

WORKING PAPER

**Romanian-Chinese Cooperation in a Post-Pandemic World:
The Case of 'Youhao Chengshi'**

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Romanian-Chinese Cooperation in a Post-Pandemic World: The Case of 'Youhao Chengshi'

Radu Sava*

Abstract

This paper intends to analyse the dimension of Romanian-Chinese local cooperation through the sister-cities network ('înfrățiri' or 'youhao chengshi') in a post-SARS-CoV-2 context. It aims to produce a standardisation of the network that could be framed within traditional theory-inflicted mechanisms and entangled with a series of structured questionnaires. In other words, the purpose of this is (1) to compile a collection of data regarding the existing sister-cities network, (2) to describe Romanian-Chinese local partnerships throughout the transformative pandemic years, and (3) to present a series of tendencies that could have an impact at the level of centralised Romanian-Chinese relations in a post-SARS-CoV-2 context.

Nonetheless, based on approximately 30 structured questionnaires with China-preoccupied Romanian academics that carry out research in the fields of political sciences and economics or Romanian public civil servants that are engaged with China at the level of public administration, this paper formulates research queries by employing grounded theory in order to test a hypothesis that revolves around the potential of local cooperation between Romania and China in a post-pandemic context.

Keywords

Romania; China; local cooperation; sister-cities network; post-SARS-CoV-2 cooperation.

Introduction

Before the outbreak of the pandemic generated by SARS-CoV-2, existing research related to local Romanian-Chinese cooperation has been elusive and remains limited. And be that as may be, this has broadly changed due to the nature of analyses and policy-oriented investigations

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that have been published after and during the outbreak of the pandemic. Therefore, this paper is structured around a hypothesis that seeks to underline a major question in Romanian-Chinese relations after the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak. This being said differently, this research paper intends to analyse the dimension of Romanian-Chinese local cooperation through the *sister-cities* network (*înfrățiri* as is ought to be regarded in Romanian or *youhao chengshi*, in Chinese).

Systematically, this paper is arranged into four major parts and intends to debate several theoretical aspects involving Romanian-Chinese local cooperation (1) by compiling a collection of data regarding the existing *sister-cities* network, (2) by describing these local partnerships throughout SARS-CoV-2 and (3) present, as a result of a questionnaire carried out in mid-October 2022, a series of tendencies which could be observed in relation to Romanian-Chinese local cooperation. In light of this, it is important to indicate that Romanian-Chinese local cooperation could be categorised into three different types, depending on the form of the local administrations engaged in a partnership act. As a consequence, this research paper advances the outcome of a questionnaire that had been conducted with China-preoccupied academics that carry out research in the fields of political sciences and economics as well as China-engaged civil servants at the level of the Romanian public administration.

Finally, whilst acknowledging several limits and limitations that emerged in regard to this research, certain aspects regarding some factors that govern agreements between Romanian and Chinese local authorities are debated as this paper attempts to describe *sister-cities* partnerships after the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, and features four premises that are relevant for the general conduct of Romanian-Chinese local cooperation in the future.

Research methods

This paper encompasses two major research dimensions, namely one intrinsic (assembled on quantitative research) and the other, extrinsic (built on qualitative research). Firstly, the intrinsic research dimension internalised the investigation, given the fact that very little official data of Romanian-Chinese *înfrățiri* or *youhao chengshi* cooperation has been provided, despite formal and informal inquires to relevant authorities¹. In other words, employing grounded theory, the intrinsic dimension contributes to the comprehension of the hypothesis that seeks to

¹ In preparation of this research paper, the author has contacted various Romanian institutions in order to formally obtain listings and relevant information. However, not all inquires had resulted in deliverable information in due time whilst some details were confirmed *in-person* or over the telephone.

examine how the centralised level of authority responded to the coordination of Romanian-Chinese local cooperation after the outbreak of the pandemic generated by SARS-CoV-2 between December 2019 (in China) and February 2020 (in Romania).

Secondly, the extrinsic research dimension, although equally relevant in regard to the hypothesis, externalised this investigation by conducting 34 questionnaires with China-preoccupied academics that carry out research in the fields of political sciences and economics, and public civil servants that are engaged with China at the level of public administration. These questionnaires, conducted online in mid-October 2022, have been exclusively based on a structured methodology, ensuring that each question was presented in exactly the same form and order to the respondents. Given the purpose of this research, the questionnaires were distributed within a closed-circled of individuals (respondents) pertaining to the target group and their subsequent results were recorded anonymously, without revealing the identity of the respondents or collecting any associated personal data.

Bearing this in mind, it is important to state that the extrinsically research outcome required validation of intrinsically collected data in order for this investigation to be appropriately aligned with the notions associated to both dimensions. Hence, the intrinsic results of this research ought to be perceived as a formative assessment in relation to the extrinsic dimension exemplified by the results of the questionnaire. This could represent a differentiation regarding the conceptual demarcation between *the quantitative* and *the qualitative* attributes of this paper. Also, the suggested differentiation may contribute to the theorisation of some concrete and delimited frameworks from the overall perspective of Romanian-Chinese relations, involving the emergence of pragmatic, niche research studies coming into being in the future as well as better grounded from a methodological point of view.

Literature review and assessment

Data regarding the existing *sister-cities* network among Romania and China

Being a form of social, economic or cultural association among administrative units, *sister-cities* networks are defined by Nick Clarke as "the construction and practice, by various groups and to various ends, of relatively formal relationships between two towns or cities usually located in different nation-states" (2009: 2). And despite different names attributed to such associations in time (such as *sister-cities*, twinnings, twin towns), this practice could be traced

back to the 836 AD Paderborn-Le Mans example (Stephen, 2008) or "the first recorded twinning... established in 1920 between Keighley, West Yorkshire, and Poix du Nord in France" (Handley, 2006: 4). However, these associations have taken different forms and have had various objectives, especially after the Second World War, when "many European governments encouraged towns to make formal links as part of efforts to bring about peace and reconciliation among countries that had been locked in combat" (Handley, 2006: 4). This phenomenon reached its peak sometime throughout the 1970s and then again throughout the 1990s, according to the analyses and debates excerpted from the specialised literature (Handley, 2006: 4).

Possessing an enhanced understanding of *sister-cities* networks today implies the acknowledgement of globalisation and the trends according to which new international associations "move away from formal, long term partnerships... and enter into less binding arrangements" (Handley, 2006: 4). Indeed, this assertion is relevant and remains forthwith, since digitisation and digitalisation continue to develop and animate all walks of life. Moreover, it could be argued that *sister-cities* networks are rather a "production of space and related things such as place, territory, scale, distance, and proximity" (Clarke, 2009: 2-3), because all these "are not given to societies. They are made by individuals and groups through practices of bordering, naming, educating, networking and so on" (Clarke, 2009: 3).

Starting from the pre-existence of a number of Romanian-Chinese *sister-cities* networks presented by relevant authorities, whilst drawing analogies between previously published research and mass-media reports, it is easily seen that these networks encompass three different types of cooperation since 1986: those established between Romanian counties (*județ*) and Chinese provinces (*sheng*) or autonomous regions (*zizhiqu*) (Type A), those established between municipalities (Type B), and *mixed*, established between counties and municipalities (Type C). For instance, the latter is interestingly practiced in the case of Romanian-Chinese local cooperation as evidence suggests such networks have been established only among Romanian counties and Chinese municipalities, and not among Chinese provinces and Romanian municipalities. In this train of thoughts, official records indicate a number of 54 local cooperation agreements² out of which 19 are of Type A, 32 are of Type B, and 3 of Type C (Ministerul Afacerilor Externe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), 2021).

² Note that the electronic source of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs miscalculated the overall number of agreements at the time of consultation.

As a general rule, there is a tendency that, upon the completion of a *twinning* process between a county and a province, for example, local cooperation among Romanian and Chinese partners runs into two major systemic problems:

- (1) agreements are not quantified by means of specific objectives and evaluation of these is not undertaken at definite intervals (See Table 1), and
- (2) the partnership act becomes far too elitist to involve comprehensive segments of the local communities.

In other words, most local agreements are limited in time, spanning across several years, and without specific objectives and proper evaluation, these often expire and are put at risk in the sense that some might not be renewed at all or others may be *renewed* in later decades. Hereof, Susan Handley puts forward some notions regarding strategic planning of such local partnerships, according to which each plan must have "three sections: [a] the aims and objectives of the partnership, encompassing all aspects of the local organisation and community; [b] a methodology, explaining how the aims and objectives will be achieved; and [c] a list of desired outcomes and benefits, providing a starting point for the project's review and evaluation. This will enable partners to include a wide range of services and people" (Handley, 2006: 10). Her example is indicative, because it extends these three major assumptions and debates adjacent aspects from both a vertical and horizontal perspective in allowing local authorities to articulate a comprehensive format of a strategic plan. These suggestions are presented in Table 1 and may well be applied to all cases involving the forms and formats of Romanian-Chinese local partnerships as understood through Type A, Type B and Type C.

Table 1. *An example, giving some brief suggestions for the format of a strategic plan.*

Project summary	Measurable indicators	Means of verification	Important assumptions
GOAL: Improvement in the lives and living conditions of poor households and communities in Malawi	Communities have increased access to sustainable basic services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Programme evaluation - Observation analysis - Comparisons against against [sic!] national country plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social and economic stability - Community residents see value in the project - Central government is receptive to the project goals
PURPOSE: Household and community groups see a reduction in unmet needs through improved delivery of appropriate basic services	Improvement in the quantity and quality of basic services, falling under the responsibility of local government including: primary education, social welfare, public health, broader environmental health and housing compared to pre-programme levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Programme evaluation - Meeting minutes and reports - Discussion with other civil society groups - Local level assessment reports - Discussion with other local and central government representatives - Visit reports - Group discussions with community groups 	Stability of staffing in the council
OUTPUTS: (1) The local council is functioning effectively as a sustainable and relevant instrument of local government (2) The local council has developed a clear system for community engagement and is demonstrating this	<p>(1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The council has established plans in place - The council is working towards the delivery of strategic plans and is able to monitor performance against these plans - A reduction in unmet needs at the community level <p>(2) Community groups have full access to council officials who have mechanisms for consulting and responding to their input</p>	<p>(1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Written plans - Records of progress against plans with improving trends <p>(2)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interviews with community groups. - Minutes of meetings and activity records 	

Source: Handley, 2006: 11.

In accordance with the observation based on this research, agreements incorporate commercial aspects with all of those partners presented in Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4, yet the majority of these disregard *people-to-people* exchanges in the form of cultural, educational or scientific cooperation. Nonetheless, extended theoretical assessment implies that the higher authority (mainly counties, provinces, in this case) exerts an influence, be that formal or informal, on the lower local authority in the sense that this influence can determine choice, options in terms of twinning agreements; in turn, the option itself of the higher authority can be decisive with respect to the option of the lower authority, especially when it comes to *connecting* partners across Romania and China. In this regard, it could be argued that the following three factors govern agreements between Romanian and Chinese local authorities:

(1) Conjectural factors. These factors are determined by administrative processes, institutional memory subsumed to each local community and implicit socialisation processes, existing at the level of local administration in Romania and China, including from the perspective of their perception of the central or centralised level of administration. For example, local administrations in Romania must obtain approvals for concluding such agreements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration. One example in this regard could be the Harghita-Ningxia Hui agreement.

(2) Political factors. These factors are determined by the cyclicity of elections and appointments, respectively by their overlaps with various events in the political life of a state, without a clear demarcation between the levels of government from the perspective of a citizen. These amplify the urban-rural divide in the case of *sister-cities* networks between Romania and China, and could be connected to the fact that such agreements generally are difficult to be measured on short to medium term. Therefore, evidence suggests that before the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, local agreements did not produce immediate effects within local communities. This could be explanatory for the case of the Județul Dâmbovița-Târgoviște-Pucioasa trio and the Guanxi Province-Guilin-Yangshuo equivalent.

(3) Economic factors. These factors are closely connected to the explicit development of each local community and its potential to explore or, for that matter, to probe the possibilities of expanding its own economic profile. Accordingly, it is

indicative to point out that a major part here is held by the degree of urbanisation. In the case of local agreements between Romania and China from this point of view, Județul Prahova could be considered the frontrunner in terms of agreements with Chinese partners (Sava, Romanian Perspectives on China's "Sixteen plus One". Dynamics and Alterity, 2019).

Table 2. Cooperation (Type A) between Romanian *județ* (county) and Chinese *sheng* (province) or *zizhiqu* (autonomous region)

<i>In alphabetical order</i>	<i>Observations</i>
Alba - Gansu	2004
Arad - Fujian	2020
Arad - Hainan	2000
Bistrița-Năsăud - Hunan	2016
Brăila - Henan	1993
Brașov - Hunan	2017
Brașov - Liaoning	1993
Buzău - Shaanxi	Status irretrievable
Cluj - Shandong	2010
Dâmbovița - Guangxi Zhuang	2016
Galați - Hubei	1986
Harghita - Ningxia Hui	2011
Hunedoara - Shaanxi	2018
Iași - Jilin	1994
Ilfov - Zhejiang	2013
Mureș - Shanxi	2000
Prahova - Guangdong	Status irretrievable
Prahova - Heilongjiang	1992, 2017
Suceava - Guizhou	2007

Sources: Ambasada Republicii Populare Chineze în România (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Romania), 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Bujdei, 2013; Consiliul Județean Hunedoara, 2018; Camera de Comerț și Industrie Prahova, 2022; Consiliul Județean Arad, 2017, 2018; Consiliul Județean Bistrița-Năsăud, 2016; Consiliul Județean Brașov, 2010; Consiliul Județean Galați); Consiliul Județean Harghita; Dâmbovițeanul, 2020; Drajna, 2014; Jilin Provincial Government, 2021; Consiliul Județean Iași, 2016; Ministerul Afacerilor Externe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), 2010; Administrație.ro, 2006; Prefectura Județului Brașov; Regia Autonomă Administrația Zonei Libere Brăila; Special Arad, 2020; Timponline.ro, 2018; Valea Prahovei TV, 2016; Consiliul Județean Mureș; Știrile Pro TV, 2012; Zhejiang Provincial Government, 2020; Consiliul Județean Ilfov, 2010; Consiliul Județean Cluj, 2010; Ionescu, 2018; Mătiș, 2022; Gheorghe, 2016; Dumitru, 2018; ȘtiriDB.ro, 2017; Hațegan, 2020; Bistrița News, 2016; Știriactuale.ro, 2017; Dincă, 2017; Gazeta Dâmboviței, 2015; Rizea, 2017.

Nota bene: (1) Cooperation varies in terminology and purpose, with some forms of cooperation being protocols, formalised intentions, for example or memorandums of understanding. (2) Consiliul Județean Ilfov sent an official delegation to Jiangsu between 31 October 2018 and 07 November 2018, based on the approval of the Council to sign an agreement protocol with Jiangsu (Consiliul Județean Ilfov, 2018). Further details were irretrievable.

Table 3. Cooperation (Type B) between Romanian *municipalitate, oraș, comună* (municipality, city, commune) and Chinese *chengshi* (municipality, city, town) with their corresponding county and province, autonomous region or district municipalities in parenthesis.

<i>In alphabetical order</i>	<i>Observations</i>
Alba Iulia (Alba) - Lanzhou (Gansu)	Status irretrievable
Arad (Arad) - Fushun (Liaoning)	Status irretrievable
Avrig (Sibiu) - Guangyuan (Sichuan)	Status irretrievable
Avrig (Sibiu) - Ordos/ Erdos (Inner Mongolia)	Status irretrievable
Azuga (Prahova) - Yichun (Heilongjiang)	2013
Baia Mare (Maramureș) - Ningbo (Zhejiang)	Economic agreement (2022)
Breaza (Prahova) - Dongguan (Guangdong)	2014
Bucharest - Beijing	2005
Buzău (Buzău) - Baoji (Shaanxi)	2007
Călărași (Călărași) - Hengyang (Hunan)	2000
Câmpina (Prahova) - Jizhou (Hebei)	Status irretrievable
Cluj-Napoca (Cluj) - Ningbo (Zhejiang)	2014
Cluj-Napoca (Cluj) - Zhengzhou (Henan)	1994
Constanța (Constanța) - Shanghai	2002
Craiova (Dolj) - Shiyan (Hubei)	1999
Cumpăna (Constanța) - Zhuanghang (Fengxiang District, Shanghai)	Status irretrievable
Deva (Hunedoara) - Yancheng (Jiangsu)	1998, 2019
Galați (Galați) - Wuhan (Hubei)	1987
Hunedoara (Hunedoara) - Kaihua (Zhejiang)	2014
Iași (Iași) - Xi'an (Shaanxi)	1994
Mioveni (Argeș) - Jinhua (Zhejiang)	2017
Mizil (Prahova) - Yiyang (Hunan)	Status irretrievable
Ocna Mureș (Alba) - Dongyang (Zhejiang)	Status irretrievable
Pitești (Argeș) - Chongqing	2013
Ploiești (Prahova) - Harbin (Heilongjiang)	1994
Pucioasa (Dâmbovița) - Yangshuo (Guanxi Zhuang)	2017
Satu Mare (Satu Mare) - Nanjing (Jiangsu)	Status irretrievable
Satu Mare (Satu Mare) - Shanghai	Status irretrievable
Sector 1 (District, Bucharest) - Chaoyang (District, Beijing)	Status irretrievable
Sector 2 (District, Bucharest) - Dongcheng (District, Beijing)	Status irretrievable
Sighișoara (Mureș) - Wujiang (District in Suzhou, Jiangsu)	Intention agreement (2019)
Slobozia (Ialomița) - Nanyang (Henan)	Status irretrievable
Suceava (Suceava) - Yinchuan (Ningxia Hui)	2019
Tășnad (Satu Mare) - Sucheng (District in Suqian, Jiangsu)	Status irretrievable
Târgoviște (Dâmbovița) - Guilin (Guangxi Zhuang)	2017
Techirghiol (Constanța) - Fengxiang (District, Shanghai)	Status irretrievable
Tecuci (Galați) - Zhongxiang (Hubei)	1996
Vălenii de Munte (Prahova) - Huizhou (Guangdong)	Status irretrievable

Sources: Ministerul Afacerilor Externe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), 2010; Ambasada Republicii Populare Chineze în România (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Romania), 2019c; Primăria Orașului Breaza, 2014; Dezvăluiri.ro, 2018; Rizea, 2017; Primăria Orașului Ocna Mureș, 2016; Primăria Municipiului Iași; Romanian-Chinese House, 2011; PrimarPH.ro; Replicaonline.ro, 2014; Alba24, 2013; Deva Business, 2019; Țimonea, 2013; Primăria Municipiului Pitești; Radio China Internațional, 2016a; Radio China Internațional, 2016b; Primăria

Municipiului Cluj-Napoca, a; Primăria Municipiului Cluj-Napoca, b; Primăria Oraşului Tăşnad, 2022; eMM.ro, 2014; Mesagerul Hunedorean, 2019; Cupar, Onea, & Dădărlat, 2022; Drajna, 2014; (Constantin, 2014); Elena, 2017; Primăria Municipiului Suceava, 2021; Romega, 2019; Diaconiţă, 2019; Ultima-ora.ro, 2013; Primăria Municipiului Buzău, 2019; Consiliul Local al Municipiului Câmpina, 2016; Primăria Municipiului Arad, 2009; Aradonline.ro, 2020; GazetaPH.ro, 2013; Cojocar, 2005; Primăria Municipiului Călăraşi, 2016; Primăria Municipiului Constanţa, 2020; Primăria Municipiului Craiova, 2021; Consiliul Judeţean Galaţi; Primăria Municipiului Hunedoara, 2016; Primăria Municipiului Ploieşti; Muntean, 2019; Gurialomiţei.com, 2011; Agenţia pentru Dezvoltare Regională Sud Muntenia, 2011; China Daily: Hubei, 2012; Sava, 2019.

Nota bene: (1) Timişoara included Taizhou (Zhejiang) in its cultural strategy for 2014-2024 (Sava, 2019).

Table 4. Mixed cooperation (Type C)	
<i>In alphabetical order</i>	<i>Observations</i>
Judeţul Tulcea - Suzhou (Jiangsu)	Signed in 1995
Judeţul Maramureş - Nandong (Hebei)	Status irretrievable

Sources: Consiliul Judeţean Tulcea; InfoTulcea.ro, 2021; ZiarMM.ro, 2017; Graiul Maramureşului, 2017.

Therefore, despite the fact that official records do not encompass every partnership outsourced, compiled evidence suggests there are, in fact, more local Romanian-Chinese partnerships employed, although some of them are inactive at the moment. This is denotative to the extent that it reflects an ever-changing landscape which, on one hand, determines the centralised levels on both sides to become more dynamic in and aware of situations involving engagement, and, on the other hand, it determines local communities to advance different perspectives on various issues that have not been raised at the level of hierarchically superior administrative entities.

Describing *sister-cities* partnerships after the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2

The outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic determined increased participation within the networks established among Romanian and Chinese partnerships. In this regard, it is of outmost importance to point out two arguments brought up by Iulia Monica Oehler-Şincai, based on a timeline produced in April 2020 around "several significant active cooperation channels between Romania and China" (2020: 57). The first reflects the role of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Bucharest in sharing "information on preventing and controlling the pandemic" (2020: 57) with Romanian authorities, and in offering "epidemic prevention materials on behalf of the local authorities, [especially since] on that occasion [03 April 2020] it was announced that more than 10 provinces and cities in China were actively preparing medical

supplies to donate to their twin cities in Romania, which underlines that cooperation is also strong at local levels" (2020: 57-58).

The second argument claims to assert that "13 flights from China were planned [...] the first one, operated by the [Romanian] state-owned company TAROM" which had been described by the Embassy of Romania in Beijing "as a sort of resumption of direct flights, even if it was a full cargo transport, taking into account that TAROM interrupted its passenger flights to China 17 years ago due to another epidemic" (2020: 58). As a consequence, the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 has determined an immediate central coordination which has created the premises of revitalising local Romanian-Chinese cooperation. Whether this revitalisation has been a direct or indirect consequence of the immediate central coordination, further research is needed due to the fact that contributions to the overall Romanian-Chinese *state of affairs* sought to be instrumental in policymaking analyses.

Beyond the two arguments presented above, it is equally important to note that various local communities in Romania received donations from China, predominantly based on the existing *sister-cities* networks after the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2. Some examples include the following:

- Ningxia Hui authorities donated to Harghita's local hospital some 500 surgical masks and 150 protective coveralls (Spitalul Județean de Urgență Miercurea Ciuc, 2020); (Xinhua, 2020).
- Gansu has donated to Alba some 2.000 protective suits and "specialised masks", and over 20.000 "general-purpose masks" (Hațegan, 2020); (Ambasada Republicii Populare Chineze în România (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Romania), 2020b).
- Hunan donated similar medical equipment to its partners in Bistrița-Năsăud (Televiziunea Română Cluj, 2020).
- The Embassy of the People's Republic of China donated masks, protective overalls, disinfectants and gloves for local hospitals in Bucharest (Carcioag, Matei, & Giurgiu, 2020).

Summarising the points raised by Iulia Monica Oehler-Șincai, and noticing the evolution of policies, assembled evidence suggests indeed a determination of increased participation,

although limited, in the situation caused by the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2. Pointing out a measurable indication, namely that communities have had the means to increase access to sustainable basic services, some local partnerships (Harghita-Ningxia Hui, Alba-Gansu and Bistrița-Năsăud-Hunan) entail, at least to some extent, an incorporation of transformative elements which represent unconventional approaches to local partnerships. In fact, these three local authorities have aligned their policies with those implemented at the centralised level, in spite of a general locally-oriented asymmetry with the centralised level. A contrasting example to this perhaps could be offered by Hungary, whose "solutions... [were] amplified by classical realism in which the internal structure of power reflects a hegemonic distribution" of measures (Sava, Debutul pandemiei în retrospectivă: China și cooperarea central-est europeană („17+1”), 2020) or, as Tamás Matura of the Budapest-based Corvinus University has explained, "cooperation between Hungary and China" during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic was "mostly business, not donations" (Matura, 2020).

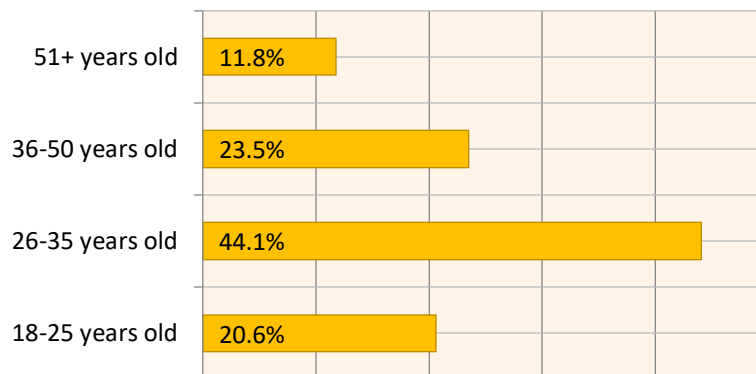
Hence, describing the *sister-cities* partnerships after the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 indicates a reactivation of local Romanian-Chinese relations at the level perhaps attained during the 1990s as well as a shift of certain focal points from conventional economic cooperation to points of convergence in other sectors, such as public health. This conceptual shift points out that some local partnerships, predominantly those classified as Type A, have the prospects and capabilities of becoming more goal-oriented and pragmatic in terms of strategic planning and coordination. And even though it is true that proper exchanges between Romanian and Chinese partners were adjourned in the aftermath of the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 and their resumption is still postponed, SARS-CoV-2 created the effect according to which, in a demonstrated tracing-frame process, local cooperation can be diversified indeed and extended.

Research results and outcome

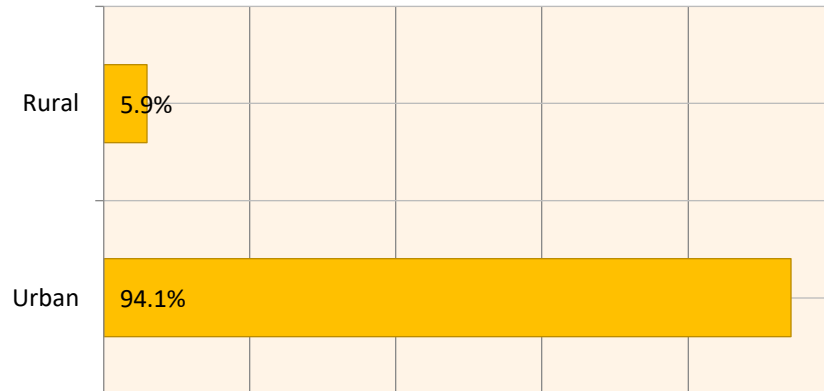
Having determined the intrinsic dimension of this research, it is henceforth to examine the other dimension, that is to say the externalised sequence of the investigation. Accordingly, it is crucial to emphasize that the questionnaire conducted online in mid-October 2022 incorporated four different sections. Further results of the questionnaire are produced below in their entirety, and are displayed in percentages, in accordance with each section. Firstly, the questionnaire sought to determine some specific characteristics of the target group. This took into

consideration several standardised features, essentially age (through the age group method), location (if respondents reside in an urban or a rural area), educational attainment (referring to the highest degree of education each respondent completed), employment (as to clearly differentiate among those respondents that are China-preoccupied academics or China-engaged public civil servants), whether respondents have ever travelled to China or not (in order to conceptually encipher between respondents that could be familiar or not with Chinese realities *in-person*) and whether respondents have or have not heard of the *sister-cities* network(s). In brief, some the results of the questionnaire reveal that **64.7%** of the respondents **have not been to China**, although they are actively engaged with China both in the academia or in public administration. In addition to this, **44.1%** of the respondents **have never heard of** or had any contact with links to Romanian-Chinese sister-cities network(s).

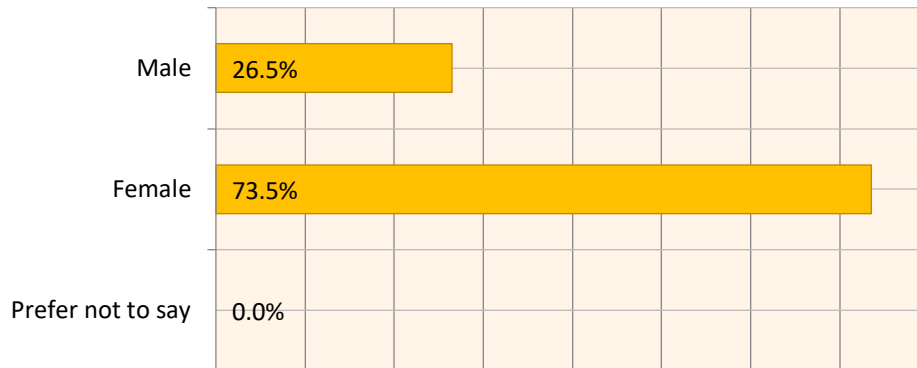
1.1. Age



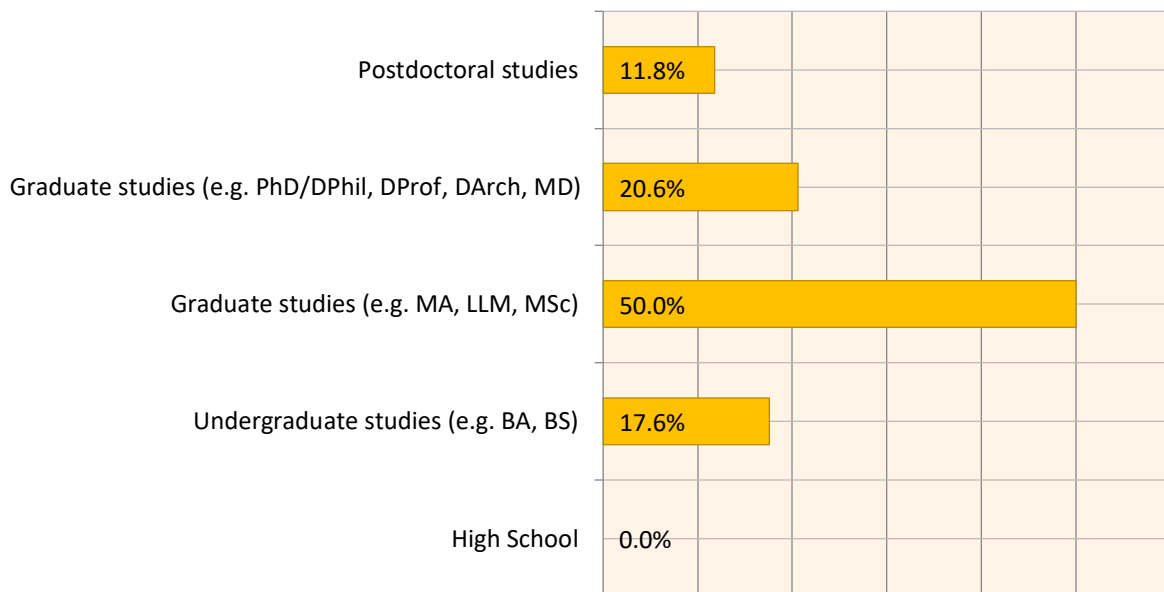
1.2. Location



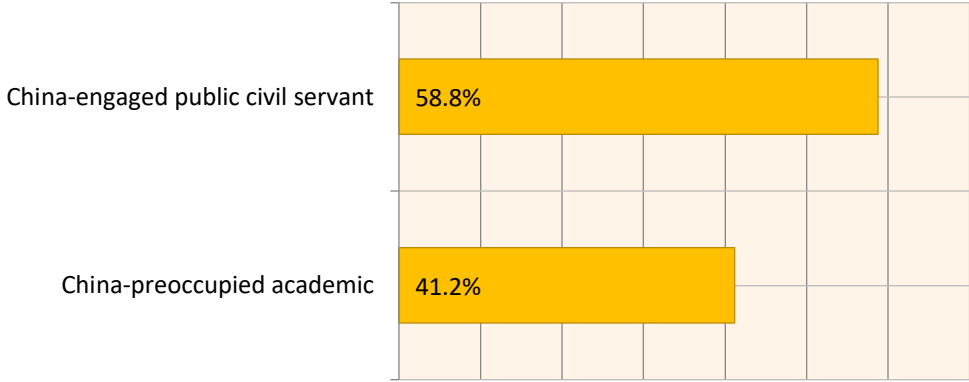
1.3. Gender



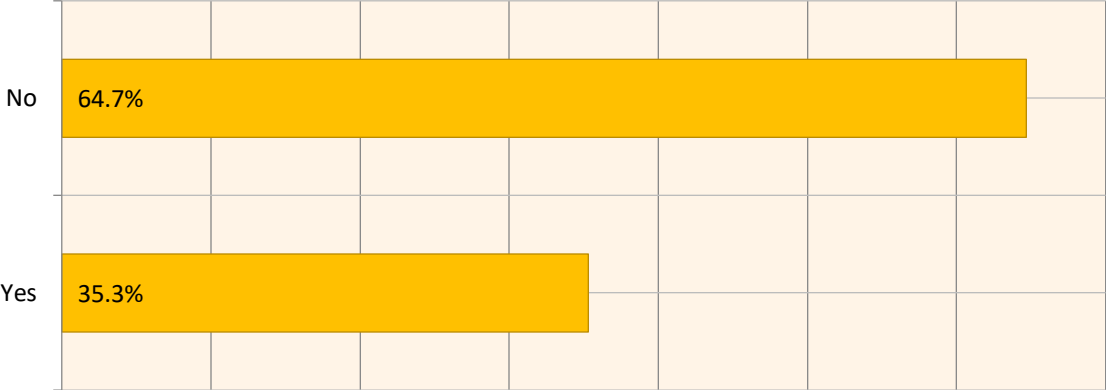
1.4. Educational attainment



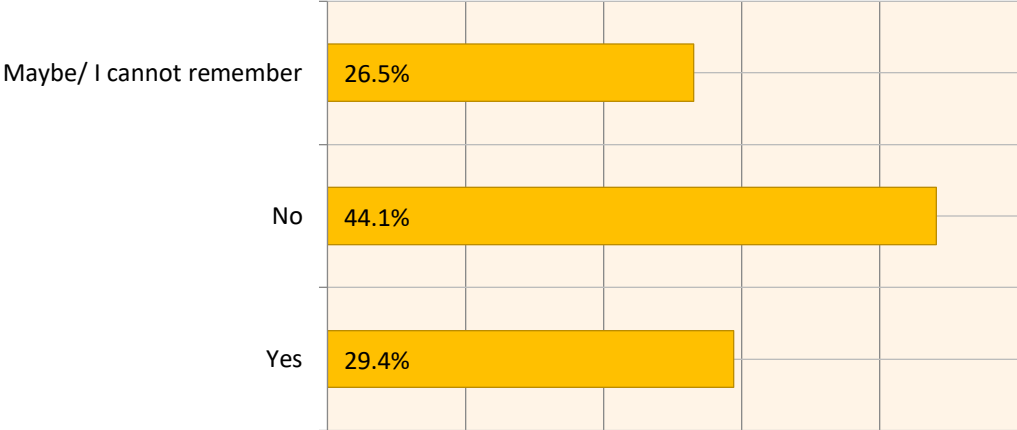
1.5. Employment (relevant to the research)



1.6. Have you ever been to China?

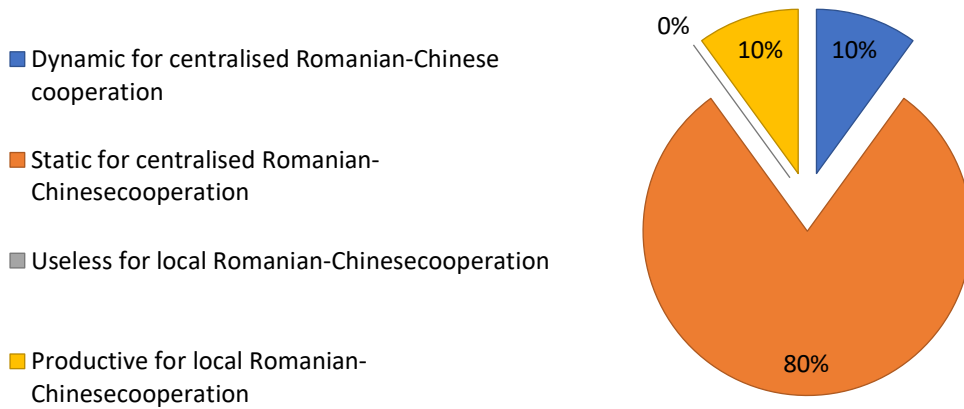


1.7. Have you ever heard of the 'sister-cities network'?

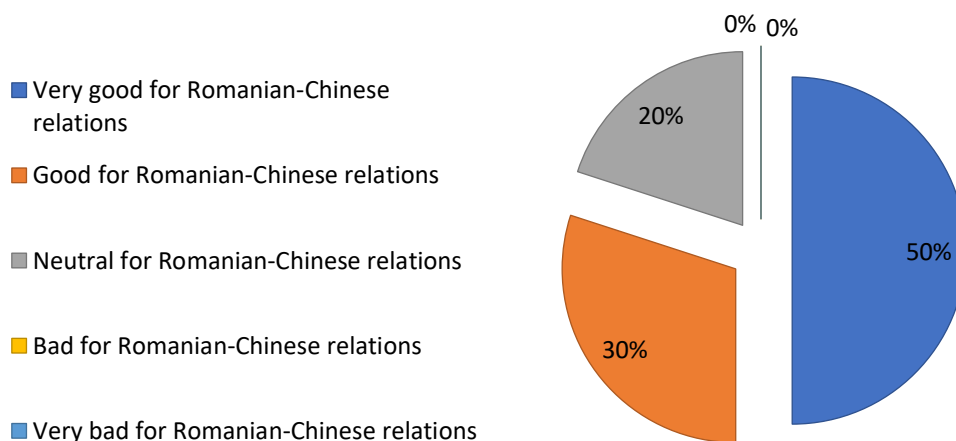


Secondly, the questionnaire sought to assess Romanian-Chinese local cooperation before the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. This section is significant on the grounds that it incorporates a distinguishing perspective on local cooperation and the existence of the *sister-cities* network. Thus, this second section examines aspects related to a classification of the *sister-cities* network (using wording such as dynamic, static, productive), and puts forward *inter alia* the fact that 60% of respondents believe that Chinese local authorities are engaged in productive cooperation with Romanian local authorities, in contrast to 70% which believe that Romanian local authorities are not engaged in productive cooperation with their Chinese partners.

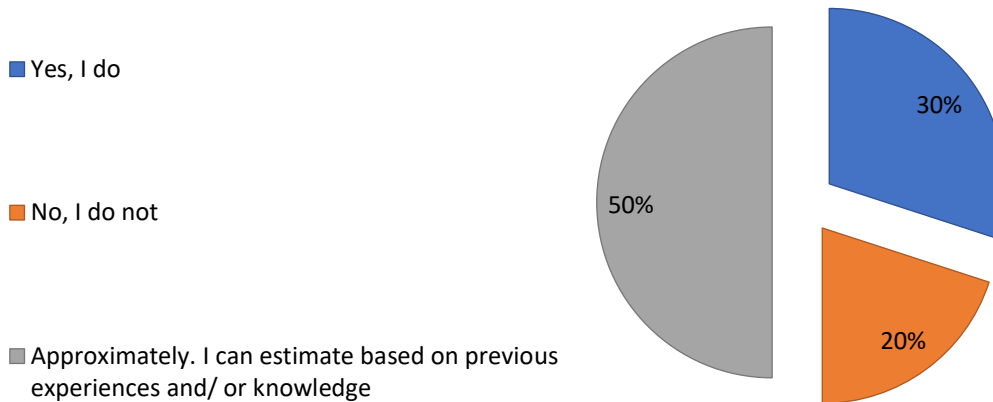
2.1. How would you classify 'yuhao chengshi' before the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic?



2.2. Do you think 'yuhao chengshi' is... ?



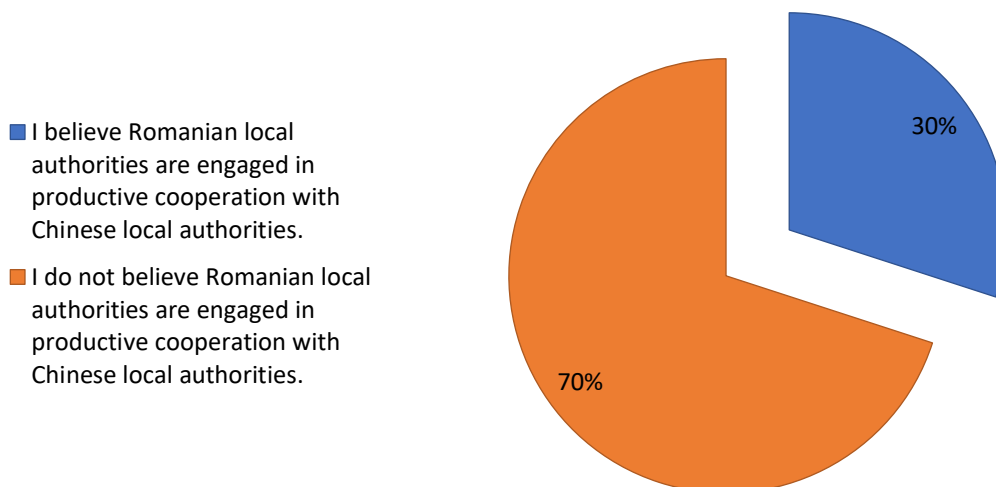
2.3. Do you know how many cities in Romania have signed 'youhao chengshi' agreements with cities in China?



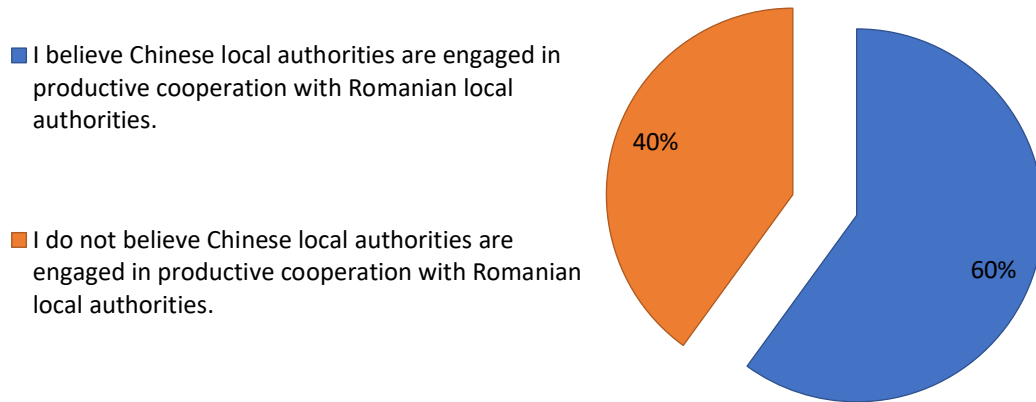
2.4. Are you aware that some counties (județe) in Romania have 'youhao chengshi' agreements with Chinese provinces?



2.5. In your opinion, are Romanian local authorities engaging with Chinese local authorities in productive cooperation?

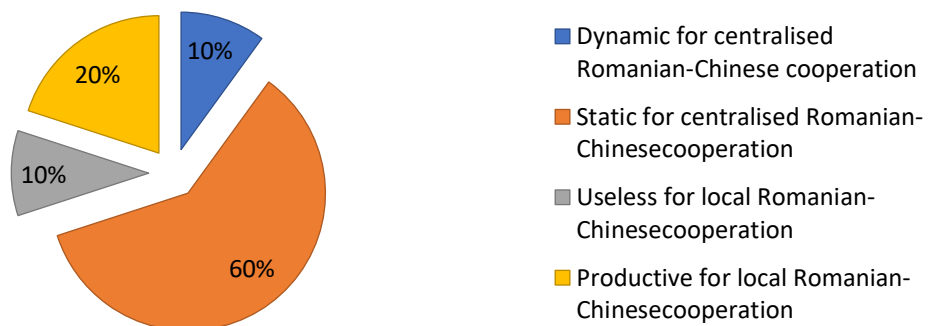


2.6. In your opinion, are Chinese local authorities engaging with Romanian local authorities in productive cooperation?

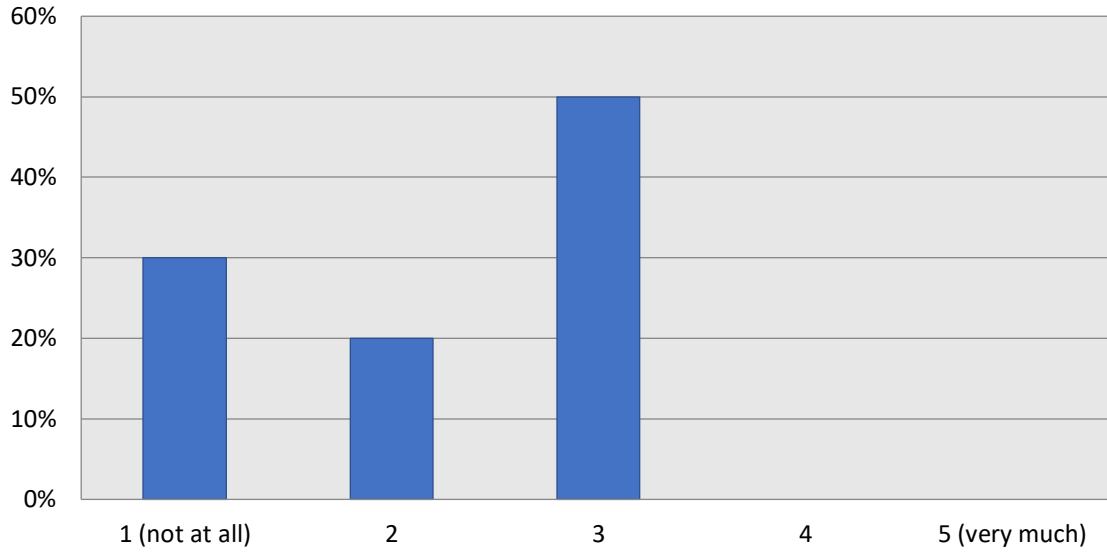


Thirdly, in a similar configuration to the previous sections of the questionnaire, the following set of questions ascertain perspectives on local cooperation after the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The third section of the questionnaire could be regarded as the most significant in relation to subsequent tendencies in Romanian-Chinese local cooperation and their impact at the level of the centralised Romanian-Chinese relations. Although the majority of respondents do not believe that the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic strengthened Romanian-Chinese cooperation, 50% of the respondents consider that the *sister-cities* network is the best mechanism to coordinate local Romanian-Chinese cooperation, implicitly, to the detriment of other forms (which could include, for example, unions, joint stock inter-municipal companies or associations).

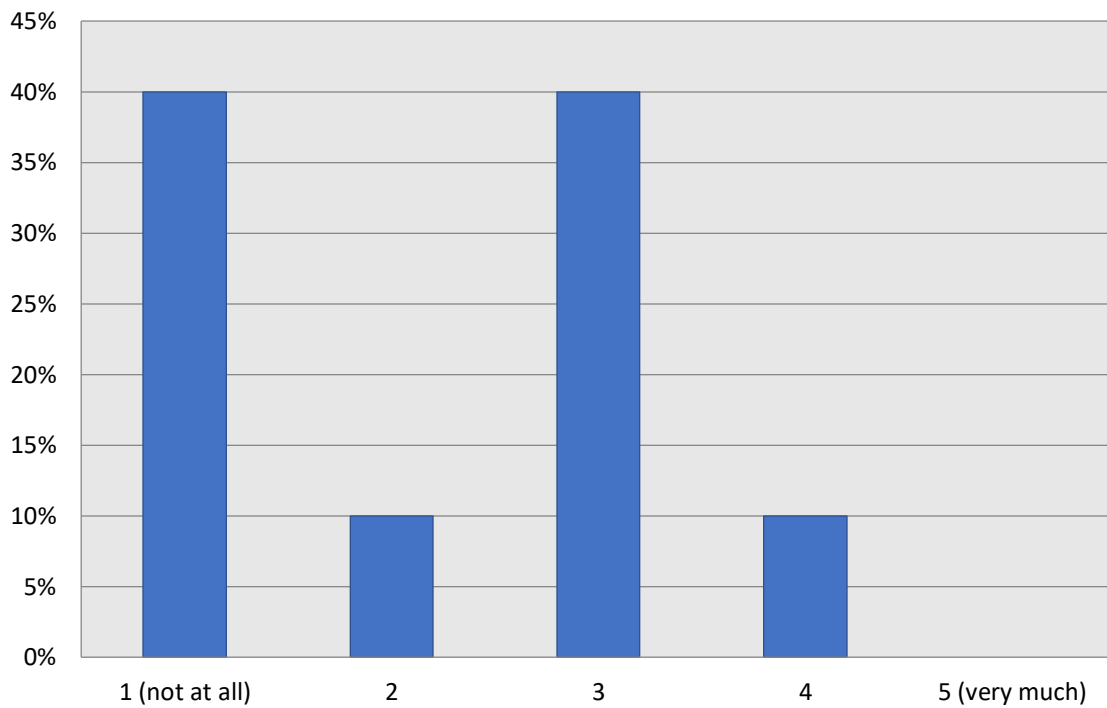
3.1. How would you classify 'youhao chengshi' after the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic?



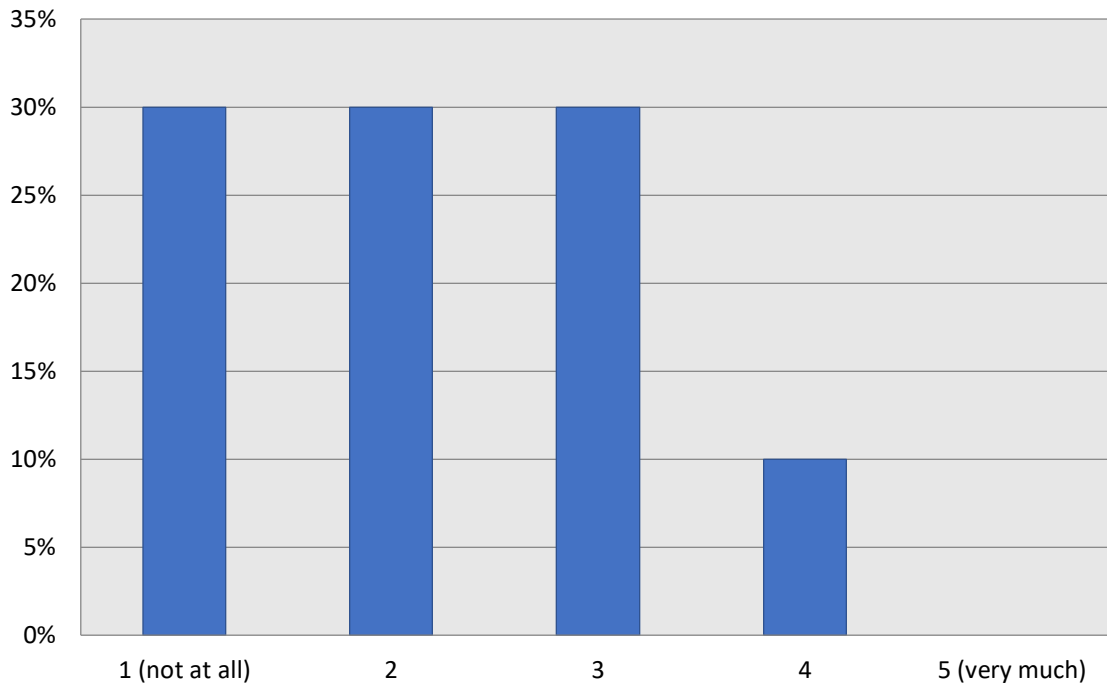
3.2. Generally speaking, I believe that the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic strengthened Romanian-Chinese cooperation



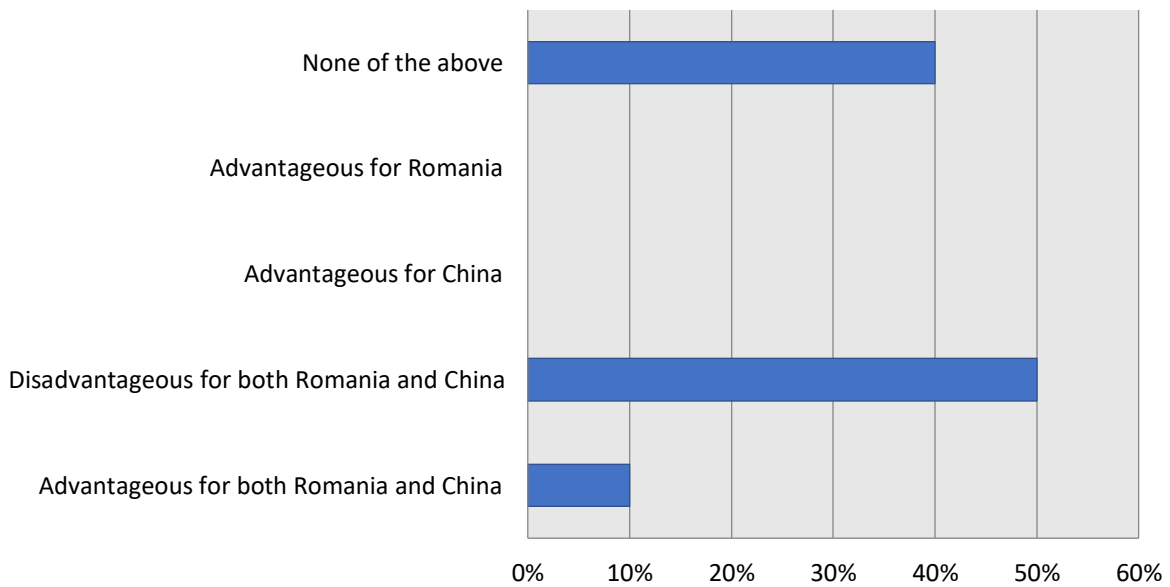
3.3. I think that the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has strengthened local Romanian-Chinese cooperation to the detriment of centralised Romanian-Chinese cooperation



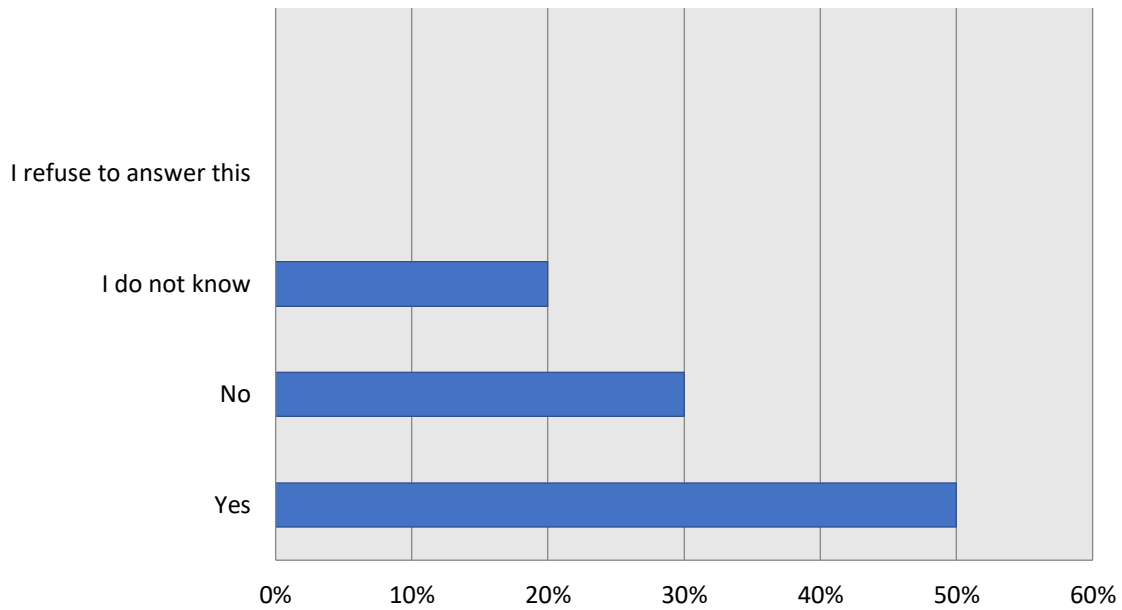
3.4. I think that the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has strengthened centralised Romanian-Chinese cooperation to the detriment of local Romanian-Chinese cooperation



3.5. How would you describe the effects of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on Romanian-Chinese cooperation?

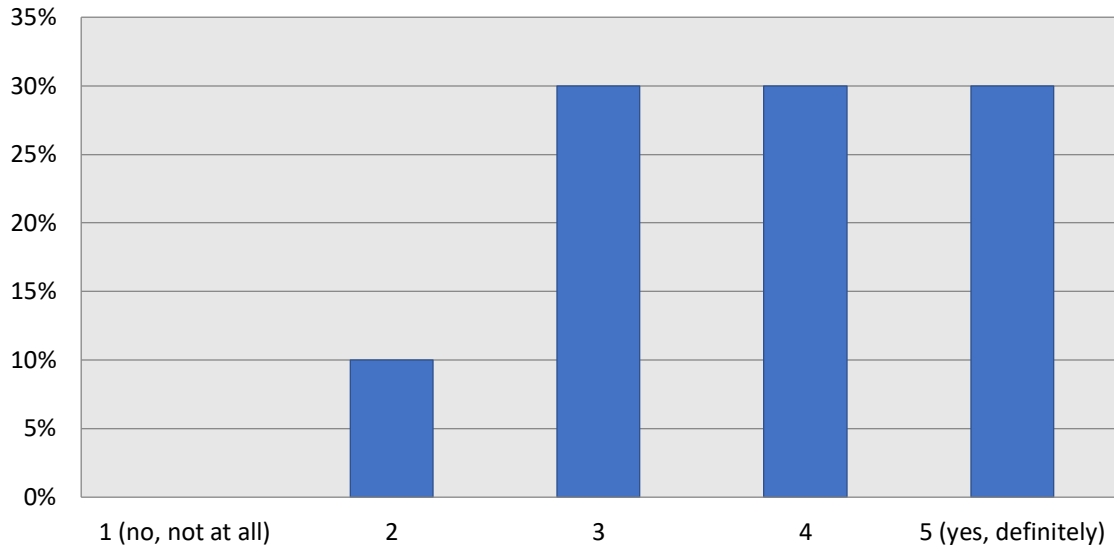


3.6. Do you think that 'youhao chengshi' is the best mechanism to coordinate local Romanian-Chinese cooperation?

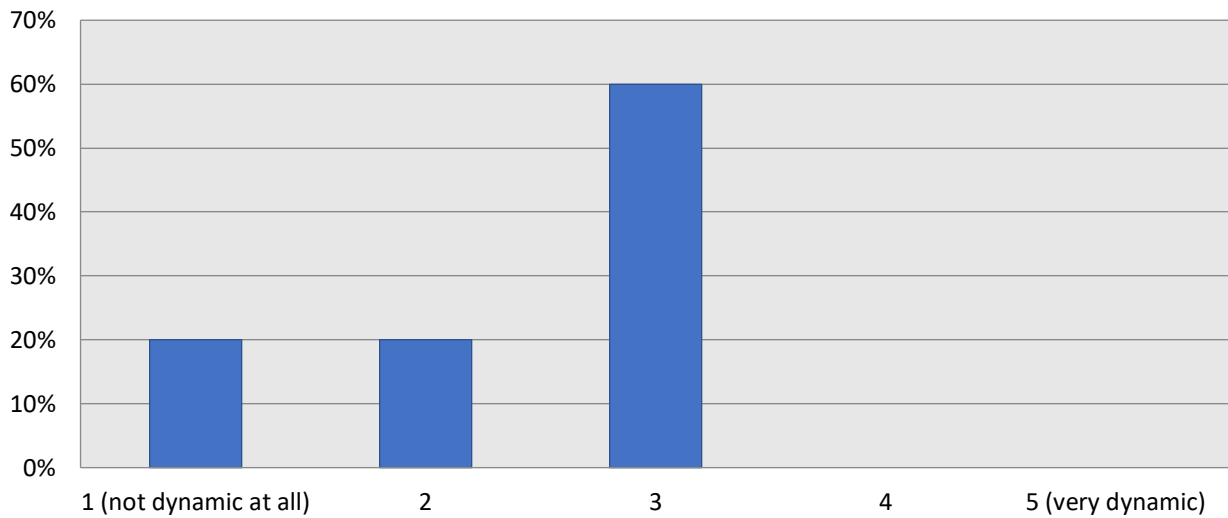


Finally, the last part of the questionnaire attempt to frame a differentiation amid the 'centralised' element in Romanian-Chinese relations as well as the 'local' element. On this subject, for instance, an overwhelming majority (70%) of the respondents think that the 'centralised' element, namely Romania's central administration is the most important feature when it comes to conducting Romanian-Chinese relations in completeness *per se*.

4.2. On the long term, do you think local cooperation has more potential for enhancing Romanian-Chinese relations overall?



4.3. How would you describe the general 'state of affairs' of Romanian-Chinese relations as of 2022?



Conclusions

This research paper highlights the fact that Romanian-Chinese cooperation conscribed to what is regarded as *sister-cities* networks is subjected to continuous transformations, especially given the effects of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. In spite of the fact that since 1986 three different types of cooperation have taken shape, the majority of local partnerships face challenges that are connected to conjectural factors, political factors and economic factors, as described previously. These factors could explain phenomena that is yet to be analysed and integrated in the specialised literature. Based some of the cases presented throughout this paper, it is important to acknowledge that some local administrations are more ambitious than other, some possess different notions regarding international cooperation, whilst other lack rationale and vision when it comes to cooperating with Chinese partners.

In regard to the hypothesis that seeks to examine how the centralised level of authority responded to the coordination of Romanian-Chinese local cooperation after the outbreak of the pandemic generated by SARS-CoV-2, it is important to underline that the centralised level, through its policy layout, coordinated the local level. In any case, the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 and its consequently-generated context enhanced four major premises that could

(1) reactivate some existing partnerships, starting from the examples provided by cooperation between Harghita and Ningxia Hui, Alba and Gansu, and Bistrița-Năsăud and Hunan.

(2) contribute to the overall conduct of Romanian-Chinese relations, given that the local level of administration has a more realistic approach to governance, being at the forefront of realities across the two countries

(3) ascertain that the act of local governance is effective and relevant for the higher state authority, and

(4) enhance pragmatic mechanisms that may transform into deliverables for their own members of the community by expanding cooperation to other areas than economic cooperation.

As for the limits and limitations of this research, it could be argued that some respondents have asked directly for reasons why the questionnaire has been conceived exclusively in a structure form due to the fact that some have desired to have a greater contribution to this

research. Therefore, the need for further research is evident and expansion of such studies on the field might prove decisive for advancing not only general knowledge, but also particular knowledge for the academia and for those policymakers that are in positions to coordinate and oversee the implementation of Romanian-Chinese local partnerships.

Furthermore, another shortcoming of this research is the non-standardisation of the enlisted terminology. However, this is also in part due to the fact that there is no consensus within the international community regarding the *sister-cities* networks. Ultimately, the questionnaire on which this paper has been formulated relied exclusively on digital tools which caused a gap in the representation of certain age groupings and social categories. In any case, beyond the SARS-CoV-2, in the future, (1) it would be critical to assess how can local authorities enhance mutual cooperation and expand, beyond the conventional areas of participative-collaboration settings? (2) How does the notion of *city diplomacy*, subsumed to a *sister-cities* network, interlink with the overall state of Romanian-Chinese relations? (3) What other aspects of common interest between local Romanian and Chinese authorities could be identified and how?

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