

Taiwan-Philippines Sister-City Relations: A Scoping Review and Case Studies¹

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Abstract. This study examines the evolving landscape of sister-city arrangements between Taiwanese and Philippine cities, framing subnational and local governments as increasingly important actors in innovation, trade, tourism, and city diplomacy. It addresses key questions concerning the intellectual structure in both countries, the current configuration of sister-city partnerships involving these countries, the nature of ongoing activities and strategies, the extent to which these relationships reflect mutual cooperation or asymmetry, or whether or not they yield meaningful outcomes. The analysis draws on an adapted framework on city-to-city cooperation, refined through empirical findings and insights from the literature on city diplomacy, and multi-level governance. The scoping review reveals notable differences in the sister-city literature between Taiwan and the Philippines. Compared to the Philippine literature, the Taiwanese scholarship is relatively more developed and demonstrates a more sustained and diversified research trajectory over the past four decades. While it largely aligns with the framework of city diplomacy, it remains predominantly Taipei-centric. In contrast, the Philippine scholarship on sister cities (also framed as city-to-city cooperation), remains emergent but reflects greater methodological variation in research design. In both contexts, however, the literature continues to be dominated by grey sources. The differences in framing are also mirrored in their sister-city practice. Despite structural differences, both countries exhibit similar geographic patterns of linkages, with a significant concentration of partnerships involving cities from the United States, Japan and South Korea. At the operational level, the tenets of decentralization and local autonomy underpin the sister-city initiatives in both countries, with central governments playing largely facilitative roles. While the formation of partnership implies reciprocity, their sustainability depends on the alignment and recalibration of local priorities, as well as sustained mutual engagement. Evidence from three Taiwanese cases suggest that city-led strategies tend to combine two dominant phases: “reciprocal” exchanges, centered on tourism and policy learning, and “global city positioning,” aimed at enhancing international visibility and competitiveness.

Keywords: Sister cities, town twinning, city diplomacy, paradiplomacy, city networks

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