Chinese Paradiplomacy: A Theoretical Review

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Abstract
This article presents a review of the theoretical and empirical studies of paradiplomacy produced to date, focusing on the literature on subnational diplomacy in China, specifically. It argues that the analytical frameworks of previous paradiplomacy studies lead their focus to be restricted to a very limited aspect of the phenomenon only. Moreover, previous studies focusing on the engagement of Chinese provinces in world politics mainly relied on the central-provincial frameworks and susceptible to a geographic bias. This article contributes to the existing literature in two ways: first, by improving the existing framework to better reflect the most essential dimensions of the international actorness of subnational actors and second, by expanding the geographical scope of the study of paradiplomacy to include more non-Western, centralized political system. It presents one of the first academic attempts to systematically review the existing literature regarding paradiplomatic theory and the paradiplomatic activities in China.

Keywords
paradiplomacy, actorness, subnational government, China

International relations theorists recognize that the past few decades have seen the weakening of the exclusive status of nation-states in international relations in the wake of the growth of multinational corporations, integrative mechanisms, and the free movements of capitals (Hettne, 1999; Ohmae, 1995). During 1990s, nation-states began to decline as international actors—especially in Europe, which was in the process of economic and political integration in the post–Cold War years (Wunderlich, 2008). The role of nation-states as a “middleman” between enterprises and global markets was eclipsed by the booming of multinational corporations engaged in borderless exchanges of commodities, investment, individuals, and information (Ohmae, 1995). Regionalization has also stimulated this process (Baylis et al., 2008). It is against this global backdrop that subnational governments around the world have become more proactive in transnational activities, operating independently of their national authorities.

Among the different schools of international relations, the influence of domestic actors in foreign policy outputs has been researched by the Innenpolitik, who contend that a flurry of non-state domestic actors, such as economic agencies and non-governmental organizations, are becoming more influential in the international scene. The interaction between diplomatic output and non-state domestic actors has been discussed in, inner alia, the democratic peace theory (Doyle, 1983; Farber & Gowa, 1995; Gowa, 2011; Spiro, 1994) and the “two-level game” theory (Putnam, 1988). This theoretical development provides a general context within which paradiplomacy studies have developed their own research agendas.

This article examines how the study of paradiplomacy has evolved during the last three to four decades. The research on this phenomenon was, at first, mainly concerned with the United States and Canada, but then broadened to include the European continent and beyond. This article then presents a review of the existing theoretical and empirical studies of paradiplomacy in China, in particular. It aims to contribute to the literature in two ways: first, it expands the geographical scope of the study of paradiplomacy to the non-Western, centralized political system by providing a critique of the paradiplomacy study on China and second, it systematically reviews and further develops the analytical frameworks of paradiplomacy, an underexplored topic in paradiplomacy research. This literature review suggests that the existing scholarship has provided invaluable insights into how subnational governments take part in international relations, but that it has failed to account fully for this phenomenon in the following two respects. First, as regards their analytical

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dimension, the existing studies of paradiplomacy focus on very limited aspects of paradiplomacy. For example, they fail to capture a more complete picture of the international actor-ness of subnational governments, nor are their frameworks entirely suited to studying cross-border paradiplomacy. Second, as regards their geographical scope, paradiplomacy research has tended to be based on case studies of Western countries. Analyses of subnational foreign agendas of unitary states in non-Western world, for example, have been inadequate, while studies on Chinese paradiplomacy have been overwhelmingly focused on the interactions between provincial and central governments in external interactions. They have also tended to focus on better-off coastal regions rather than border and inland regions.

In the following sections, this review systematically maps the theoretical evolution that has occurred within paradiplomacy studies. It continues to explore the efforts to put forward analytical frameworks by various paradiplomatic scholars. A group of critical scholarly works on paradiplomacy in China are reviewed then, with the identification and elaboration of the limitations in this body of scholarly works. The final section compares the paradiplomatic actions of subnational units in unitary and federal systems in both Western and non-Western contexts.

The Historical Development of Paradiplomacy Studies

The state-centric approach to diplomacy, which views the nation-state as the primary or even sole international actor in diplomatic relations, has been challenged since the end of the Cold War, following the acceleration of globalization and regionalism. In line with this tendency, scholarly interest has shifted to examining the participation—both direct and indirect—of non-nation-state actors in international relations. However, few theoretical and empirical studies produced since the 1970s have focused on subnational governments, as opposed to such non-central government actors as sub-units of ministries (Keohane & Nye, 1974), legislature (Milner, 1997), bureaucrats (Slaughter, 2004), as well as commercial oligarchies (Wallander, 2007). Given that not many studies have sought to account for the external activities carried out by subnational governments, the literature on paradiplomacy provides an alternative lens through which to understand this phenomenon.

Research on the role of subnational governments as international players can be divided into three distinct phases. The first phase covers the inception of paradiplomacy studies in the 1970s. Stimulated by the “new federalism” policies advanced by the Nixon administration in the United States and the independence movement in Quebec, the genesis of paradiplomacy studies began in the early 1970s, with a focus on North America (Atkey, 1970; Holsti & Levy, 1974; Leach et al., 1973). The works during this period were more concerned with describing how subnational governments lay claim to international competence (Kuznetsov, 2014).

It was not until the 1980s—the beginning of the second phase of paradiplomacy studies—that scholars started shifting their focus from description and case studies to making theoretical and terminological contributions to paradiplomatic phenomenon. This phase first involved attempts to find a proper term to describe the phenomenon whereby subnational governments engage in external interactions. This phenomenon is universally recognized as “paradiplomacy”—a contraction of “parallel diplomacy” (Soldatos, 1990). However, when searching the grounds and boundaries of “paradiplomacy” for a precise definition, Iñaki Aguirre (1999) admitted that “paradiplomacy” is “a buzz-word with mysterious successes in specialized literature, even though [its] analytical definition is not clear” (p. 185). By “paradiplomacy,” this article refers to the conduct of external engagements (across socioeconomic, security, and energy fields, for example) by subnational/provincial governments in both federal and unitary systems. While the global involvement of subnational/provincial governments often runs parallel to that of central government, it is “more functionally specific and targeted, [and] often opportunistic and experimental” (Keating, 1999, p. 4).

Although the term was widely accepted, the notion itself was challenged by various scholars offering alternative conceptualizations. For John Kincaid (1990), “paradiplomacy” implied that the diplomacy of subnational governments was inferior to that of federal governments because of its origin in “parallel diplomacy.” As such, he suggested replacing the notion of “paradiplomacy” with “constituent diplomacy.” “Constituent diplomacy” refers to the participation of regional and local governments in foreign policymaking and international affairs without indicating the subordination of subnational diplomacy. The term “constituent diplomacy” also clarifies the subject of paradiplomatic actors; namely, as a constituent unit/government (Kuznetsov, 2014, p. 29).

Brian Hocking (1993) has critiqued Soldatos’s theoretical contributions, on the grounds that the term “paradiplomacy” suggests an element of conflict between subnational and national units (p. 26). By proposing the alternative term “multilayered diplomacy,” Hocking sought to indicate that subnational governments “are capable of performing a variety of roles at different points in the negotiating process . . . and may become opponents of national objectives, but, equally, can serve as allies and agents in pursuit of those objectives.”

Another alternative expression of paradiplomacy—“microdiplomacy”—was first used by Ivo Duchacek in his writings in the 1980s to describe the international activities of Canadian provinces and American states. Later, Duchacek (1990) adopted the concept of “paradiplomacy,” as coined by Panayotis Soldatos; Duchacek envisioned the term “paradiplomacy” to reflect a more equal footing between subnational and national foreign agendas. As described above, this
view was not echoed by John Kincaid. Duchacek (1990) also suggested the terms “global microdiplomacy” to describe the engagement of subnational units with their distant foreign partners, and “transnational paradiplomacy” to describe an engagement between subnational governments who are not neighbors, but whose nation-states are.

The interactions between paradiplomacy and national diplomacy were also discussed. On one hand, it is argued that the reason why subnational governments have become more interested in engaging with foreign partners is that their central authorities have failed to promote effectively their local external interest through established state-level diplomatic channels (Keating, 1999). On the other hand, some researchers have opposed this idea, and attempted to refute it by suggesting, for example, that “[s]uch a belief ignores the processes which are rendering the boundaries demarcating state and non-state actors far more permeable than hitherto and creating ambiguities about the status and characteristic of each” (Hocking, 1993, p. 3). Francisco Aldecoa (1999) further identified the existence of “double loyalty” in many European countries.

In addition to these theoretical endeavors, the second phase of paradiplomacy studies marked a shift of attention from North America to Europe. This includes, for example, studies focusing on the Committee of Regions (Kuznetsov, 2014), the subnational entities in Belgium (Lejeune, 1990) and Austria (Pelinka, 1999). During this period, paradiplomacy scholars also became interested in the foreign agendas of subnational governments in the post-Soviet space—particularly the Russian Federation. This shift was partly influenced by the prediction that Russia was likely to be disintegrated within several years (McFaul, 2000; Perovic & Makarychev, 2000; Stern, 1994). Scholarly discussed, for example, the foreign actions of oblasts (Cornago, 2000), Tatarstan’s protodiplomacy (a type of paradiplomacy resorted for a nation-building purpose; Makarychev & Valuev, 2001), Sakhalin’s relations with Japan (Zinberg, 1995) and Kursk’s engagement with the European Union (EU) Member States, as well as the promotion of cross-border cooperation with Ukraine (Sarychev, 2001).

As we have seen, during the first two phases of paradiplomacy studies, scholarly interest was mainly limited to Western federations. However, a host of new geographical points on the “map of paradiplomacy studies” have appeared in the third phase, which began in the 2000s. This breakthrough is a result of the improved position of non-Western countries in world politics and the global economy. For instance, Fritz Nganje (2014) addressed the question of how the paradiplomatic efforts of South African provinces (including Gauteng, the North West, and the Western Cape) contributed to the democratization of Pretoria’s foreign policy. Further, over the past decade, many studies examining paradiplomacy in Asian contexts have emerged: Amitabh Mattoo and Happymon Jacob (2009) examined how the influence of globalization made it possible for Indian subnational governments to undertake high-profile investment-promotion campaigns abroad; Malgorzata Pietrasia et al. (2018) dealt with various cases of subnational units in India and China; Tomasz and his colleagues (2019) explored the role of Chinese provinces in Beijing’s relationship with the EU; and Falguni Tewari (2016) encouraged Indian states to learn from their Chinese counterparts in terms of building international connections. These materials have made important expansions and refinements of paradiplomatic studies, complementing existing paradiplomacy theories with non-Western, and particularly, Asian empirics.

During this phase, some studies were also concerned with paradiplomatic activities taking place in unitary states. There used to be a strong presumption that paradiplomacy—an attribute of federal or semi-federal states—cannot exist in a country without democratic sharing of international relations prerogatives (Kuznetsov, 2014). The paradiplomatic activities of Iraqi Kurdistan were considered unprecedented in terms of the autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan actors in transregional contexts and their scope of paradiplomatic activities, in that this restive region took advantage of security issues and energy exports by developing foreign ties to gain a stronger position than other Iraqi regions (Akreyi, 2017; El-Dessouki, 2012; Mohammed & Owtram, 2014). It has also been shown that the subnational governments in Malaysia, a centralized unitary with certain federal features, were allowed to engage in paradiplomatic activities through their own administrative machinery, as Putrajaya could not effectively look after their local external interests (Loh, 2009). In Japan, the country’s prefecture governments were found to integrate directly with the international community to avoid being constrained by the international sanctions Tokyo had to face after the Second World War and some domestic financial policies (Jain, 2006).

Given the fact that not a few municipalities in the world are provincial-level entities, it is necessary to take into account the scholarly works concerning trans-municipal networks (TMNs) and city diplomacy. The bodies of literature on TMNs and city diplomacy reflect the multiple scales on which the geopolitical knowledge of paradiplomacy is produced, experienced, and made meaningful (for discussions on multiscalar paradiplomacy, see Jackson, 2017). For example, if a municipal government were to enter into a global campaign of climate change, their geopolitical motivations and execution would occur on a number of scales, ranging from municipal to transnational. The execution would be enabled through TMNs, which can act as intermediaries for facilitating the creation, transference, and diffusion of certain knowledges on climate change, for adopting experiences from one context to another, and for building the capacity for global action (Bouteligier, 2013; Feldman, 2012; Fenton, 2014; Hakelberg, 2014; Hamann & April, 2013; Román, 2010). TMNs are thus crucial in integrating “outside-in” influences with the needs of members in their “inside-out”
actions (Porter & Reinhardt, 2007), enabling said members to think and work beyond city limits.

City diplomacy is a downscaling of the international actorness explored in the conventional paradiplomacy to a municipal level. Driven by growing city-level globalization, many cities have joined TMNs in an effort to overcome the collective action problems of climate change (Lee, 2013). Cities are associated and interacted through socialization, learning, and collaboration to create networks of international interdependence that encourage collective action on climate change (Lee, 2013; Lee & van de Meene, 2012). City diplomacy could be considered a form of decentralized international relations management, in which cities emerge as key actors engaging with other actors on the international political stage through two-sided or multisided interactions (Van der Pluijm, 2007). City diplomacy and “glocal” governance present valuable possibilities for helping to solve the collective action problems, in which sovereign obligation and national interest mean that state-to-state negotiations often fall into “gridlocks” (Chan, 2016). Thanks to multiscalar paradiplomacy, the nation-state is no longer conceived as a fixed political container of diplomatic processes, nor as a methodological abstract. The international interactions of provinces and municipalities have been seen as transient scalar fixes, which are always transforming the boundaries of national-level diplomacy.

The following two sections provide a critique of two bodies of literature produced within the preceding phases of paradiplomacy studies. The first section reviews the analytical frameworks of existing paradiplomacy studies, while the second explores the expansion of the geographical scope of paradiplomacy studies to include a relatively underexplored topic: paradiplomacy in China.

The Analytical Framework of Paradiplomacy Studies

André Lecours (2002) argued that “[t]here has been little effort to ground the study of paradiplomacy in a theoretical perspective that could serve as the foundation for a general explanatory framework” (p. 94). A host of paradiplomacy scholars have also drawn attention to this phenomenon. From the perspective of Joachim Blatter et al. (2008), many paradiplomacy works “either have no theoretical framework or use quite different ones, making it very difficult systematically to derive general conclusions” (p. 469). Alexander Kuznetsov (2014) ascribed this absence of explanatory frameworks to the multidimensional nature of scholarly perception of paradiplomacy, as the various approaches to paradiplomacy complicate comprehensive application. Even so, the efforts to put forward an appropriate analytical framework have not been absent (Cohn & Smith, 1996; Duchacek, 1990; Hocking, 1999; Keating, 1999; Lecours 2002; Soldatos, 1990).

The analysis of actorness, which aims to address the question of who can be recognized as an international player, is one of the most systematically developed frameworks used in paradiplomacy studies. Actorness is understood in this article as the group of characteristics requisite for subnational governments to be actors in international relations (Liu & Song, 2019). The concept focuses on the external relations of subnational actors; namely, autonomous regions, federated states, non-autonomous provinces, and provincial-level municipal units. As we have attempted to demonstrate in this review, there is a specific body of international relations literature which has discussed and conceptualized actorness.

Since the 1970s, a few international relations scholars have been keen to investigate the actorness of the EU in a context in which the economic and military predominance of the United States has been in question since the Vietnam War (Hocking & Smith, 1990; Rosenau, 1990; Sjöstedt, 1977). For instance, Gunnar Sjöstedt (1977) has suggested two aspects of actorness in his analysis of the external role of the European Community (EC): autonomy and capability. For Sjöstedt, these two dimensions are essential to judge whether a political or economic entity is an international actor. From the early 1990s, the abrupt ending of the Cold War and the conflicts in Eastern Europe propelled more scholars to analyze the actorness of the EU to see whether it could be counted on to contribute to regional stability. David Allen and Michael Smith (1990) highlighted the importance of presence as one of the key dimensions of actorness. For Allen and Smith (1990), presence is “defined by a combination of factors: credentials and legitimacy, the capability to act and mobilize resources, the place it occupies in the perceptions and expectations of policy makers” (p. 21). Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler (2006) argued that opportunity and capability are also often presented as key elements of actorness. Opportunity refers to the external environment which enables or prevents the engagement of subnational governments in international relations, while capability should be measured according to the availability of policy instruments and the effect of policies. Petr Kratochvíl (2013) defined four dimensions of actorness and conducted a few empirical case studies based on the following dimensions: legitimacy, external recognition, attractiveness, and the power to frame policy.

Hocking (1999) was the first paradiplomacy scholar to apply the theory of actorness to the analysis of subnational governments. After re-defining actorness to include a group of characteristics that indicate whether subnational governments are international relations players, Brian Hocking (1999) suggested a framework consisting of five dimensions: motivation, extent of involvement, resources, level of participation, and strategy. In his analysis of the external role of the French region of Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur (PACA), Manuel Duran (2011) continued to list four dimensions relevant to the exploration of the actorness of subnational...
governments: authority, presence, autonomy, and opportunity. Duran (2011) interpreted each dimension in detail:

Authority deals with the legal competences that allow PACA to engage in international relations. By presence we mean both the external recognition, by which other actors acknowledge PACA’s international role and the internal identity or self-perception as an international actor. Autonomy is the ability to set up and develop an institutional diplomatic structure, while opportunity refers to the external environment enabling PACA’s international activities. (p. 346)

Although clearly defined, Duran’s framework still has some conceptual shortcomings. First, there is an apparent overlap between authority and autonomy according to Duran’s definition, as the autonomy of subnational governments will always be a result of the authorization of national authorities. Second, through substantiating the last dimension—opportunity—it is interesting to explore the external environment within which a subnational government is directly or indirectly stimulated to become an international actor. However, paying attention solely to the question of whether and how the involvement of a subnational government in international institutions boosts its paradiplomacy fails to take into account the general regional environment and the influence of state-level diplomacy on the development of paradiplomacy.

The present reviewers argue that the existing frameworks used by paradiplomacy researchers are unable to capture a comprehensive picture of international actorness as part of their analyses of this phenomenon. They often pay excessive attention to one or two aspects of the international actorness of a subnational government only, rather than exploring its full complexities. For example, although Panayotis Soldatos (1990) claimed to build an explanatory framework, his study was overly preoccupied with the question of what derives paradiplomacy and left many other essential questions untouched. Peter Bursens and Jana Deforche (2010) employed the concepts of historical institutionalism, such as critical junctures, path dependence, and “lock in,” to examine paradiplomacy in Belgium, consequently proposing a framework that can be used only to explain the evolution of subnational foreign competences. Much the same can be said of André Lecours (2002), who also proposed a framework based on historical institutionalism, but whose study ended up merely accounting for the choice of paradiplomatic activities by subregional governments.

This study does not seek to invent a framework from scratch. Rather, it incorporates the most relevant existing frameworks to develop a framework that can better reflect the most essential dimensions of international actorness in paradiplomacy. This review combines the practice of paradiplomacy with the theories of actorness, developing a four-dimensional analytical framework of paradiplomacy, as follows (Table 1):

The four dimensions proposed in this framework are interconnected, but not repetitive. Still, not a few conceptual dimensions of paradiplomacy in some earlier analytical frameworks were found to overlap with one another to some extents. Take the framework by Ivo Duchacek (1990), for instance. Partly included in his framework are the dimensions of channel and the level of paradiplomacy. Duchacek rounded out the dimension of channels by suggesting various options, such as the establishment of permanent offices in foreign regions, visits, short-term and professional fact-finding missions, and commercial shows, while fleshing out the dimension of the level of participation by categorizing all paradiplomatic activities into transborder regional activity, transregional activity, and global activity. In fact, discussing channels selected by a subnational government to undertake its paradiplomacy must indicate the level at which its paradiplomacy activities take place. In fact, these paradiplomatic dimensions, overlapping with one another, are hardly able to be addressed in a separate way.

Moreover, our framework is more suited to the study of cross-border paradiplomacy. The existing frameworks, however, have largely been based on the investigation of general paradiplomatic activities and have failed to consider the full gamut of characteristics of the external interactions undertaken by border provinces. The framework by Alexander Kuznetsov (2014) is one of the more comprehensive and involves six crucial dimensions. Still, it cannot be directly applied to cross-border paradiplomacy. For instance, with respect to the interpretation of the influence of paradiplomacy on national foreign policy, for one dimension in this framework, Kuznetsov provided three potential outcomes. These outcomes are the rationalization of national foreign policy, the democratization of the process of foreign policymaking, and the disintegration of state sovereignty. Even if

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**Table 1. The Analytical Framework.**

| Dimension | Description |
|-----------|-------------|
| Authority | This deals with the external affairs powers that allow a subnational government to engage in international relations, although with limitations. |
| Opportunity | This refers to opportunity stemming from the external environment that directly or indirectly promotes a subnational government as an international relations actor. |
| Capability | This indicates the instrument leveraged by a subnational government to deepen its economic and diplomatic influences overseas. |
| Presence | This concerns the external and internal recognition of subnational governments as international actors by third parties. |
the third outcome were to take place when border subnational units seek international support for their independence, the first two outcomes are unlikely to be realized, as cross-border issues are always considered too peripheral to have such implications (Keating, 1999).

Before critiquing the literature on Chinese paradiplomacy, it should be added that the idea of capability, one of the four dimensions, is understood in this study as the selection and leveraging of instruments by subnational governments for the purpose of increasing their influences over foreign partners. For illustrative purposes, we take the Yunnan province of China as an example. Yunnan’s capability in external engagements can be seen in its strategic use of infrastructure and diplomatic instruments to woo its neighboring countries into cooperation (Liu & Song, 2019). For example, Yunnan’s investment in various cross-border projects to improve regional transportation connectivity. These projects include the West Line of the North-South Economic Corridor, the Kunming-Hanoi Highway, the Pan-Asian Railway Network, and the Regional Technical Assistance (C. Li, 2015). These cross-border transportation upgrades have created rapid growth in Yunnan’s border trade, and at the same time increased its foreign neighbors’ economic dependence. In addition, Yunnan has utilized this diplomatic instrument to deepen its regional leverage. For instance, Yunnan has hosted a growing number of external visits and receptions, interfered in the peace-building process between local Burmese militants and the national military forces in Naypyidaw, and conciliated the Mekong River water dispute between Beijing and the Indochinese countries (Liu, 2015). Therefore, the question of what counts as the ability of a subnational actor to act internationally should be individually examined, as the political and social contexts where the external policies and actions of subnational actors are conducted are diverse.

**Chinese Paradiplomacy**

As discussed in the historical review presented earlier, since its genesis in the 1970s, theoretical studies of paradiplomacy have provided a lens through which the foreign agendas of subnational governments might be revealed. Moreover, the scope of these studies gradually widened beyond that of the first phase of North American research, which tended to focus on federal states. Over the years, we have seen more and more paradiplomacy scholars from all over the world enthusiastically seeking to explore this phenomenon, while the geographical scope of the study of paradiplomacy has further expanded to examining unitary, centralized states. Thus, in addition to expanding the analytical horizon of paradiplomacy studies, it is also important to broaden the geographical scope of the study of paradiplomacy to diversify the types of political systems being analyzed in paradiplomacy research. To this end, this section provides a critical review of the literature on Chinese paradiplomacy.

The shift of scholarly interest toward examining Chinese paradiplomacy is mainly based on two academic concerns related to the historical development of paradiplomacy studies. First, within the growing number of works examining the external activities of subnational governments, there has been a dearth of research on the paradiplomacy of non-Western states. As mentioned earlier in our review of the historical development of paradiplomacy studies, scholarly interest in paradiplomacy started in the 1970s with a predominant focus on North American cases, and this was motivated by the “new federalism” in the United States and separatist movements in Canada. In tandem with the progress of European integration, the geographical scope of paradiplomacy studies extended to include European countries. It was not until the 1990s, however, that the paradiplomacy of non-Western countries was given a certain amount of attention. This was reflected in the publication of works on subnational foreign agendas in Japan (Jain, 2006), India (Jacob, 2016; Jha, 2014; Mattoo & Jacob, 2009), and Russia (Albina, 2010; Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2014; Kuznetsov, 2014). However, until recently, a preponderance toward discussing the subnational external interactions of Western countries was still apparent. In one of the latest edited volumes on paradiplomacy, for instance, all of the conceptual and empirical contributions were based on the cases of Quebec (Lecours, 2010), Scotland (Jeffery, 2010), Bavaria (Nagel, 2010), and Flanders (Creekemans, 2010).

Second, and related to the previous point, paradiplomacy in unitary, centralized states has not been exhaustively explored. The last decade and a half has seen scholarly interest shifting toward studying some centralized countries (Chen, 2005; Cheung & Tang, 2001; Cornago, 2000; Jain, 2006). Some have even called sparing judgment on whether paradiplomatic activities exist in a country by a cursory look at its constitution alone; instead, they have emphasized the importance of observing the extraconstitutional actions of the subnational governments of an examined country (Hocking, 1999; Michelmann, 2009). Even so, it must be noted that, compared with the literature examining paradiplomacy in federal states, the attention paid to unitary systems has been sparse. This neglect has resulted from the long-held view among paradiplomacy researchers that paradiplomacy is more observable in Western federations or federal-like countries (Elazar, 1997; Kincaid, 1990), in that “the locally elected officials and their staffs possess a considerable degree of jurisdictional autonomy in domestic affairs, which they now tend to expand to include closely connected international issues” (Duchacek, 1990, p. 2). One of the direct repercussions of this neglect is that international relations specialists and practitioners have failed to take into account growing local factors when analyzing the foreign policies of some quintessential centralized states.

It is against this academic background that the case of Chinese paradiplomacy becomes particularly significant and interesting. China has long been regarded as a typical
centralized state (Hameiri & Jones, 2016), with a monolithic grand strategy (Goldstein, 2003). The existing research suggests that the central government in Beijing monopolized every aspect of political, economic, and social activities, leaving non-state actors, including provincial governments, with no say in foreign policymaking (Barnett, 1967, 1985; Garver, 1993; O’Leary, 1980; Perkins, 1966). In addition, it was deemed by some scholars that, under an inward-looking economic system, Chinese provinces had no incentive to conduct foreign economic relations (Chen et al., 2010). Therefore, the appearance of a body of literature on the external interactions of Chinese provinces is revolutionary. However, these works have been largely dedicated to studying the external economic activities of Chinese provinces within the framework of central–provincial government relations, short of giving insights into their actorness in international relations—a set of fundamental characteristics of a political and economic entity as an international player.

Since the launch of the “opening up” and reform policies of 1978, the central party-state system in China has ceased to be a monolith in foreign affairs, with provincial authorities, especially in coastal areas, becoming more active in foreign economic cooperation (Zheng, 1994). As the core of China’s foreign policy in the reform era has consisted in creating a favorable external environment for economic development, foreign economic policy has been of critical importance to China’s selection of direction and strategy in managing its international relations. Hence, the implications of the provincial foreign agenda might weigh not only on China’s external economy but even on the country’s overall foreign policy (Chen, 2005).

Still, the growing autonomy in foreign economic affairs enjoyed by Chinese provincial governments does not necessarily mean that they are in confrontation with Beijing (Womack & Zhao, 1994). In the past two decades, whenever the central government felt that the conduct of external affairs by provincial governments went so far as to erode central authority and state unity, it opted for clawing back the autonomy of provinces in terms of making foreign economic policies (C. Su, 2008). The macro-management of the central authorities over the paradiplomatic activities of provinces will become more effective in the future thanks to the progress of technology (Hameiri & Jones, 2016). This view is echoed by Chen et al. (2010):

With the development of a modern state structure and the revolution in transportation and communication, China’s central government has been in an even stronger position to exert direct control over provincial external activities, making it possible for centralization of Chinese foreign policy and proactive provincial international involvement to be achieved at the same time. (p. 355)

In reality, provincial governments have become partners or agents of the central government in the conduct of foreign policy agendas. In forging external links, provinces can facilitate the deepening of China’s economic footprint abroad, while boosting its national profile in local communities of foreign countries through proffering medical teams and developing sister-provincial relationships. Any attempts to challenge national foreign policy could easily be suppressed, with provincial governments being able to “only push for specific policies that are permitted within the larger policy framework or when the central government’s policy appears to be uncertain” (M. Li, 2017, p. 210).

During the reform era, Guangdong has strengthened its economic and cultural integration with Hong Kong, as well as achieving considerable autonomy in domestic and foreign issues, and significantly reducing its dependence on the economic subsidy from the central government. Even so, the province hardly strayed openly from the parameters of the central government’s policy (Jones et al., 1993). Instead, the objective of the paradiplomatic activities of Guangdong was not only to benefit from taking advantage of economic resources in Hong Kong but also to assist the central government in smoothing the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China (Goodman & Feng, 1994; Hayter & Han, 1998). Apart from Guangdong, the provincial-level cities of Beijing and Shanghai were purposively used by the central government to deal with some external affairs that it was not prepared to face itself. After the Paris city council planned to pass a resolution to grant honorary citizenship to the Dalai Lama, who is globally honored but politically controversial in China, the municipal government of Beijing and its people’s congress issued an open opposition against the city (M. Li, 2017). A similar incident occurred between Shanghai and Osaka, which have been locked in a sister-relationship. Shanghai officials raised the issue with their counterparts from Osaka in the midst of Sino-Japanese tensions over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands dispute (Wang, 2013).

This cooperative relationship between the central and provincial governments in foreign affairs is more evident in inland provinces. As X. Su (2013) argued, the central government has forged an alliance relationship with border provinces to “turn its borderlands into new spaces of development beyond its conventional territorial fix,” and it “eagerly harnesses transnational regionalization to promote the geographical expansion of capital and labour in Asia and elsewhere” (p. 1217). The latitude granted by the central government to border provinces is also referred to as “local liberalism,” when border provinces are probably “striving to push for transnational collaboration and cooperation in the economic, social, cultural and non-traditional security arenas” (M. Li, 2014, p. 276).

For instance, in the construction of the “Great Northeast Asian Economic Circle,” the northwestern provinces opted to ask for more preferential policies and economic subsidy from the central government after they could not attract considerable investment from Mongolia and Russia’s Far East, much less North Korea. At the same time, the central government would take advantage of the operation of this project to create more opportunities to work with neighboring
countries (Yahuda, 1994). Guangxi and Yunnan have made similar endeavors. They have benefited from Beijing’s relations with Southeast Asia by being able to cooperate with their counterparts in the Mekong subregion (Summers, 2013). With reference to Xinjiang, the most northwestern region of China, the central government asked the region to implement the new Silk Road scheme to assist China extend its economic influence into Central Asia and beyond, while contributing to the prosperity and stability of Xinjiang (Mackerras, 2015). During the 1990s, the economic interactions between border provinces and neighboring countries which Beijing had, historically, dealt with carefully—countries such as Vietnam, Russia, North Korea, and South Korea—also facilitated the normalization of the relationship of Beijing with these countries (Lampton, 2001).

Even so, some scholars have observed that provincial activism in relation to foreign affairs can be a mixed blessing for Beijing. The first problem is that the deepening interdependence between Chinese provinces and foreign partners might enable the former to channel their external economic forces into shaping the decision-making of the central government (Zheng, 1994). This was taking place against a background in which Beijing deliberately devolved power to provinces, with the latter enjoying much more autonomy in fields which are more closely linked to their local interests and which might not have been the priorities of the central government. In analyzing the Sino-Japanese relationship, for instance, Gerald Segal (1994) suspected that when China and Japan were locked in a heated rivalry over regional economic and diplomatic clout, Chinese coastal provinces, which have been increasingly dependent on the market and investment of Japan, would take the initiative to moderate Beijing’s political ambitions.

Second, what further concerned the central government is the provincial resistance to enforcing national foreign policies or international commitments. This is evident in the cases of Hainan and Yunnan. At the cost of China’s relationship with Southeast Asian countries, the former took the assertive initiative of upgrading its fishing activities in the South China Sea, while the latter was implicated in the exploitation and smuggling of Myanmar’s timber and precious stones, which forced the central government to re-centralize its authority over the policy toward Naypyidaw (Hameiri & Jones, 2016). Other examples are related to the fact that some provinces capitalize on the decentralization and weakening of the border to support drug trade, human trafficking, and smuggling. These local initiatives wreaked havoc on China’s economy and social stability, and even prevented it from playing its full part in upholding the rule-based international system (Chen, 2005). It is also a concern of the central government that provincial governments adopted protectionist economic policies within their jurisdictions, regardless of Beijing’s agreed concessions (across the fields of service, industry, investment, trade, and intellectual property) to re-enter the World Trade Organization (Kewalram, 2004). The provincial resistance to Beijing’s decision not to devalue the renminbi (RMB) during the 1998 Asian Financial Crisis provided one more instance. By keeping their earnings in hard currencies or even overseas accounts, a handful of provincial governments weakened the pledge of Beijing to Southeast Asian countries and forced Beijing to impose tight foreign currency control regulations (Lampton, 2001).

The third problem is that the central and provincial authorities might hold different views on the sequence of external interests. The most typical example is provided by Fujian province, which had a disagreement with the central government over provincial external economic expansion. Despite being one of two pioneer provinces designated by the central government to open up to the world market, Beijing habitually discouraged Fujian officials from attracting foreign investment. The rationale of the central government was twofold, and it failed to convince the officials and businespersons in Fujian. Beijing was worried about the province’s proximity to Taiwan, which was seen by Beijing as a breakaway province to be brought back into the fold—by force, if necessary. Another concern was that Fujian would be likely to face severe inflation and social unrest if the central government relaxed its control over its macroeconomy (Long, 1994).

A growing body of literature has examined the foreign agendas formulated by Chinese provinces, and much of it is highly valuable. However, this body of work tends to be contextualized within discussions of the general central–provincial government relationship, rather than getting to the bottom of the international actorness of provincial governments—the set of fundamental characteristics of an international relations actor. They tend to attribute the role of agency or partner (of the central government) to provincial governments, in that Chinese provinces are habitually tasked with providing hospitality and managing certain external issues that Beijing is not well prepared to face directly (M. Li, 2017). The exploration of the international actorness of Chinese provincial authorities will help address a neglect in relation to questions about whether Chinese provinces could be regarded as autonomous international actors, how they have pursued their external interests, and to what extent their paradiplomacy might conform to the characteristics presented within the mainstream of paradiplomacy literature.

The other research gap in Chinese diplomacy is that a limited number of scholarly works on the foreign agendas of Chinese provincial governments have been constrained by a geographic bias (Liu & Song, 2019). From the early 1990s, the scholarly spotlight has been fixed on the coastal regions, leaving other areas rather like a huge tract of underdeveloped landmass. For instance, oft-cited cases include Guangdong’s economic links with Hong Kong before 1997 (Goodman & Feng, 1994; Jones et al., 1993), the role of Shanghai officials in facilitating Sino-American relations (Lampton, 2001; Zhu, 2005), Fujian’s building of links with “Greater China”
actions) to produce clientelism between provincial leaders of strategies (such as periodical meetings and informal inter-
have been authorized by the central regime to adopt a range of activities. Both
and their foreign counterparts. In this regard, the actions of provinces from unitary systems are not entirely dissimilar to
the paradiplomacy of subnational units in federal systems.
For example, most American states have fostered sister-state relationships with their counterparts across Europe, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean in the fields of economy, culture, and tourism (Fry, 1990). Similarly, many sub-
national entities in European countries have constitutionally confirmed treaty-making powers, including the regions and communities of Belgium (Paquin, 2010), the regions of Austria and Italy (Pelinka, 1990), and the cantons of Switzerland (Wildhaber, 1990). The inclusion of provincial representatives in the national delegations of various interna-
tional arenas is a core manifestation of paradiplomacy within Western federal systems (Duchacek, 1990; Feldman & Feldman, 1990; Ravenhill, 1999). Similarly, Chinese provinces are allowed to adopt some “Westernized” approaches to consolidate their external connections, even though their external affairs powers are not enshrined in China’s constitu-
tion. These include fostering sister-state relationships, signing non-treaty agreements, and participating in national delegations (Yang, 2014; Zheng, 2007). Therefore, both Western federal states and the Chinese unitary system have authorized subnational governments to engage in a range of international activities.
However, the similarities in paradiplomacy between these two systems should not be over-emphasized. A crucial difference is the extent to which the central government is embed-
ded in the local foreign policy practices. Our analysis shows that the central regime is far more firmly embedded in subna-
tional foreign relations in the Chinese political system, while subnational actors in Western federal systems remain relatively independent.
The relationship between national and subnational gov-
ernments in external interactions is complex and context-
dependent. Some authors have argued that subnational units in federal countries act as allies of their national govern-
ments in international negotiations (Hocking, 1993). John Kincaid (1990) has even suggested replacing the notion of paradiplomacy with “parallel diplomacy.” In unitary sys-
tems, however, subnational diplomacy plays a strictly subordinate or complementary role. Recent literature on China’s paradiplomacy has pointed out that while the external affairs powers of Chinese provinces have increased, provincial govern-
ments remain discreet in conducting external engage-
ments, and will not violate foreign agendas implemented by Dakueva and Lin (2018), M. Li (2019), and Summers (2019). Audrye Wong (2018) further argued that Chinese provinces tend to pursue their external interests through “trailblazing,” “carpetbagging,” and “resisting” national foreign decisions. These approaches refer to strategies of innov-
vating local external policies to persuade Beijing, and subtly fine-tuning existing national policies for local interests; how-
ever, “trailblazing” and “carpetbagging” are considered to be relatively weak strategies.
Further evidence for the existence of increased political control over paradiplomacy in China can be found in the fact that it is nearly impossible for Chinese provincial governments to seek political independence, at least in the foreseeable future. However, the cases where subnational units in federal systems take advantage of external connections to assist in their independent enterprises are not few and far between (Balthazar, 1999; Soldatos, 1990). Some scholars even coined the term “protodiplomacy” to describe this particular type of paradiplomatic action by subnational actors within federal systems (Duchacek, 1990, p. 27). One notable instance was Catalonia’s attempt to propagate its independent enterprise during the 1992 Summer Olympic Games (Keating, 1999), while the most-cited instance is that of Quebec, especially under the rule of the Parti Québécois (PQ) (Fry, 1990; Lecours, 2010). Elena Albina (2010) has also shed light on the nation-building efforts by Russia’s Tatarstan region.

However, as centralized countries are often characterized by tight political control, it is unlikely for subnational governments in these countries to succeed in achieving political independence through garnering support from the international community. In the case of China, provincial leaders are regarded as having neither the desire nor the capacity to pursue “protodiplomacy.” Indeed, Beijing has cultivated “waves of nationalist education movements aimed at cultivating or reinforcing the Chinese national identity” (Zheng, 1999, 2007) This newly cultivated, although uncontested, national identity reinforces the time-honored political value placed upon unity of state in China (Bockman, 1998). At the same time, China’s domestic market is so huge and prosperous that any separation attempts would be tantamount to “cut(ing) oneself off from the one-fifth of the world’s population” (Womack & Zhao, 1994, p. 173). More crucially, under China’s nomenklatura (personnel) system, not only have local leaders been subject to cadre transfer and exchange regulations (Zheng, 2007), but they have also been constrained by the non-native principle (Yang, 2014). These regulations have succeeded in preventing provincial leaders from exercising significant regional influence, and consequently from posing a threat to central government (Liu & Song, 2019).

**Western and Non-Western Federations**

In the 2000s, the improved position of non-Western federal states in world politics and the global economy led some scholars to assess cross-border engagements between Argentinian provinces and their South American counterparts in Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Brazil during exchanges of goods and people (Iglesias et al., 2008). Other authors have examined Indian state governments (Jha, 2014; Mattoo & Jacob, 2009), the state of Penang in Malaysia (Loh, 2009), and South African provinces (Nganje, 2014). The inclusion of these new cases has expanded the scope of paradiplomacy studies and tested theories hitherto derived primarily from cases in Western, federal systems. When comparing the paradiplomatic practices of Western and non-Western federations, it is argued that even though the paradiplomatic actions of the latter are a relatively new phenomenon, the subnational units of both regions share many similarities, in terms of the logic of external activities, key instruments employed, and potential challenges stemming from pursuing local interests overseas (Lecours, 2008).

**Conclusion**

Within the scholarship on paradiplomatic activities, three distinct periods were identified in this article. The first period, starting in the 1970s, marked the beginning of paradiplomacy studies, which concentrated on cases in North America. The 1980s saw a second phase in the study of paradiplomacy take shape. During this period, scholars started shifting their focus from merely describing this phenomenon to developing theoretical and terminological tools to analyze and describe it. From the 1990s onward, paradiplomacy works included more cases of non-Western, centralized systems.

This historical review reveals that the existing scholarship has provided invaluable insights into how subnational governments take part in international relations. This article contributes to this body of literature in two ways: by further developing the analytical frameworks of paradiplomacy and by expanding the geographical scope of the study of paradiplomacy to include a more unitary, centralized political system. It represents one of the first academic attempts to review systematically the existing literature on the analytical frameworks used in paradiplomacy studies and the paradiplomatic activities in China. It argues that the existing analytical frameworks of paradiplomacy have focused on very limited aspects of this phenomenon only; they fail to present a complete picture of the international actorness of subnational governments and are not entirely suitable for studying cross-border paradiplomacy. Moreover, previous studies of the engagement of Chinese provinces in world politics have mainly adopted a central–provincial government framework while also being susceptible to geographic biases.

As with the nation-states, subnational governments are not monolithic; instead, they may encompass a superagency and a range of sub-actors who attempt to pursue their own external interests. Future studies may produce new insights into paradiplomacy by utilizing a more comprehensive analytical framework in their empirical analyses of the foreign activities of the subnational actors of paradiplomacy in “non-traditional” contexts, such as non-Western, centralized political systems. It will also be fruitful to pursue such questions as to what extent the broader context of paradiplomacy scholarship, which is still largely based on Western cases, can be applied to studying Chinese cases, as well as how Chinese non-coastal provinces have become international...
relations players, and to what extent the external powers projection of such non-coastal provinces has driven the recognition of their international actorness by third parties.

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1. Our treatment of Japan as “unitary” is grounded on Purnendra Jain’s book (2006), in which Japan was framed as a centralized state. For example, Jain (2006) argued that “In the post-war period, SNGs [local or subnational governments in Japan] were granted some autonomy under the new 1947 constitution, but the ‘centralized’ unitary structure [of Japan] remained at least partially intact” (p. 7). Jain (2006) also stated that “The overall picture that emerges casts Japanese SNGs as increasingly active international actors within a highly regulated unitary state, in ever more globalized international and domestic environments” (p. 7).

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