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Decentralised Diplomatic Relationships between Europe and China: A Comparative Case Study of the Moravian Silesian Region and Noord-Brabant's Provincial Economic Relationship with Jiangsu Province

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Sanne Vos-Zwart

DECENTRALISED DIPLOMATIC RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN EUROPE AND CHINA

A Comparative Case Study of the Moravian Silesian Region and Noord-Brabant's Provincial
Economic Relationship with Jiangsu Province

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

All over the world local governments engage in ‘decentral diplomacy’, which refers to the international relations of sub-state regions (Dams, 2022; Šimalčík, Šebok, Kalivoda, & Blablová, 2021). European regions often engage in decentral diplomacy with Chinese provinces because of the expected economic outcome. The question is often asked, however, how does a region economically make the most out of these relationships? This thesis studies the domestic state-local political dynamism that influences economic opportunities emerging from the provincial relationship with Jiangsu province. In an interview-based comparative case study using a most similar systems design, the Dutch province Noord-Brabant is compared to the Moravian Silesian Region in Czechia. Whereas these regions are comparable in certain aspects, of which their relationship to Jiangsu is the most important, this thesis makes the comparison studying three dissimilar factors: the extent of central-local coordination on China policy, the institutional structure of the regional relationships, and the local institutional bureaucratic effort. These factors are expected to explain the difference in economic opportunities emerged through the relationship with Jiangsu province. Studying the determinants of good interstate relations at the local level, this thesis finds that based on these two cases particularly the institutional structure of the regional relationships and the local institutional bureaucratic effort are important for economic opportunities emerged through the relationship with Jiangsu.

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Abbreviations

BOM	Brabantse Ontwikkelings Maatschappij (Brabant Development Agency)
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CHOICE	China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
IPE	International Political Economy
MERICS	Mercator Institute for China Studies
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MSIC	Moravian-Silesian Innovation Centre Ostrava
NBSO	Netherlands Business Support Office
RVO	Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland (Netherlands Enterprise Agency)

1. Introduction and research question

There are more actors in international relations than just member states. Since the second World War, local governments have benefited significantly from engaging in foreign affairs. These actors engage in ‘decentral diplomacy’, which refers to the international relations of sub-state regions (Dams, 2022; Šimalčík et al., 2021). Different forms of decentral diplomacy can be distinguished. Some of the most well-known are sister city relations, in which like-minded municipalities enter a partnership, and friendship regions, in which provinces or regions do so. More and more, these relations with Chinese counterparts are under scrutiny in Europe (Berends, 2021; Duxbury, 2020). Lobby groups, citizens, and journalists criticise the relationships because they believe they do not yield any benefits for the municipality or region, while costing a lot of money and effort (Timsit, 2020; F. Wu, Zhang, & Wang, 2016).

This thesis focuses on European decentral diplomacy with China and, more specifically, on the economic opportunities that emerge from them. One of the main aims of this thesis is to explore how provincial relationships with China can be used in an economically beneficial way and what factors contribute to this. In China, local governments function primarily as an extension of the central government since the central government has “more leverage available to instrumentalize local actors to achieve larger foreign policy goals, especially in case of major political disagreement” (Šimalčík et al., 2021). Still, when it comes to finding market opportunities, China is often seen as one of the most fiscally decentralized countries globally (Myšička, 2009; X. Wu, Ramesh, & Yu, 2017, pp. 96-97). Moreover, in many European countries, regions and towns enjoy a high degree of independence in pursuing international relations (Bergström, Franzke, Kuhlmann, & Wayenberg, 2021).

The thesis is built on a comparative case study, comparing the province Noord-Brabant in the Netherlands and the Moravian Silesian Region in Czechia. These two European regions have several similarities, of which their friendship relation with the Chinese province Jiangsu is the most important for this study. See figures 1 to 3 for the location of the regions within their respective countries. As part of the comparative case study, several interviews with policy makers and researchers will be conducted. The Dutch province Noord-Brabant signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Jiangsu in 1994. Since then, this relationship has brought valuable contacts and knowledge, as well as specific sales opportunities for the province of Noord-Brabant (2021). Almost every year, the Brabant Development Agency (BOM) organises a trade mission to Jiangsu in which participants have the chance to identify and act on business opportunities. Similarly, trade missions from Jiangsu to Noord-Brabant are scheduled regularly. In the Netherlands, the province of Noord-Brabant is an exciting research case for two reasons. The first reason is the presence of the BOM, which allows for active international engagement, as opposed to other Dutch decentral governments that have close to no employees working on foreign affairs. The second reason is that several municipalities in Noord-Brabant have a sister city

relation with municipalities in Jiangsu. This is interesting to investigate since research from X. Liu and Hu (2018, p. 483) has shown that sister city relations do not necessarily link cities from sister provinces in China. Nevertheless, the assumption in this thesis is that sister city relations positively impact the goals of the provincial friendship ties. Therefore, an insight that this thesis will give is whether the case in the Netherlands is entirely opposed to that in China based on the findings of X. Liu and Hu (2018).

The Moravian Silesian Region entered an agreement with Jiangsu in 2013. Similarly to Noord-Brabant, in this case, Czechian authorities stress the cooperation and opportunities found as a result of the relationship. Both directions organise trade missions that were popular amongst businesses (Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Czech Republic, 2014). Contrary to Jiangsu and Noord-Brabant, the Moravian Silesian Region is not called a province. In fact, after the establishment of Czechia in 1993, the first adjustment of spatial arrangement was the creation of higher territorial self-governing units in 2000, making the Moravian Silesian Region one of the fourteen self-governing regions (Blazek & Bečicová, 2014, pp. 10-11). Still, I see the provinces of Noord-Brabant and Jiangsu and the region Moravia Silesia as similar entities. The interesting structure of this region and the Czechian relation with China make this case worth researching. As such, the thesis aims at answering the following research puzzle:

This paper compares the economic opportunities that emerged from two European regions' provincial relationship with China's Jiangsu province: Noord-Brabant in the Netherlands and the Moravian Silesian Region in Czechia. It asks how the domestic state-local political dynamism influences such opportunities. In this thesis, I particularly investigate the impact of three factors on the economic opportunities that emerge from the relationship with Jiangsu province: the extent of central-local coordination on China policy, the institutional structure of the regional relationships, and the local institutional bureaucratic effort.

After studying the determinants of good interstate relations at the local level, the thesis argues that the institutional structure of the regional relationships and the local institutional bureaucratic effort are particularly important for economic opportunities that have emerged from the relationship with Jiangsu. The institutional structure deals with the sister city relationships within the regional relationship as well as the coordination between regional and municipal governments within a region. Here, I found that the city is a particularly contributing factor in decentral diplomacy because it allows for the creation of more knowledge and is even closer to the business sector within the region. Following, the local institutional bureaucratic effort concerns how the regional governments involve other stakeholders in their foreign relations and the degree of transparency between the different stakeholders in the region. Studying this factor I see big differences between the two regions. Whereas in Noord-Brabant the regional development agency is very active in aligning the wishes of the Brabant-based companies to the opportunities in Jiangsu, Moravia Silesia's development agency is not involved in international

relations. As a result, only in Noord-Brabant I see economic opportunities in the form of matches with Chinese partners.



Figure 1. This map shows the location of Jiangsu Province in China. (Wikimedia Commons, 2011).



Figure 2. This map shows the location of Noord-Brabant in the Netherlands (Wikimedia Commons, 2019).



Figure 3. This map shows the location of the Moravian Silesian Region in Czechia. (Wikimedia Commons, 2011).

2. Literature review

This chapter shows how this study fits with existing academic research. To get an idea of the actors in the global sphere, the review first discusses the literature on nonstate actors in international relations. Following, I will discuss literature on the role of diplomacy in international relations because this helps explain why regions opt for having foreign ties. After that, since this thesis has a strong focus on Jiangsu province in China, literature on China's motivation for diplomacy is studied. Finally, the academic relevance is explained.

2.1 States and nonstate actors

There is ample research on the role of nonstate actors in international relations. In this thesis, the term 'nonstate actor' is understood as follows: "nonstate actors are non-sovereign entities that exercise significant economic, political, or social power and influence at a national, and in some cases international, level" (National Intelligence Council (U.S.), 2008). A wide variety of actors are classified as nonstate actors, to name a few: charities, political parties, the media, and multinational companies (Wijninga, Oosterveld, Galdiga, & Marten, 2014). It is important to note that I also include provinces and regions in this definition.

The scholarly debate often focuses on whether states are the most important actors in understanding international politics, as realists and neorealists claim, or whether nonstate actors also matter (Ataman, 2003; Weenink, 2001; Wijninga et al., 2014). In the most critical work of neorealist Waltz (1979), *Theory of International Politics*, the role of nonstate actors, in theory, is largely dismissed. He sees states 'like units' which are sovereign, which means that even though states differ internally, they face a similar fate of surviving under anarchy conditions (Waltz, 1979; Weenink, 2001, p. 3). But also, Lake (2007) argues that state policy is the most common object of analysis. One of his most convincing reasons for this argument is that "states are authoritative actors whose duly enacted policies are binding on their citizens and thus regulate how individuals and the collective interact with other similarly bound societies" (Lake, 2007, p. 3).

On the other hand, Arts et al. (2001) book on nonstate actors in international relations offers a welcome perspective to the often state-centered focus on international relations. This group of scholars deems both state and nonstate actors important in international relations. Even scholars, such as Marchetti (2016, p. 79), claim that nonstate actors can autonomously influence global politics. Marchetti (2016, pp. 82-83) assigns the vital role of nonstate actors to the increasing number of functions. To name a few, they participate in formulating the political agenda by bringing public issues to the attention, providing funds for other players, and implementing programs and policies. When it comes to cities as one of the nonstate actors, Barber (2013) argues that urbanity is our history and present. "It defines how we live,

work, play, and associate” meaning that these actors are much better capable of addressing the global challenges we confront.

Even though both these groups of scholars make valid arguments, they both stay reasonably general regarding how the role of state and nonstate actors differs between certain countries. This body of literature cannot fully answer my research question because I am open to the idea that the role of the region, as a nonstate actor, between the Netherlands and Czechia differs. By similarly analyzing both regions, the thesis hopes to bring a new understanding.

2.2 The role of diplomacy in international relations

The role of diplomacy in international relations is often studied. Unfortunately, the concept of diplomacy is often wrongfully confused with foreign policy. I see diplomacy as a functional instrument of foreign policy. In this thesis, I use a rather broad definition of diplomacy: “diplomacy, then, is the act of one actor relating to the other to devise a workable relationship across a border; or, in the case of a failure, to do so, and in the event of a rupture of the peace, to maneuver and manipulate one another’s political assets and relationships to gain a strategic or tactical advantage” (Holmes, 2018, p. 127).

Within the broad concept of diplomacy, I distinguish many types, of which traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy are the most prominent in the literature. This debate is relevant since it tells us about who is to be represented (Murray, Sharp, Wiseman, Crikemans, & Melissen, 2011). Scholars studying traditional diplomacy focus mainly on the relationships between the representatives of states or other international actors (Kissinger, 1994; Melissen, 2007; Murray et al., 2011). Kissinger (1994) relates diplomacy to power, which is at the heart of every political unit. To understand diplomacy, we must examine what drives world leaders in a balance-of-power system that makes decisions without complete information (Kissinger, 1994, pp. 17-28). A more recent study by Melissen (2007) explains how the roles and responsibilities of actors are delineated in the traditionalist view of diplomacy. In line with that, Murray et al. (2011, p. 711) describe how diplomacy was seen as a process involving rules and practices to facilitate inter-state relations in the English School theory. This line of thought relates to the first factor in the research puzzle, as here, I will study the national contexts.

More recently, however, scholars have studied the idea of public diplomacy, which “targets the general public in foreign societies and more specific non-official groups, organizations and individuals” (Melissen, 2007, p. 5). Pigman and Deos (2008, p. 85) explain that for governments of regions and for not widely recognized nation-states, public diplomacy is a way to assert their identity “through gaining recognition by the global public as well as by established governments.” Public diplomacy is specifically linked to the concept of soft power of Nye (2004) which is based on intangible or indirect influences such as culture, values, and ideology (Snow & Cull, 2020). Nevertheless, these scholars do not disregard the importance of states. Public diplomacy allows both government and private actors to influence public attitudes and opinions that “bear directly on another government’s foreign policy decisions (Snow &

Cull, 2020, p. 8). I learn that the public in other states can be engaged through strategic communication methods “such as media outreach, conferences and events, collaborative projects, and exchanges of culture, personnel or students” (Pamment, 2012, pp. 313-314). Public diplomacy is much more critical to this research overall. Collaboration and exchanges within decentral diplomacy are an example of public diplomacy. Since regions are the central units of analysis, I speak of ‘decentral diplomacy’ in this thesis. Decentral diplomacy is defined as the international relations of sub-state regions (Dams, 2022; Šimalčík et al., 2021). As mentioned in the introduction, the most well-known forms of decentral diplomacy are sister city relations and friendship regions. I should note that in the literature, many different terms are used to describe forms of decentral cooperation, such as sister provinces, sister city relations, paradiplomacy, friendship regions, and decentral partnerships (Dams, 2022; X. Liu & Hu, 2018; O’Toole, 2001; Šimalčík et al., 2021).

While traditional and public diplomacy is often studied, the study of decentral diplomacy is relatively new. This thesis aims to build on the works of Dams (2022) and Šimalčík et al. (2021) by diving deeper into examples of decentral diplomacy using a comparative case study. Now that the literature on diplomacy, in general, has been studied, the following sub-chapter will take this literature review a step further by explicitly focusing on China’s motivation to practice diplomacy. What are the goals China aims to achieve by using diplomacy as one of its foreign policy instruments?

2.3 The motivation behind China’s diplomacy

States can have many different diplomatic goals. Rasmussen (2009, p. 10) gives several examples of motivations: to preserve international prestige, to combat negative impressions, to improve the financial situation, and to keep control over the information that flows into and out of the state. When it comes to China, there is little consensus on the strategic motivations for diplomacy (Zhao, 2015). Still, it is essential to discuss China’s motivation because it could impact the economic opportunities that arise in the two European regions.

I distinguish two camps of scholars in the debate on the motivations behind China’s diplomacy. On the one hand, scholars discuss a cooperative form of diplomacy directly related to former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (Shen & Blanchard, 2010; Wang, 2013). In contrast, another group of authors speaks of so-called wolf warrior diplomacy (d’Hooghe, 2021; Smith, 2021). To begin with, the style of diplomacy often related to the start of the Deng Xiaoping era emphasizes the avoidance of controversy. During this time, China entered a new stage of development in which it opened up to the world. As Wang (2013, p. 129) states, “China thus embarked on a path of cooperation with the world.” To add, Shen and Blanchard (2010, pp. 5-6) explain how Deng’s diplomacy was inspired by Taoism, especially because it focuses on maintaining a low profile and concentrates on China’s internal development. Moreover, this style of diplomacy resembles defensive realism since it suggests that nations “prefer cooperation to competition if the level of uncertainty is high” (Glaser, 1995; Shen & Blanchard, 2010).

Contrarily, scholars discussing wolf warrior diplomacy state that Deng's guideline of keeping a low profile lies far behind us (d'Hooghe, 2021). Wolf warrior diplomacy, named after the 2015 action movie *Wolf Warrior*, is focused on acquiring legitimacy and defending national dignity (Smith, 2021, pp. 10-11). It does so by, for example, communicating in a pushy manner with foreign journalists, experts, and politicians and by threatening actors to blacklist them for the "wrong views" (Lukin, 2021). When studying China's diplomacy, Chang-Liao (2022) asks why Chinese diplomats became so aggressive? One of his reasons for China's more recent assertive behavior is to appeal to nationalist attitudes at home, "thus bolstering the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)" (Chang-Liao, 2022).

The truth on China's motivations for diplomacy may lie somewhere in between. An excellent example of how China acts on middle ground is its' mediation diplomacy. In this foreign policy, China positions itself as a peacemaker in the Middle East conflicts and crises, such as in Syria, Yemen, and Iran (Chaziza, 2019, p. 25). Here, it shows how China wants to acquire legitimacy and avoid controversy by 'doing good'. While this thesis mostly focuses on factors on the European side, China's motivations do matter. The Chinese diplomacy motivations in specific countries result in how it strategically engages with these countries. Different aims lead to different bilateral or multilateral initiatives, and therefore China's motivations can say something about which institutional factors are present in Czechia and the Netherlands.

2.4 Academic relevance

This chapter aims to give an overview of the existing literature and explain how the literature fits the thesis research. The first body of literature on state and nonstate actors inspires the research by the curiosity of how two somewhat different regions in Europe have evolved as nonstate actors active in foreign relations. The relevance of this comparative case study lies in the possibility of thoroughly investigating how the regions differ and how that leads to different results in economic cooperation with the same Chinese province. Following, the literature on diplomacy as a functional instrument of foreign policy shows how many types of diplomacy can be distinguished. Since decentral diplomacy, meaning the international relations of sub-state regions, is relatively new in academic literature, this thesis aims to build on the existing knowledge and give a new understanding of the effect of decentral diplomacy with China on local European actors. The literature on China's motivation for diplomacy inspires the research since it tells us why China engages in specific ways with the two European regions. What this research aims to do differently, which directly relates to the academic relevance, is taking a moderate stance in the analytical chapters when it comes to the debate between a cooperative form of diplomacy and wolf warrior diplomacy.

3. Theoretical framework

This thesis falls in the realm of International Political Economy (IPE) studies. Cohen (2021, p. 1) explains this area of intellectual investigation as follows: “The field of IPE teaches us to think about the connections between economics and politics beyond the confines of a single state.” As stated in the introduction, the main aim of this thesis is to compare the economic opportunities that emerged from the provincial relationship with China’s Jiangsu province for Noord-Brabant and the Moravian Silesian Region. I do so by studying three factors, namely: the extent of central-local coordination on China policy, the institutional structure of the regional relationships, and the local institutional bureaucratic effort. In this chapter, I will conceptualize these factors, as well as explain why they are important and how they relate to academic theory. I will do this taking a liberalist perspective with a particular emphasis on its relation to the local level.

3.1 Liberalism and the regional level

As O'Brien (2016, p. 12) explained, liberals “do not see the state as a unitary actor, but as influenced by numerous factors.” This theory fits particularly with the thesis subject since it focuses on an interdependent world and believes that states and people “can cooperate for mutual benefit.” In this theoretical framework, the focus is on the liberalist idea at the regional level. Li (2014, p. 276) introduces this concept as ‘local liberalism’, which can be defined as “local government actors, within the possible national foreign policy parameters, striving to push for transnational collaboration and cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, and non-traditional security arenas.” Research on nonstate actors like regional governments shows how liberalism values their role in international relations. Saifullah and Ahmad (2020, p. 46) argue that nonstate actors induce states' preferences: “Democracy provides a vehicle to these actors [nonstate actors] to translate their interests into the state’s priorities”. Whereas other IPE theories believe that states’ preferences result from external system pressures (like anarchy), liberalism believes that preferences depend on the interests of the most influential societal actors (Stengel & Baumann, 2017, pp. 13-14). From this line of thought stems the incorporation of nonstate actors in the liberal world order.

In his research, Li (2014) makes the case that local governments in China can be seen as semi-independent actors since they can take significant initiatives and make big proposals. According to him, the liberal idea of local governmental relations is particularly salient as a solution for the economic development of all parties. Breslin (2006) explains that in the form of neo-liberalism that has materialized in China, often, actors at the local level remain central to the functioning of the economic system at the national level. Interestingly, this is the same for most European regions and can be explained because national policies determine where national budgets are allocated, which makes it most economically beneficial for regions or provinces to focus on similar key areas. Young and Kaczmarek (2000) explain how especially in Central and Eastern European countries, economic transformation in

the regions is guided by neo-liberal principles such as attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) or internationalisation. Therefore, decentral diplomacy for a region is often seen as the necessary path for economic transformation and internationalisation (Swain & Hardy, 1998, pp. 226-227; Young & Kaczmarek, 2000). The first factor that this study focuses on is the extent of central-local coordination on China policy. In many European states, the principle of cooperation between central and local authorities is present in constitutional or legal provisions (European Committee on Local and Regional Democracy (CDLR), 2007). What I mean by the central-local coordination on China policy is the vertical synchronization seen in policy relating to foreign relations with China. To what extent do ideas and strategies on China overlap? And how does the central impact the local and vice versa? The extent is high when policy objectives, but also knowledge and experience, are the same in the region as in the national context. This is regardless of the fact that both in EU member states and in China there is a high degree of regional autonomy (Parks & Elcock, 2000). This factor is important for answering the thesis' main question for two reasons. First, several scholars have shown that national development and effective coordination are of high importance to both the local and central objectives (El-Gamal, Ismail, & El Bagoury, 2022; Panday, 2014). Secondly, empirical evidence in the Netherlands has shown how, in some cases, for China, it is difficult to determine whether a decision is made by the local or central government (Zwart, 2022). Even though the two European regions function independently and autonomously, based on these theories I expect the central-local coordination on China policy to impact the economic opportunities for the regions. For a region, having a similar strategy on China as your national government makes it easier to engage with China, but also makes it more likely that the goals and objectives can be achieved. Moreover, since subnational governments are most likely to engage with counterparts in countries with which their national government has a functioning relation, I expect to find that the national context was essential for the establishment of the regional international relations. As an alternative to coordination with the national level, I also look for similarities with an even higher, multinational, level. Therefore, I specifically look at whether there is a clear guiding strategy that is materialised at the local level.

Following this, the idea of complex interdependence theory can be explored through a liberal lens and explains global linkages (Leffel & Amiri, 2018, p. 111). With complex interdependence, I refer to a situation in which all actors, including states and nonstate actors, depend on each other (Rana, 2015). When it comes to inter-city linkages, which is a form of decentral diplomacy, Leffel and Amiri (2018, p. 112) explain how this perspective “emphasizes a dense web of economic, technological, and other ties between nations in an era of accelerated globalization, in which a plethora of nonstate actors and processes bind societies together in complex and interdependent ways”. One way in which we may see such a complex and interdependent web of actors at a local level is when studying the institutional structure of the regional relationships. With this I mean how the region is structured administratively. The second factor studied in this thesis, therefore, deals with the governance structure within the

province and region. Here, what is included are the sister city relations within the provincial relationships. If many municipalities within the two regions have a sister city relation, a higher degree of institutional structure is seen. Also included is the cooperation between the provincial government and the municipalities within one province or region. Not just the amount of contact between the different parties contributes to the institutional structure, but also the sophistication of the contact. To what extent are the different actors within a region working together? To create a sophisticated form of high institutional structure, I should see that parties openly share their knowledge and information and that cooperation is based on agreements. To give an example, if the sharing of knowledge continues when a policy maker's position is taken by another person, I can say that the institutional structure is in such a place where it is not just the goal of the individual policy maker, but rather of the entire organisation. This factor should not be confused with regional institutionalism, which in academic literature often refers to multipurpose regional institutions that include various member states such as ASEAN or the EU (Norkevičius, 2014). I link the second factor of this thesis to complex interdependence theory. Because of interdependence between the regional governments and the municipalities I expect increased economic cooperation, which should yield more interstate cooperation at the subnational level.

Regarding nonstate (or nongovernmental) actors, such as regional development organisations, liberalism regards them as impacting the shaping of national policy choices and encouraging international trade. The economic benefits of the local governments do not go against the economic benefits of neighbouring provinces or even the national government. Studying how liberalism relates to local government, Chandler (1989, p. 611) rightly claims that for individual freedom to be maximized, individuals should have the "right to determine actions that affect other people solely in conjunction with those that are affected." Arguing from this liberal premise, he shows how local government is a robust political structure ensuring that its members alone make decisions. Since the local government is even closer to individuals than the central government, I expect individuals to be more involved in the actions of the local governments. For this reason, the third factor studied in this thesis is the local institutional bureaucratic effort. This factor specifically studies the efforts of the regional governments to involve other stakeholders in the administrative processes. Are parties other than the governmental parties likely to contribute to subnational diplomacy with China, and are there any barriers that obstruct their involvement (Yang & Callahan, 2007)? Maybe even more importantly, for the local institutional bureaucratic effort to be high, a high degree of transparency is needed from the provincial or regional government's side. Based on the idea that citizens within the region stand closer to nongovernmental organisations and on the idea that also nongovernmental organisations can participate in diplomacy, I expect the local institutional bureaucratic effort to positively impact the economic opportunities that emerged from the provincial relationship with Jiangsu. Decentral diplomacy is an effective way to reach

economic development, and putting in more effort, such as in the form of investments, knowledge, or full-time employees leads to a positive economic outcome.

4. Methodology and data collection

This chapter discusses the methodology and case selection for this thesis. The chapter will explain the reasons for conducting a qualitative comparative case study and elaborate on the selection of the specific cases. Also, I will discuss whether generalization is possible based on this study.

4.1 Comparative case study using a most similar systems design

The primary methodology in this thesis is a comparative case study using a most similar systems design. A case study is an in-depth analysis of one or more cases to test a theory, in this case, the expectations of the three factors determined in the preceding chapter. The idea of the most similar systems design is that two very similar cases which differ in their dependent variable are compared. The two cases have several control variables, which are elements that make the cases similar. Besides that, very few elements are dissimilar. The three factors chosen as independent variables are dissimilar across the cases (Steinmetz, 2021).

As discussed before, the two cases studied are the provincial relationship between Noord-Brabant and Jiangsu and the provincial relationship between the Moravian Silesian Region and Jiangsu. Both of these cases will be studied from the start of the provincial agreements until January 2022. The comparative case study is grounded on the fact that, out of the relationship with Jiangsu province, different economic opportunities emerge for Noord-Brabant and the Moravian Silesian Region. Therefore, the dependent variable is the economic opportunities for the Dutch or Czechian province that emerged from the provincial relationship with Jiangsu. It is important to note that economic opportunities will not be measured in hard numbers such as in money. Instead, economic opportunities can be networking contacts made through trade missions and exchange programs, exchanges of knowledge between companies and institutions, and deals made between entrepreneurs (Kuckertz, Kollmann, Krell, & Stoeckmann, 2017). Therefore, all business-related aspects that contribute positively to the region's development are considered. The two cases have several elements that make them similar. First of all, both of the regions are in a decentral relationship with the Chinese province Jiangsu. Following, even though in the Netherlands we speak of provinces and in Czechia we speak of regions, the two regions are both an administrative division in their respective countries. Within the two countries, the regions take a similar position. Both have an area of just over 5.000 km² and host a similar population: approximately 15% of the Dutch population lives in Noord-Brabant, and about 11% of the Czech population lives in the Moravian Silesian Region (Czech Statistical Office, 2021; Statistics Netherlands, 2020). Also, the two regions are both located in European Union member states and are the 7th and 9th member states in terms of population. Lastly, the two regions are similar since they are highly industrialized (Eurostat, 2021).

In a most similar systems design, among the dissimilar elements, the researcher find independent variables expected to produce the difference in the dependent variable (Steinmetz, 2021). In this thesis, the independent variables are expected to explain why the economic opportunities that emerged from the friendship relationship with Jiangsu differ. The three factors, which were introduced in the theoretical framework of this thesis, vary slightly between Noord-Brabant and the Moravian Silesian Region. The first selection point is the central-local coordination on China policy. Here I study the bilateral national relationships with China and the coordination between the national levels and the regional levels of Noord-Brabant and Moravia Silesia. In recent years, in Czechia, China has been a cause for a political split while in the Netherlands, a unified China strategy has appeared (Hutt, 2021; Šebok, 2021; The Government of the Netherlands, 2019; van der Putten & Sie Dhian Ho, 2020). The second selection point is the institutional structure of the regional relationship. Here, specific focus is put on the sister city relations within the regional relations, as their activity could spill over to the regional level. Noord-Brabant has many municipalities with a sister-city relationship with a city in Jiangsu province, while in Czechia, “regions, rather than cities, are the most important actors in the Czech-Chinese paradiplomacy” (Dams, 2022; Šimalčík et al., 2021, p. 18). The last selected factor is the local institutional bureaucratic effort of the two European regions. In Noord-Brabant, besides the provincial government, the Brabant Development Agency (BOM) cooperates and works on the relationship. At the same time, the development organisation of the Moravian Silesian Region is less active.

Using a comparative case study as the main methodology has several advantages. First of all, because of the large wealth of details that come with a case study, this method gives room for developing a nuanced view of reality. Flyvbjerg (2006, p. 6) adds that “human behavior cannot be meaningfully understood as simply the rulegoverned acts found at the lowest level of the learning process, and in much theory.” Also, a case study allows for exploring causal mechanisms in detail. A case study looks at a large number of intervening variables within a case, which helps identify the conditions needed to activate the causal mechanism (Starman, 2013, p. 37). One of the weaknesses of a case study that is often written about in literature is generalization. Stake (1995, pp. 7-8) argues that the emphasis is on uniqueness and understanding the case itself: “the real business of case study is particularization, not generalization.” However, Flyvbjerg (2006, p. 8) argues that generalizability depends on the case and how it is chosen. The strategic selection of cases can improve the generalizability. “When the objective is to achieve the greatest possible amount of information on a given problem or phenomenon, a representative case or a random sample may not be the most appropriate strategy” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 13). I chose these two cases because they are atypical in certain aspects, which I expect to reveal more information. Noord-Brabant is atypical because, in the Netherlands, it is by far the most active province when it comes to decentral diplomacy with China. The Moravian Silesian Region is atypical since it is

a European region that is Eurosceptical, but also because Czechia does not have an explicit China strategy. I argue that this thesis is a step forward in researching decentral diplomacy with China.

4.2 Data collection

In this thesis, data collection is done by desk research and interviews. The desk research is based on sources from the three regions, Noord-Brabant, the Moravian Silesian Region, Jiangsu, and the respective national levels. I use publicly available English- and Dutch-written sources and translated Czechian sources, like government documents, scholarly publications in the fields of political science and international management, and research from think-tanks such as the Clingendael Institute, the China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE), and the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS).

After doing desk research, interviews will be conducted to contribute specific knowledge that was not found in the written sources. These interviews are with policy makers and researchers from the Netherlands and Czechia and are in-depth and semi-structured. In total, interviews with five people are conducted. One of the interviews was conducted via email messaging, and the other four were conducted online via MS Teams and lasted approximately 45 minutes each. In preparation for the interview, different questions for each interview were set up. The main topics discussed were the three factors studied: the central-local coordination on China policy, the institutional structure of the regional relationships, and the local institutional bureaucratic effort. All questions were open-ended. As is very common for semi-structured interviews, the list of questions was only loosely followed to allow for an open discussion (Wildemuth, 2016).

In this thesis, the interviews are cited and anonymised as respectively interviews 1 until 5. The interviewee of interview 1 is a China Research Fellow of the Association for International affairs in Prague, and the interviewee of interview 2 is a China Research Fellow of the Central European Institute of Asian Studies in Bratislava. Since these people are acquainted, I made the decision to interview them in a combined call. Interview 3 is with an economic and internationalization advisor of the province Noord-Brabant. Interview 4 is with a project manager focusing on trade with China from the BOM. Even though these interviews were planned to be conducted in physical form, the COVID-19 circumstances (on March 8th and March 16th) did not allow this. The last interview, -interview 5-, with someone from the International Relations office of the Moravian Silesian Region, is conducted via personal email contact. Please see the appendix for a recap of this information. Finally, I gathered information through participation in a summer school on EU-China relations organised by CHOICE. During this four-day event from May 24 to May 27 held in Kutná Hora (Czechia), I attended seminars and had off the record conversations with China scholars from Central and Eastern Europe as well as officials from European states working at governmental delegations in China (Blablová, 2022). At the summer school I met interviewee 1 once again, and continued the conversation we had online. Through

active participation in this event, I gained additional knowledge on the bilateral relations between Czechia and China, and of Czechia's participation in the 16+1 Initiative.

5. Central-local coordination on China policy

This thesis asks how the domestic state-local political dynamism influences economic opportunities that emerged from the provincial relationship with Jiangsu. The comparative case study focuses explicitly on Noord-Brabant and the Moravian Silesian Region. This analytical chapter aims to answer the following sub-question: **To what extent does the central-local coordination on China policy of Noord-Brabant and the Moravian Silesian Region influence the economic opportunities that emerged from the relationship with Jiangsu province?** As mentioned in the methodological chapter, economic opportunities are measured broadly and include networking contacts made through trade missions and exchange programs, exchanges of knowledge between companies and institutions, and deals made between entrepreneurs. The expectation is that having a clear guiding strategy from a national or international level positively impacts the economic opportunities gained through the decentral relationship. Even more so, since subnational governments are most likely to engage with counterparts in countries with which their national government has a good relation with, I expect the national context to be of importance to the economic opportunities. The chapter is structured as follows: first, the case Noord-Brabant will be discussed. Secondly, the Moravian Silesian Region will be discussed, and lastly, a comparison will be made, leading to a reflection on the hypothesis.

5.1 Noord-Brabant

In 2019, the Netherlands published its China Strategy called ‘The Netherlands and China: a new balance’ (The Government of the Netherlands, 2019). One of the main pillars of this strategy is sustainable trade and investments. The national government argues that because of China’s fast-growing markets, considerable research and development budgets, and talented knowledge infrastructure, China offers many opportunities for Dutch companies and institutions (The Government of the Netherlands, 2019, p. 23). China is an important trading partner for the Netherlands. The latest figures from the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO) state that in 2020 the total export to China was €14.1 billion, and the total import was €44.6 billion (RVO, 2021). The Dutch economic network in China is represented at the embassy in Beijing, four Consulate-Generals, and six NBSO offices (Netherlands Business Support Office). The Dutch economic network has determined several ‘opportunity-rich’ sectors in China. These sectors, in their turn, are partly based on Chinese frameworks for foreign economic relations, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Made in China 2025 (Cremer, McKern, & McGuire, 2020; S. X. Liu, 2016). Through this, the Netherlands tries to find an overlap in which sectors are essential for both China and the Netherlands to see where economic cooperation can be highest.

As stated by an official of the provincial government, the province of Noord-Brabant has its own goals when it comes to trade with China (Interview 3, 2022). However, they are very similar to the goals of the national government. In its relationship with Jiangsu, Noord-Brabant focuses on the high-tech and agriculture sectors. These two sectors are also among the ‘opportunity-rich’ sectors determined by the

national government. The province hosts a large number of high-tech and agriculture companies (Landbouw en Voedsel Brabant, 2022; Van der Putten, 2018). Especially in the high-tech industry, Brabant-based companies such as NXP and ASML are very relevant to Chinese priority sectors (Interview 4, 2022). As Van der Putten (2018, pp. 5-6) states, China's Made in China 2025 framework focuses on technologies that companies from Noord-Brabant are leading in. Even though Noord-Brabant and Jiangsu are incomparable in size, the provinces are comparable in their respective countries as both have a strong focus on high-tech (Interview 3, 2022; Interview 4, 2022). A report of Oosterhout municipality on the trade mission to Jiangsu in October 2019 states that valuable business contacts were made in the high-tech sector, specifically in robotics and artificial intelligence (Klerks, 2019).

5.2 The Moravian Silesian Region

The bilateral relations between Czechia and China can be described as turbulent (Fürst, 2021; Hewitt, 2020). Often allocated to Czechia's communist past, China is a divisive topic amongst politicians. When in 2013 Zeman became president of the country, China was promoted as a new priority. However, Lomová (2020) explains that the new policy to draw closer to China was never written into authoritative government documents on foreign policy. Still, although the Czech bilateral relation with China fluctuates according to which government is in power, I see an ongoing focus on economic investments and business (Fürst, 2021, pp. 21-25; Lomová, 2020). Czechia, specifically the Moravian Silesian Region, is known for being highly Eurosceptic, which is one of the reasons that partners outside of Europe, such as in China, have been gaining growing importance (Böhm, 2018). Whereas the national government does not have a guiding strategy for China, I could study the 16+1 Initiative as a substitute guiding strategy. The 16+1 initiative, also known as the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, is China's main initiative to promote business and investment relations with sixteen Central and Eastern European countries. Böhm (2018, p. 79) explains China's motives as follows: "This area provides one-third of that EU market segment, which is relevant for the Chinese investment policies, which reflect its oversized capacities in certain fields, above all in the transport infrastructure, as well as in the building and power industries". Even though the economic goals of the 16+1 initiative cannot be found in one document, there is a high focus on infrastructure and mobility (Pepermans, 2018).

The Moravian Silesian Region used to be highly industrial. As the home of the heavy industry, coal mining, and steel industry, the region used to carry the name 'Europe's black hole' (Böhm, 2018). Since the economic restructuring in 1989, the prosperity has grown to a similar level to other Czech regions. The latest regional development strategy from 2019 states how it aims to change the image of Moravia Silesia from a coal region to a region of new technologies and clean energy (Moravian Silesian Region, 2019). The region's focus is now on the automotive industry and IT technologies. China's goals in the 16 Central and Eastern European countries can be viewed in a broader context of development goals identified in its' Five-Year Plans. However, since China is the leading party in the 16+1 Initiative, I

cannot fully see this form of cooperation as a guiding strategy to regions in Czechia. Even though Jakóbowski (2015, p. 3) shows how the focus sectors of the 16+1 Initiative and the Moravian Silesian Region overlap, the local relationships developed very much organically, without a guiding strategy (Interview 1, 2022; Interview 2, 2022). Böhm (2018, p. 10) even goes as far as stating that the Moravian Silesian Region is a passive partner when it comes to relations with China.

5.3 Comparison and chapter conclusion

When looking at the case of Noord-Brabant, I see strong alignment between the national China policy and Noord-Brabant's policy. There are several reasons why the central-local coordination on China policy and economic opportunities that emerged from the relationship with Jiangsu are positively related. First, there is reason to think that the Chinese see the Netherlands as a country where the national and regional levels are strongly intertwined (Kefferpütz, 2021). For example, when in 2021, the Dutch municipality of Arnhem decided to break its ties with Wuhan, Chinese officials questioned the Dutch national government on why it did not stop Arnhem from making this decision (Zwart, 2022). Secondly, I also see that companies from Noord-Brabant use the knowledge coming from the Dutch economic network in China. The fact that the focus sectors of Noord-Brabant are also focus sectors at the national level is a vital asset (Interview 4, 2022). Contacts and information gained through the Dutch Consulate-Generals and NBSOs help the Brabant-based companies. A good example in the high-tech sector is the robotics company WWA from Oosterhout. During the 2019 trade mission to Jiangsu they worked on cooperation in the robotics sector in China, but at the same time, they are a member of Smart Industry, a national initiative that stimulates digitization (Oosterhout, 2019; Rijksoverheid, 2021). In the Netherlands, there is an open climate for the province of Noord-Brabant to cooperate with the national government's institutions, leading to a positive economic outcome for both.

In comparison, when it comes to the case of the Moravian Silesian Region, the bilateral national relation between Czechia and China cannot be considered similarly good. Even though China is called a focus area in Czechia, this is nowhere to be found in official government strategies. Still, the 16+1 Initiative could offer another form of guiding strategy to the region. The problem here is, however, that the Moravian Silesian Region functions as a passive partner, giving me the impression that the overlap in focus sectors is a coincidence rather than a strategy. In the theoretical framework I hypothesized that the central-local coordination on China policy impacts the economic opportunities that emerged from the relationship with Jiangsu province. Also, I expected that a similar form of guiding strategy could function as an alternative to actual central-local coordination. While I found that in Noord-Brabant the coordination with the Dutch national government has a positive effect on Noord-Brabant's economic relation with Jiangsu, the hypothesis does not follow in the Czech case. Since Czechia does not have a clear China strategy, the 16+1 Initiative was studied as an alternative to the bilateral relation. However, Czechia has a passive role in this initiative and the overlap in focus sectors of the initiative and Moravia Silesia seems to be more of a coincidence. To conclude this chapter, I can say that central-local

coordination on China policy is a valuable, but not essential, factor for gaining economic opportunities. To add, the case in Czechia shows that a guiding strategy in another form cannot substitute good bilateral relations with China.

6. The institutional structure of the regional relationships

This analytical chapter focuses on the second factor determined in the research puzzle. It aims at answering the following sub-question: **To what extent does the institutional structure of the regional relationships of Noord-Brabant and the Moravian Silesian Region influence the economic opportunities that emerged from the relationship with Jiangsu province?** The hypothesis is that the institutional structure, meaning the governance structure of the different (governmental) parties within a region, positively impacts the economic opportunities that emerge for the two European regions. From the theories, I expect that the amount of sister city relations within the provincial relationship and the coordination between the regions and the municipalities contribute positively to the economic opportunities. The chapter is structured similarly to the subsequent chapter.

6.1 Noord-Brabant

The importance of Jiangsu province for Noord-Brabant stems from its historical background. In the late eighties, the well-known company Philips from Eindhoven opened a television factory in Nanjing (Interview 3, 2022; Paulussen, 2021). In an interview in 2012, Ms. Verstraeten from the municipality of Eindhoven explained how for years, Eindhoven had been a one-company-city (van Oss, 2012). Philips was by far the most important company in Eindhoven. Therefore, the most logical city in China for Eindhoven to build a relationship with was the city where Philips opened a factory in. The interviewee of the BOM explained that the sister city relationship between Nanjing and Eindhoven was the first reason for the provinces of Noord-Brabant and Jiangsu to discuss their future as provincial friends (Interview 4, 2022). “Just like Nanjing and Eindhoven fit together, Jiangsu and Noord-Brabant are like-minded as well.” Within the Netherlands, cities in the province Noord-Brabant have developed the most sister city relations in China, of which nine are in Jiangsu (van der Putten, 2021)(see appendix 10.2). The ties between the provinces Jiangsu and Noord-Brabant and between Eindhoven and Nanjing were useful for opening doors for other cities in Brabant. A good example is the municipality Tilburg which in 1997 signed a relationship with Changzhou. The two towns found common ground as they both are textile cities that grew through their cotton industries.

In Noord-Brabant, I see extensive cooperation between the provincial government and the different municipalities when it comes to China. Officials from the various governments are in contact every three months to exchange knowledge and refer to each other when a connection with a Chinese party can better be made in a different municipality. As explained by the interviewee of the BOM, the close cooperation started after the trade mission to Jiangsu in 2019 (Interview 4, 2022). Before that, the various officials acted more independently. However, after organising a trade mission in collaboration with the province, several municipalities, and over fifty companies, the different parties found a structured way to see each other. The quarterly meetings between those responsible for China in the cities and the province positively affect the economic opportunities for Dutch companies and

organisations. The provincial official explained that when a company from Noord-Brabant is looking for a partner in China, the sister city relationships are the starting point. “We first try to match them with the right partners through the sister city relationship.” The Dutch companies can often find a suitable match through one of the sister city relationships. The provincial relationship is only used when a match was not found at the municipal level (Interview 3, 2022).

6.2 The Moravian Silesian Region

In Czechia, regions rather than cities are the most important actors in decentral diplomacy with China (Šimalčík et al., 2021, p. 18). These scholars explain that regions have more financial and personal resources to be dedicated to foreign relations and that cities often lack dedicated bodies in charge of foreign relations. Still, in 2015, of the provincial relationship between the Moravian Silesian Region and Jiangsu province, the Chinese city Suzhou initiated a partnership with Ostrava. The relationship was mostly built on sports and higher education cooperation, and, to be more precise, the exchange of table tennis athletes between Ostrava and Suzhou. Even though Ostrava municipality tried to renew the partnership with their Chinese partner, in 2020, Suzhou left the relationship to expire (Šimalčík et al., 2021, pp. 34-35). Before this sister city was established, the Moravian Silesian Region started planning to open a representative office in Suzhou (Rejmanonva, 2012). However, according to Šimalčík et al. (2021, pp. 21-22), these plans never materialized. Interestingly, in personal communication with the region's regional authority, they state that they have no information on the agenda to open a representative office in Suzhou. None of the interviews, news articles, or papers show a sign of institutional cooperation between the Moravian Silesian Region and Ostrava municipality.

Just like there seems to be a lack of institutional cooperation between the region and municipalities in the Moravian Silesian Region, the institutional structure within the region seems to be marginal because the Moravian Silesian Region also has cooperation initiatives with other Chinese subnational actors. Since 2015, the Moravian Silesian Region has had an agreement with Hebei province, and in 2017 the Moravian Silesian Region signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Qiqihar city in Heilongjiang (Šimalčík et al., 2021, pp. 67-68). I get the impression that the relationship with Jiangsu province does not have priority in the Moravian Silesian Region. For example, it seems that the cooperation in sports was not enough for the Chinese city Suzhou to remain active in their relationship with Ostrava. This results in a lack of institutional collaboration within the Moravian Silesian Region. Therefore, in this case, the institutional structure has not yet developed, and therefore I do not see clear economic opportunities that emerged from the relationship with Jiangsu province.

6.3 Comparison and chapter conclusion

Studying the case of Noord-Brabant, I see a sophisticated form of institutional structure in the cooperation between the provincial government and the nine municipalities that have a sister city in Jiangsu province. The institutional structure in Noord-Brabant positively affects the economic

opportunities that emerge from the provincial relationship between Noord-Brabant and Jiangsu. The first reason is that especially since the trade mission in 2019, the officials of the different parties have found ways to find each other. The quarterly meetings allow for information sharing and gaining knowledge. Lessons learned on how to deal with Chinese partners can be shared. The 2011 case of the Health Campus in Boxmeer, and its' cooperation with partners in Wuxi, shows what the city ties can do that the province cannot. A relatively smaller organisation not coming from one of Brabant's biggest cities had the opportunity to network in Jiangsu due to specific effort of their mayor (Health Campus Boxmeer, 2011). The second reason why the institutional structure in Noord-Brabant positively impacts the economic opportunities that emerged from the provincial relationship with Jiangsu is because the different forms of agreement allow for multiple options to start an economic partnership. If finding a business partner through the sister city network doesn't lead to concrete outcomes, there is always the chance to try again at the provincial level.

Contrary to this, no more cities in the Moravian Silesian Region have a decentralized relationship with a town in Jiangsu province. Between 2015 and 2020, Ostrava and Suzhou had a relationship, but this relationship was left to expire by the Chinese side. Still, there are no signs that tell us that there was a form of institutional cooperation between 2015 and 2020. To add, I find that the Moravian Silesian Region has multiple relationships with Chinese decentral governments, giving the impression that there is no clear priority focusing on Jiangsu province. Seeing that there is a lack of institutional structure of the regional relationship in the Moravian Silesian Region, I cannot find any economic opportunities that emerged based on this.

This chapter aimed to answer the following question: to what extent does the institutional structure of the regional relationships of Noord-Brabant and the Moravian Silesian Region influence the economic opportunities that emerged from the relationship with Jiangsu province? The thesis' hypothesized that the institutional structure of the regional relationships has a positive effect on the economic opportunities that emerge from the provincial relationship with Jiangsu. Mainly focusing on the sister city relationships within the provincial relationship, I found that the close cooperation between the province Noord-Brabant and the nine municipalities with a sister city in Jiangsu was of great benefit for influencing economic opportunities. To add, the city is an especially contributing factor because it usually has the closest ties to companies, as was the case for Philips. Contrarily, within the Moravian Silesian Region, I found little institutional structure, and therefore also no economic opportunities emerged based on this factor.

7. The local institutional bureaucratic effort

The final analytical chapter aims to answer the following sub-question: **To what extent does the local institutional bureaucratic effort of Noord-Brabant and the Moravian Silesian Region influence the economic opportunities that emerged from the relationship with Jiangsu province?** It should be noted, once again, that economic opportunities are not measured in hard numbers, but rather in networking contacts made, exchanges of knowledge between companies and institutions, and deals made between entrepreneurs. As determined in chapter three, the hypothesis is that the local institutional bureaucratic effort positively impacts the economic opportunities that emerged from the provincial relationships with Jiangsu. Based on the liberal idea that nongovernmental organisations are important actors in diplomacy and on the idea that citizens within the region stand closer to nongovernmental organisations, I expect that the more effort and resources the different actors within the regions put in, the better the economic outcome is.

7.1 Noord-Brabant

With fifteen full-time employees, the international department of the province Noord-Brabant is relatively big for a Dutch province (Interview 3, 2022). China is one of the focus countries in Noord-Brabant's global policy, which explains why two to three full-time employees work on China (Noord-Brabant, 2022). And on top of that, since 2011, the province has had a permanent representative working at the NBSO in Nanjing. Their job is to present the interests of Noord-Brabant in Jiangsu and ensure that Brabant-based companies have a head start in doing business with Jiangsu-based companies (Interview 4, 2022). According to the interviewee of the province Noord-Brabant, the province's most important task is to lead all the information and knowledge in the right direction. Therefore, more and more focus is put on gaining knowledge about doing business with China (Interview 3, 2022). In addition, Noord-Brabant puts effort into researching how to give more context to the relationship. The initiative for cooperation usually comes from Jiangsu since their trade department is expected to engage with a certain number of foreign counterparts. In Noord-Brabant, however, much more time is spent finding how cooperation initiatives can be established that result in direct opportunities. "In China, establishing a relationship is usually the end goal, while we [in the Netherlands] see it as the beginning of collaboration" (Interview 4, 2022).

Besides the employees working for the provincial government and the resources spent on gaining knowledge of China, the Brabant Development Agency (BOM) plays an essential part in the institutional bureaucratic effort of the province. BOM is an executive body of the province Noord-Brabant and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy and focuses on entrepreneurship as the driver of change. The province has given the BOM the task to help establish economic relations. For Jiangsu, the province Noord-Brabant is the most important partner, and for the Jiangsu Department of Commerce, the BOM is the most important partner. Within the province, the BOM is in contact with the different

companies, surveys where their interests lie and how they would like to do business. The wishes and decisions of the companies in Noord-Brabant are leading in BOM's activity. Since the focus sectors in Noord-Brabant have remained the same over the years, the BOM has found that besides Taiwan, Jiangsu remains the most critical possible partner in Asia for companies from Noord-Brabant. Both the interviewee of the BOM and the interviewee of the province explain that the local institutional bureaucratic effort in Noord-Brabant is very much economically driven. The trade missions to Jiangsu, which were touched upon earlier in this thesis, are organised by the BOM, making the BOM the central bureaucratic coordinator in the network within Noord-Brabant (Interview 3, 2022; Interview 4, 2022).

7.2 The Moravian Silesian Region

Studying the local institutional bureaucratic of the Moravian Silesian Region, strikingly little information was found. In their research on Czech and Slovak local governments' ties to China, Šimalčík et al. (2021) wrote that these relations have mainly passed 'under the radar'. This statement stems from a lack of transparency in many of the Czech regions, among which also the Moravian Silesian Region: "Overall, however, it can be said that there is a lack of information about the partnerships, the agreements concluded, the delegations that were received and in turn visited China, as well as their specific agenda" (Šimalčík et al., 2021, p. 10). What we do know is that in the relationship between the Moravian Silesian Region and Jiangsu province governor Miroslav Novák played an important role. As a social democrat, he spearheaded the ties with China by being one of the co-chairs of the China-CEEC Association of Provincial Governors (Interview 1, 2022; Interview 2, 2022). In the relationship with Jiangsu province, his personal role was vital (Novák, 2013). When he left his role in 2016, no other governor took up his position, showing us that the social democrats were a leading force in decentral diplomacy with China. Besides the personal role of governor Novák, a lack of transparency tells us that local institutional bureaucratic effort can only, to a small extent be found in the Moravian Silesian Region.

In addition, research has found that in various regions in Czechia, the management of contacts with Chinese partners was outsourced to private actors (Šimalčík et al., 2021, p. 4). In personal email contact with the international relations section of the region, I learned that the main objectives of the Moravian Silesian Region in the relationship with Jiangsu are to establish cooperation between specific entities of the regions (Interview 5, 2022). The specific bureaucratic efforts were not specified in the interview. Also, even though the province hosts the Moravian-Silesian Innovation Centre (MSIC) and is one of its' five shareholders, the development agency does not state anything about working on international relations (Moravian-Silesian Innovation Centre Ostrava, 2020). When answering the question of what economic opportunities have arisen out of the relationship with Jiangsu province, the contact person of the international relations section of the region answers that there are no such opportunities (Interview 5, 2022).

7.3 Comparison and chapter conclusion

Studying the case of Noord-Brabant, here I see how the regional development agency BOM is essential for the local institutional bureaucratic effort in the decentral relationship with Jiangsu. Since the efforts of Noord-Brabant are economically driven, the BOM is mostly in contact with the Jiangsu Department of Commerce. The local institutional bureaucratic efforts of Noord-Brabant positively affect the economic opportunities that emerge from the provincial relationship with Jiangsu. For example, BOM (2019) states that the 2019 trade mission to Jiangsu led to 116 new matches, which will be built on both in the short term and long term. One of the reasons for this is the effort of people working on the relationship at the provincial government, the representative office in Nanjing, and the BOM office. As a result, the knowledge of doing business with China increases, allowing Brabant-based companies to connect to the right counterparts. The second reason the local institutional bureaucratic effort positively impacts the economic opportunities that emerge from the relationship with Jiangsu is that the BOM thoroughly researches what companies from Noord-Brabant look for in a trade partner. BOM's activity revolves around companies' wishes, and because of this, the BOM can quickly make a connection when a request is received from Jiangsu. Due to the open communication, various entities know what Brabant-based companies need and can therefore quickly refer to them when a business opportunity arises.

In the Moravian Silesian Region, however, I found little sign of local institutional bureaucratic effort when it comes to the relationship with Jiangsu province. As Šimalčík et al. (2021) rightly state, decentral relationships with Chinese partners in Czechia remain largely 'under the radar'. Transparency is lacking, and it seems as if the relationship between the Moravian Silesian Region and Jiangsu mainly was a personal effort of governor Novák during his time in office. One of the most noteworthy findings of this chapter is that the contact person of the international relations section of the region stated that he was not aware of any economic opportunities that emerged from the relationship with Jiangsu (Interview 5, 2022). Considering the little bureaucratic coordination between the regional government and the development agency MSIC, we may wonder: is it true that no economic opportunities have arisen, or does the contact person not know of these opportunities simply because communication between the parties in the region is lacking?

This chapter aimed to answer the following question: To what extent does the local institutional bureaucratic effort of Noord-Brabant and the Moravian Silesian Region influence the economic opportunities that emerged from the relationship with Jiangsu province? As stated in chapter three, the local institutional bureaucratic effort was expected to positively impact the economic opportunities that emerged from the provincial relationship with Jiangsu. Particularly in the interviews conducted, I found a high degree of local institutional bureaucratic effort in Noord-Brabant, resulting in more business opportunities with counterparts in Jiangsu province. The knowledge of the people working on China, as well as the efforts of the BOM that closely align with the wishes of the Brabant-based companies, are leading factors in this. Contrarily, since there is a lack of transparency within the Moravian Silesian

Region and their development agency does not seem to have international relations with China as a priority, I have reason to say that no economic opportunities emerge. Therefore, it is fair to say that the expectations as determined in chapter three are valid: a high degree of local institutional bureaucratic effort leads to more economic opportunities emerging from the provincial relationship with Jiangsu.

8. Discussion & Conclusion

In this final chapter, I will summarize and interpret the results of the three analytical chapters, after which I will make conclusive remarks. The chapter is structured as follows: first, I will restate the research question and objectives of the study; secondly, the limitations of the thesis research will be presented. Then, a discussion of the results will be done, and a connection to the literature review will be made; and finally, I will provide a conclusive argument as well as some suggestions for further research on the topic.

8.1 Research question and objectives of the study

The thesis aimed to answer this research puzzle:

This paper compares the economic opportunities that emerged from two European regions' provincial relationship with China's Jiangsu province: Noord-Brabant in the Netherlands and the Moravian Silesian Region in Czechia. It asks how the domestic state-local political dynamism influences such opportunities. In this thesis, I particularly investigate the impact of three factors on the economic opportunities that emerge from the relationship with Jiangsu province: the extent of central-local coordination on China policy, the institutional structure of the regional relationships, and the local institutional bureaucratic effort.

The goal of the thesis was to understand which factors contribute positively to the economic opportunities for the two European regions in the provincial relationship with the Chinese region Jiangsu. The research was conducted as a comparative case study using a most similar systems design. The three factors in the research puzzle are the independent variables that differ between Noord-Brabant and the Moravian Silesian Region. These three were expected to explain why the economic opportunities that emerged from the relationship with Jiangsu differ. By doing a combination of desk research and semi-structured interviews with scholars and policy officers from the two European regions, I analyzed the decentral relationships and the economic opportunities that emerge from them.

8.2 Limitations of the research

Before drawing conclusions and interpreting the findings, I will shortly discuss some limitations of this research. The first limitation is that as a researcher from the Netherlands, speaking Dutch but not Czech, it was more feasible to gain knowledge on the relationship between Noord-Brabant and Jiangsu than on the relationship between the Moravian Silesian Region and Jiangsu. Both my prior knowledge of the international strategy of the province Noord-Brabant and the network I have gained through my academic career positively contributed to gathering data on Noord-Brabant – Jiangsu relations. While the interviews on the relationship between the Moravian Silesian Region and Jiangsu were highly insightful, gaining knowledge elsewhere proved to be much more limited. Nevertheless, enough data was gathered to answer the three sub-questions of the study.

The second limitation of this study is an external factor impacting the ability for exchange between regions. While decentral diplomacy is very much based on traveling to meet each other to have fruitful conversations, the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, 2021, and 2022 negatively impacted the ability to engage in this. Even though this is the case for both the European regions, the impact of the pandemic was likely different in Noord-Brabant and the Moravian Silesian Region. Unfortunately, due to time and data constraints, this external factor could not be accounted for in the analytical chapters of this research. However, it is important to note that regional governments are very much dependent on their national governments when it comes to restrictions during the pandemic, and, as Bailey et al. (2020) write, “the virus’s impact has been unevenly distributed geographically.”

8.3 Interpretation of the findings

This thesis analysed the impact of three specific factors on the economic opportunities that emerge from the provincial relationship with Jiangsu. Since this is a most similar systems design, the three factors that function as independent variables are dissimilar between Noord-Brabant and the Moravian Silesian Region.

Studying the first factor, the central-local coordination on China policy, the main observation is that in the Netherlands, there is a high degree of central-local coordination because the policy aims of the national and provincial governments overlap. Here, business opportunities were found specifically in the sectors in which the national and Brabant governments overlap, showing that this central-local coordination works as an extra push for Brabant-based companies. In Czechia, however, neither the national government nor a multilateral alternative like the 16+1 positively influenced the central-local coordination. Within the 16+1 Initiative, Czechia is a passive player, which gives us reason to think that the overlap in focus sectors, and therefore business opportunities, is a coincidence rather than a strategic decision. This thesis’ research suggests that the central-local coordination on China policy can be a valuable, but not essential, factor for gaining economic opportunities.

When interpreting the second factor, which is the institutional structure of the regional relationships, I see that cooperation between the provincial government and the municipal governments is critical. In Noord-Brabant, which has nine municipalities with a sister city tied to a municipality in Jiangsu, quarterly meetings allow for fruitful knowledge exchange. Also, there is the opportunity to refer to each other when doing business. Contrarily, in the Moravian Silesian Region, this is not the case. Even more so, this region partners with other Chinese decentral governments, showing a lack of institutional focus on Jiangsu. In line with the hypothesis, this chapter found that, based on these cases, a high degree of institutional structure is beneficial for economic opportunities since Chinese business partners can find their European equivalents easily and targeted.

The last factor studied is the local institutional bureaucratic effort. Here, I mainly researched the effort of economic development organisations within the region and the people actively working on the

provincial relationship between the two regions. For example, in Noord-Brabant, the regional development agency BOM plays a big part in the relationship with China since they are in direct contact with the business sector in Brabant and are responsible for making trade links. In the Moravian Silesian Region, on the other hand, researchers describe the decentral relationship with Chinese partners as being ‘under the radar’, meaning that there is little transparency to be found (Šimalčík et al., 2021). Even though the MSIC is active in the Moravian Silesian Region, transparency on international efforts is lacking. I found that Brabant-based companies were very enthusiastic about the opportunities given through the BOM and that in the Moravian Silesian Region the policy officer saw no opportunities at all. This shows us, that the local institutional bureaucratic effort is extremely important for the region's economic opportunities.

8.4 Concluding remarks and recommendations for further research

This thesis studied the determinants of good interstate relations looking at the local level. In earlier chapters, I theorized that local governments are semi-independent and are crucial for the functional of the complete economic system, that within regions there is a complex system of interdependence, and that nonstate actors make relevant decisions because local governments are closer to citizens. Focusing on the cases of Noord-Brabant and the Moravian Silesian Region in their relation with Jiangsu, out of the three determinants studied the institutional structure of the regional relationships and the local institutional bureaucratic effort are most defining in gaining economic opportunities from Jiangsu. Interestingly, out of the three factors, the regions have most influence on these two factors. The central-local coordination, or a guiding strategy, is much harder to change while also staying true to the core of the region. Therefore, for a region to enhance their economic opportunities from their decentral relationship with a Chinese region, this thesis found two factors to focus on. First, being a guiding partner to cities within the region and supporting them in their foreign activity within the specific region. Second, setting up or supporting a development agency that can function as the main link between the companies in your region and the Chinese region.

To go back to the academic debates presented in the literature review, this study was able to contribute new insights and confirm and contradict some of the academic assessments. Referring to the literature on states and nonstate actors, this thesis has particularly shown how the role of the nonstate, or region, differs between Czechia and the Netherlands. Even though the regions Noord-Brabant and the Moravian Silesian Region are comparable in several aspects, in the Netherlands, the region takes a much more leading role in supporting the business sector. But also, both cases have shown how the region is often better approachable for citizens than the national government. The open conversations with the interviewees of this thesis reinforced this claim. Also, in the literature review, the motivation behind China's diplomacy was discussed. Even though it is challenging to make conclusions based on this research only, in decentral diplomacy with Noord-Brabant and the Moravian Silesian Region, the province Jiangsu took a reasonably active position. Jiangsu province actively reached out to both

European regions and even does so indirectly, such as via national or multinational channels. This hints somewhat more at Jiangsu province having a wolf warrior strategy. Nonetheless, one of the interviewees of the province Noord-Brabant explained that for the Chinese side, the main goal is usually to complete the partnership agreement, while on the Dutch side that is only the beginning of the strategy. The actual economic or political outcome is what matters most.

Finally, future research is needed on relations between Chinese and European regions. Setting the research in a different setting or context may give new findings on the potential for economic opportunities in European regions. For example, is Jiangsu province typical within China, or do other provinces set up collaborations much differently? Next to that, to build on this thesis, a future researcher could expand the knowledge by studying the decentral relations from the Chinese side, which is expected to give a broader insight into China's aim with decentral diplomacy. How is Jiangsu province institutionally organised, and where are opportunities for the European regions? Future research could lay an even bigger focus on the business sectors and also interview business people from the big Brabant- or Moravia Silesia-based companies. In that way, I expect to get a more neutral opinion on the long-term effects of trade missions or exchanges with Jiangsu province.

9. Appendices

9.1 Overview of municipal relations within the provincial relationship between the Moravian Silesian Region and Jiangsu Province

Moravian Silesian Region – Jiangsu		Status
Ostrava	Suzhou	Terminated

9.2 Overview of the municipal relations within the provincial relationship between the province Noord-Brabant and Jiangsu Province

Noord-Brabant – Jiangsu		Status
Boxmeer	Xishan District, Wuxi	Active
Breda	Yangzhou	Active
Cuijk	Jintan District, Changzhou	Active
Eindhoven	Nanjing	Active
Helmond	Zhenjiang	Active
Den Bosch	Wuxi	Active
Oosterhout	Chongchuan District, Nantong	Active
Oss	Taizhou	Active
Tilburg	Changzhou	Active

9.3 Overview of interviews conducted

Date	Interview	Organisation	Citation
March 4 th 2022	China Research Fellow	Association for International Affairs (AMO), Prague	Interview 1
March 4 th 2022	China Research Fellow	Central European Institute of Asian Studies, Bratislava	Interview 2
March 8 th 2022	Economy and Internationalization advisor	Province Noord-Brabant	Interview 3
March 16 th 2022	Project Manager China Trade	BOM	Interview 4
March 24 th 2022	International Relations Officer	Moravian Silesian Region	Interview 5

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