both sides. According to the policy brief: “Guidelines for Preparedness and Action Plans to Develop Sister City Relationships between Chiang Rai Province and Yunnan Province, People's Republic of China, in the Areas of Trade, Investment, Education, and Culture,” authored by the Chiang Rai Provincial Government Center, the establishment and management of city diplomacy relationships between Chiang Rai and Yunnan can be divided into three main phases (Chiang Rai Provincial Government Center, 2022).

During the first decade of cooperation from 2000 to 2010, Chiang Rai and Yunnan officially established their relationship by signing a formal agreement in 2000. Subsequently, they entered into a cooperation agreement in the field of traditional Chinese medicine. The majority of their collaborative efforts during this period were related to organizing meetings or exchanging ideas to formulate action plans.

During the second phase, from 2011 to 2019 (before the outbreak of COVID-19), there were coordination and joint leadership meetings with Laos and Myanmar to enhance cooperation within the Mekong Subregion. The focus was on developing infrastructure to facilitate logistics, transportation, economic development, trade, and investment. Additionally, there were exchanges in the areas of tourism and education. Joint efforts were made to promote civic engagement and foster fair practices in the private sector. On the occasion of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Chiang Rai and Yunnan relationship, both parties proposed measures to strengthen their ties. This involved systematic and continuous visits between leaders, increased engagement with the public sector through agricultural cooperation, and the promotion of historical and educational tourism routes to enhance public awareness and understanding.

The joint discussion on the development guidelines for the relationship between Chiang Rai and Yunnan on June 13, 2017 at the Grand Palace Hotel in Kunming, China marked the starting point for plans to deepen the relationship between both cities. The plan encompassed diverse dimensions and expanded the scope of collaboration with neighboring countries. Initiatives included developing cross-border logistics, border E-Commerce, and bridging connections with various countries along the specified route by the significant principal BRI. The relationship in the education sector was broadened, extending beyond student and staff exchanges to promoting high-level research, academic conferences, and supporting educational funding. Both parties organized activities to foster knowledge exchange, starting from youth exchange programs in 2015 which have continued up to the present day.

The third phase started in 2019 (during the COVID-19 outbreak) and continues until today. The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected international relations and operations worldwide at all levels of cooperation and across all sectors. COVID-

19 has also had a substantial impact on the relationship and activities between Chiang Rai and Yunnan. Travel restrictions have limited interactions at the leadership level, and public activities have come to a halt due to public health and safety concerns. Nevertheless, as the situation gradually improved, both parties have made concerted efforts to jointly determine operational guidelines for the development of the relationship post-COVID-19. Discussions have been held to foster deeper collaboration (Chiang Rai Rajabhat University, 2021).

## **Discussion**

### **The Obstacles, Problems, and Challenges of Chiang Rai and Yunan's Operations Under the Framework of "City Diplomacy" Cooperation**

Over the past 26 years (1998-2024), the city diplomacy cooperation between Chiang Rai and Yunnan has achieved significant success and smooth implementation. However, recent research reveals that challenges and issues remain. This section utilizes the framework of city diplomacy to analyze the current dynamics between Chiang Rai and Yunnan. An examination of the findings from Sunanta's research (2022) on Chiang Rai's sister city cooperation highlights the obstacles and challenges faced in the diplomatic initiatives between Chiang Rai and Yunnan. Furthermore, the concept of city connectivity, as proposed by Charoensri (2020), is employed to emphasize the role of cities in international relations, particularly in the city diplomacy context involving Chiang Rai and Yunnan. This analysis can be categorized into the following three main components:

#### **1. Challenges and Problems Arising from International Factors**

City diplomacy is globally significant, particularly in regions like Chiang Rai and Yunnan, where shared borders and histories necessitate unique collaborative efforts. It plays a pivotal role in fostering grassroots peace through citizen engagement—be it in cultural exchanges, joint environmental projects, or cross-border trade—enabled by proactive local governance. Beyond traditional bilateral coordination, the relationship thrives on the robust connections and collaborations fostered through regional frameworks like the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). These relationships are further cemented by shared infrastructure and transport links, a concept echoed by Charoensri (2020). However, the global COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the fragility of these connections, affecting everything from local economies to cultural exchanges, thereby challenging the adaptability and resilience of city diplomacy in unprecedented ways.

The economic partnership between Chiang Rai and Yunnan is crucial for regional commerce and development, and has encountered considerable obstacles, especially within the cargo transport sector. This area has experienced significant stagnation, with the impact

on water transportation being particularly acute. The closure of Guanlei Port, an essential channel for trade between these regions, prompted a substantial shift in cargo routes to land-based alternatives. This pivot, especially towards the R3A route through the Chiang Khong checkpoint into Laos, has been a critical adjustment to meet emerging health and safety demands. Adding to these logistical changes, the shutdown of the Mohan checkpoint in Xishuangbanna by Chinese officials, due to COVID-19 detections among truck drivers, has further hindered the movement of goods. Such disruptions, as Manager Online (2022) reports, have significantly affected the exportation of products to China and the importation of essential raw materials crucial for Thailand's manufacturing industry.

In the broader context of urban economic resilience, Leffel (2022) highlights the proactive stance of cities in driving economic growth by supporting local products, boosting exports, and drawing tourism and investment. Cities also play a pivotal role in protecting against external dangers, as Zha (2015) points out, through measures designed to block and deter external insecurities. The present circumstances reveal the susceptibility of regional economies to worldwide health emergencies and stress the necessity for adaptable strategies. They emphasize the importance of Chiang Rai and Yunnan in seeking alternative logistics approaches, strengthening cross-border collaboration, and employing technology to alleviate these disruptions. The adaptability of these cities in promoting economic expansion while ensuring security is indispensable for navigating the intricacies of the current global trade landscape.

Additionally, the protracted U.S.-China trade war, resulting in a global economic slowdown, has contributed to a significant contraction in border trade in Chiang Rai (Yirong, 2020). The COVID-19 outbreak has further affected the tourism sector, leading to the closure of arts and culture exchange activities and traditional exchanges between the two populations. Annual youth exchange activities have also been suspended in response to travel restrictions and safety concerns. As a resultant consequence, no interaction exists in the collaboration between the formal and informal sectors of Chiang Rai and Yunnan (Zhao & Chen, 2013).

Furthermore, a significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, termed the "International Situation," is the disruption of continuous coordination and the absence of regular visits crucial for fostering understanding among leaders of Chiang Rai and Yunnan. This constitutes a vital core element facilitating the efficient exchange of ideas necessary for effective operations. Discussions regarding challenges, obstacles, and the monitoring of progress across various domains have come to a standstill.

## **2. Challenges and Problems Arising from the Operations of Relevant Agencies in Both Chiang Rai and Yunnan.**

### **2.1 Operational Mechanism**

2.1.1 The lack of a systematic collaboration mechanism between Chiang Rai and Yunnan, as highlighted in the studies by Norapanlop (2017), Saenginthra (2018), Sunanta (2022), and the Policy Brief of the Chiang Rai Provincial Government Center (2020), highlights a significant gap in diplomatic cooperation not only between these two locales but also between cities across Thailand and China. Despite intentions to foster collaborative efforts, the absence of a unified operational plan continues to pose as a pivotal challenge. This disjunction is evidenced by the differing frameworks under which Chiang Rai and Yunnan operate—Chiang Rai's initiatives align with the Ministry of Interior's plan for nurturing "sister city relationships," while Yunnan's activities are guided by its Economic and Social Development Plan.

This divergent approach to collaboration, described as "collaboration under different plans," inherently limits the potential for achieving shared objectives due to the lack of a cohesive strategy. Such a fragmented structure impedes not only the alignment of goals but also complicates the monitoring and evaluation of outcomes. The resulting ambiguity in post-establishment operational guidelines, ranging from project formats and budget allocations to provinces, to the foundations of budgetary provisions—further complicates the challenge. The absence of clear and continuous policy guidance and effective operational outcome monitoring mechanisms points to a critical area for improvement.

Addressing this deficiency necessitates the establishment of a more integrated cooperative framework that transcends individual plans and agendas. By harmonizing operational models and establishing clear guidelines for post-establishment activities, including budgetary considerations, both Chiang Rai and Yunnan can better navigate the complexities of diplomatic cooperation. This alignment would not only facilitate the achievement of common goals but also enhance the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluating the impact of collaborative projects, ultimately strengthening the diplomatic ties and operational efficiency between these regions.

In the field of educational cooperation, there have been instances of challenges arising between Chiang Rai and Yunnan. For instance, Chiang Rai has endeavored to enhance the teaching of Chinese language and sought assistance from Yunnan to support Chinese language instructors for language instruction. However, Chiang Rai has not allocated the necessary budget to cover associated expenses such as accommodation, travel, and other related support for these Chinese language teachers, resulting in a shortage of such instructors in the region. Additionally, there was a lack of consideration for the reciprocal support required, such as the need for Chiang Rai to provide support for Thai

language teachers in Yunnan. This scenario reflects a one-sided transaction where Chiang Rai solely received assistance without reciprocating support to Yunnan. It stresses the importance of mutual benefit in such collaborations, where both parties should derive advantages from the partnership (Bao, 2012).

2.1.2 The collaborative efforts between Chiang Rai and Yunnan, while showing promise through youth exchange programs in the educational sector, reveal a significant shortfall in achieving equitable and effective outcomes across other crucial dimensions of city diplomacy. The essence of city diplomacy lies in the comprehensive consideration of all aspects of the city, encompassing six dimensions: security, development, economics, culture, networking, and representation (Zha, 2015; Pluijm & Melissen, 2007). Additionally, addressing environmental challenges such as pollution and climate change has emerged as a crucial aspect of this new city diplomacy cooperation (Yang & Narot, 2017; Mapendere, 2000; C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, 2021). The majority of policies and cooperative efforts are primarily confined to government agencies and the education sector, overlooking involvement from the private sector in Chiang Rai and Yunnan (Zhang, 2021). Consequently, entrepreneurs and local community members do not receive the requisite support from regional stakeholders. This lack of engagement diminishes the potential impact and inclusivity of initiatives that should otherwise involve broader participation from both the public and private sectors.

2.1.3 The challenges in nurturing sibling city relationships between Chiang Rai and Yunnan bring forward a pivotal issue: the lack of sufficient budgetary allocations to support various projects aimed at fostering economic growth and development. As Leffel (2022) articulates, cities focus on economic enhancement by promoting local products, expanding exports, and attracting tourism and investments, which are fundamental strategies for local development. Achieving these goals necessitates not only a coherent operational framework across different sectors but also substantial financial backing from the central governments of both Thailand and China. This financial support is crucial for launching effective, continuous, and sustainable joint initiatives, as highlighted by Sizoo and Musch (2008). However, it was discovered that the budget provided by the central governments of both Chiang Rai and Yunnan was inadequate. Consequently, cooperation and activities between them cannot be sustained, with only a limited number of activities being feasible. More specifically, there is insufficient funding to support research projects in language and culture, with limited financial support from the local Yunnan government (Chiang Rai Provincial Government, 2022). The budget allocated by the central government is constrained, hindering the execution of cooperation between Chiang Rai and Yunnan. If both parties can effectively communicate the anticipated benefits to the private sector, local businesses and entrepreneurs may also access additional funding opportunities in this domain.

## **2.2 Human Resource Development**

The essence of city diplomacy, especially in the collaboration between Chiang Rai and Yunnan, is to bolster interests that span both the local and national spectrums, through endeavors such as attracting investments, fostering cultural exchanges, and facilitating tourism and education initiatives (Zha, 2015). All of these activities necessitate effective management by individuals. Human resource development is considered crucial for international collaboration and cooperation between Chiang Rai and Yunnan. However, throughout past operations, it has been observed that there is a lack of personnel with Chinese language skills, such as people with the ability to translate official documents or trade and investment documents (Sunanta, 2022). A survey and interviews with business owners in the Chiang Rai economic zone found that 85% faced communication issues in the Chinese language in tourism, cross-border trade, and logistics services. There is a need to enhance communication skills, particularly in these areas, and a demand for media and innovation for self-development skills (Jantaboon, 2022).

If there are challenges in terms of personnel who can communicate fluently in either Mandarin Chinese or English communication and collaborative efforts will inevitably be hindered (Chanbun, 2022). Another issue arises from the frequent turnover of responsible heads and officials, which is directly related to the lack of budgetary support from the central government. Consequently, there is insufficient funding to hire personnel with the necessary expertise and specific responsibilities for this area of cooperation (Saengintha, 2018).

It is apparent that despite Chiang Rai's longstanding engagement in city diplomacy with Yunnan spanning over 20 years, there is a deficiency in personnel or officials proficient in Chinese. Moreover, the entity responsible for conducting city diplomacy lacks expertise and comprehension regarding the promotion process and the activities essential for fostering cooperation in city diplomacy between Chiang Rai and Yunnan.

## **2.3 Education**

In the realm of education, particularly in the teaching of Chinese in Chiang Rai, there is still a lack of promotion for modern-style Chinese language teaching. The focus has predominantly remained on traditional language and culture instead of modern style. There is a deficiency in the integration of curriculum between the education and production sectors (Wang, 2019). In Chiang Rai, two prominent educational institutions prioritize Chinese language instruction.

Firstly, Mae Fah Luang University hosts the School of Sinology, dedicated to cultivating personnel proficient in the Chinese language, supported by the Confucius Institute (affiliated with Xiamen University) and the Sirindhorn Chinese Language and Culture Center. However, the focus of Chinese language and cultural education remains limited to basic

language skills and cultural awareness, failing to facilitate a deeper comprehension of China (Bao, 2012). Moreover, there is an emphasis on producing graduates for employment outside the region, notably in the industrial and service sectors of eastern, central, and southern Thailand, neglecting the development and enhancement of the local community in Chiang Rai and its connections with Yunnan. Consequently, there exists a lack of continuity and sustainability in the educational approach.

Secondly, Chiang Rai Rajabhat University offers a Chinese language curriculum primarily aimed at training Chinese language educators and providing academic services to the community. Additionally, the university admits Chinese students seeking education in Thailand. However, like Mae Fah Luang University, there is an inclination towards equipping graduates for employment beyond the region's borders. Despite the potential of Chinese students from Yunnan to facilitate the integration of Chinese language and cultural teaching in Chiang Rai, and to foster collaboration between the two regions, the emphasis on export-oriented education remains prevalent (Wongsa et al, 2018). In summary, while both institutions contribute to Chinese language education in Chiang Rai, their focus on producing graduates for external markets undermines efforts towards local development and collaboration with neighboring regions.

Moreover, there is a deficiency in integration with key agencies tasked with overseeing city diplomacy in Chiang Rai, such as Chiang Rai City's Strategy and Information Work Group for Provincial Development. This shortfall inhibits the enhancement of the Chinese language education system for personnel development and the facilitation of manpower growth in the region to foster cooperation between Chiang Rai and Yunnan. Such initiatives should align with the Chiang Rai Provincial Development Plan 2023 - 2027. There is a lack of mechanisms to promote research and knowledge creation, innovation, and research capacity building (Integrated Provincial Administration Committee, Chiang Rai Province, 2020). It is evident that the promotion of vocational education emphasizes knowledge readiness in specific fields but lacks knowledge in the Chinese language, which could facilitate the connection between Chiang Rai and Yunnan. Additionally, there is a need to prepare human resources to elevate collaboration between Chiang Rai and Yunnan in various transportation modes, including land, water, and air, and to recruit personnel capable of directly entering the cross-border labor market.

### **3. Obstacles and Problems from Private and Public Operations**

Rising cities foster networks, collaborative projects, data sharing, and policy formulation, engaging in development assistance and disaster relief (Marchetti, 2021). Although there is an ongoing exchange of understanding between leaders and responsible parties on both sides of Chiang Rai and Yunnan, the operations are still constrained primarily at the level of relevant agencies. There is a lack of broad awareness and participation from

the public in organizing activities or exchanging opinions. City diplomacy plays a pivotal role in fostering grassroots peace through citizen participation and support, facilitated by local governments promoting social cohesion (Song, 2020). This is mainly attributed to ineffective management and a shortage of budget allocation for public relations and information dissemination. This can be further analyzed as follows:

3.1 Missing opportunities for cultural and language exchange have occurred due to the diplomatic relations between the cities of Chiang Rai and Yunnan. Initially established to promote cultural understanding and language exchange, these efforts were expected to yield positive outcomes and extend to various domains. Unfortunately, Chiang Rai and Yunnan still lack of awareness among private sectors, businesses, and residents residing in cities with collaborative partnerships has resulted in missed opportunities. Citizens miss out on participation and learning from those that come from a different culture than them, leading to a lack of support for future initiatives. Both businesses and the public express a desire to engage in these activities but are often uninformed due to the insufficient dissemination of information. Strengthening city diplomacy relations between Chiang Rai and Yunnan could significantly contribute to preparing the community and businesses for economic and tourism-related activities, ultimately benefiting the economies of both Chiang Rai and Yunnan.

3.2 The utilization of educational resources appears to be insufficient. While the government, particularly the municipal government, maintains a positive relationship with educational institutions in the area, the effective utilization of resources from these educational units seems lacking (Wang, 2008). These institutions possess high-quality personnel and various resources, including facilities, materials, and equipment, along with youth students capable of driving activities under the auspices of city diplomacy cooperation (Chiang Rai Provincial Government Center, 2022). However, the activities predominantly involve educational exchanges and collaboration between schools and universities. The lack of awareness about these collaborative efforts may result in missed opportunities for youth and educational personnel in Chiang Rai and Yunnan to engage in educational exchanges, which could be beneficial for academic and research advancements, contributing to the overall development of both cities and countries involved (Foreign Affairs Office of Yunnan Provincial People's Government, 2022).

## **Conclusion and Suggestions**

Chiang Rai and Yunnan have maintained a multifaceted relationship over time, encompassing cooperation in trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges through tourism, student and scholar programs, promotion of Chinese language education, and various other initiatives. The establishment of sister city relationships between Chiang Rai and Yunnan represents a significant dimension of international cooperation facilitated through city diplomacy. The city diplomacy operations under the sister city framework between

Chiang Rai and Yunnan have played a crucial role in promoting the development of their relationship, fostering increased mutual understanding, and expanding collaborative efforts in various aspects.

However, it is essential to recognize that city diplomacy relies on comprehension and cooperation across diverse dimensions and levels, including global trends, transnational linkages, and operational processes. A comprehensive examination of the achieved outcomes and ensuing impacts requires a systemic approach from the initiation to the culmination of these endeavors.

The city diplomacy cooperation between Chiang Rai and Yunnan is intricately linked to national policies, governmental strategies, and local development plans. Continuous exchanges and visits have been undertaken to foster understanding among leaders of both sides. Meetings have also been convened to broaden cooperation in various areas. However, over more than 20 years, it has been observed that substantial outcomes are more evident in the realm of educational collaboration. To enhance the relationship, both parties should create greater driving forces and incentives that yield more equitable results. This process should encompass a holistic approach, spanning from the origin to the midpoint, and finally to the destination, ensuring comprehensive and balanced advancements.

Ultimately, the prioritization of effective communication is of utmost importance to establish a foundation of understanding, foster friendship, and cultivate positive relationships. This process begins within the education sector by promoting high-quality education, developing personnel, producing graduates, and encouraging entrepreneurs to acquire language and cultural skills in Chinese. The aim should be to increase efficiency in collaboration and reduce communication gaps through the promotion of modern Chinese language and culture education. The integration of knowledge across various dimensions is crucial, ensuring applicability, further development, and practical implementation. It should also align with the needs of the private sector.

Fostering relationships between the two cities can be achieved through new forms of tourism, such as cultural, historical, and lifestyle-oriented tourism. This not only serves as a means to strengthen ties but also presents opportunities for economic growth. By emphasizing diverse tourism experiences, both Chiang Rai and Yunnan can capitalize on their unique cultural offerings, creating a mutually beneficial exchange that goes beyond conventional tourist attractions. This approach enhances the richness of the relationship by involving the broader community and promoting a deeper appreciation of each other's cultural heritage.

During the intermediate stage, achieving equitable outcomes requires collaboration from all sectors, including government agencies, organizations, private entities, and the community. Participation involves expressing opinions, contributing to development plans,

advocating for fair results, and maintaining continuous monitoring and evaluation of operations. Additionally, it entails promoting in-depth research to explore opportunities and challenges, as well as a comprehensive understanding of the benefits and impacts that occur at every level. To harness the potential and strengths of the region, public and private organizations, as well as entrepreneurs with vested interests, are vital. Educational institutions at secondary, vocational, and tertiary levels in both Chiang Rai and Yunnan should actively engage in the exchange of ideas. This requires concrete planning, cooperation, and management strategies that prioritize genuine participation.

In the final stage, support is received from the central government in terms of budget allocation and public relations to transform the Chiang Rai and Yunnan sister city model into a developmental blueprint for other provinces in Thailand to engage with various provinces in China or cities in different countries. This transformation involves creating a collaborative international atmosphere based on mutual benefits, with consideration of global and local dynamics on various issues.

This aligns with policies of economic and social development at both national and international levels, while aiming to build resilient cities and communities. This collaborative effort collectively works towards achieving sustainable development goals. By showcasing the success and positive outcomes of the Chiang Rai-Yunnan model, other provinces in Thailand can adapt and replicate similar initiatives, fostering cross-cultural cooperation and contributing to the broader objectives of national and international development agendas. This approach emphasizes the importance of shared prosperity and cooperation on a larger scale.

Ultimately, the paramount aspect crucial for the enhancement and advancement of operations within the Chiang Rai and Yunnan provinces, within the framework of Chiang Rai-Yunnan city diplomacy cooperation, is the establishment of connections and close coordination. This entails recognizing and assigning significance to the roles of all stakeholders in both Chiang Rai and Yunnan. Effective implementation of a shared plan and strategy between the two sides is imperative. Ensuring unimpeded access to information for both parties can help to facilitate the identification and resolution of obstacles, problems, and challenges encountered in their operations. It is imperative to recognize that cooperation in accordance with diplomatic principles necessitates mutual collaboration in problem-solving and a committed effort from both sides. Such collaborative efforts are instrumental in ensuring sustainable operations and fostering enduring cooperation.

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