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**Duisburg and Its Partnerships  
with China and Wuhan:  
An “All-Weather” Friendly Relationship  
amidst Contemporary Crises?**

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GIULIA C. ROMANO / MARKUS TAUBE

## **Duisburg and Its Partnerships with China and Wuhan: An “All-Weather” Friendly Relationship amidst Contemporary Crises?**

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**WORKING PAPERS ON EAST ASIAN STUDIES, NO. 138, DUISBURG 2024**

### **Abstract**

Duisburg was the first German city to establish official relations with a Chinese city, Wuhan. Less out of strategic calculation or recognition of the global significance of China's reform and opening-up policy, but rather thanks to their common industrial roots in the steel industry, the two cities entered an exchange in 1982. In the following two decades, Duisburg supported Wuhan's development with technical, administrative, and economic assistance, while the latter committed itself primarily in a symbolic fashion to the partnership. Then, after a period of reduced intensity, the partnership was strengthened anew in the early 2010s. Committed to the initiative of reviving the ancient Silk Road, Duisburg subsequently made this connection with Wuhan, and more generally with China, its distinctive brand. The partnership still exists, despite the significant changes that occurred in the international and national context in the very recent years, and above all in China. The city of Duisburg is firm in maintaining an open-door policy and upholding its ties with Wuhan, thereby deviating from the current mainstream of German and EU orientation. This paper explores the components and characteristics of this seemingly “all-weather” friendly relationship, namely its origins, actors, reasons, and objectives through a historical perspective. It looks first at the very beginning of the partnership with Wuhan, allowing for a better understanding of the history of this city's commitment to China. Then, it addresses the 2010s, a period in which relations between Duisburg and its Chinese partners have significantly intensified. Finally, it covers the contemporary period, illustrating how the city has adapted its relations with China to the enormous upheavals caused by the politico-economic developments in China, the Covid-19 pandemic, the current war in Ukraine, and the pressures of the domestic and international contexts.

## INTRODUCTION

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City partnerships, or 'sister city' initiatives, or 'town twinning' as they have been called respectively in the United States and in the UK, are a post-World War II phenomenon that emerged in Western Europe to later spread in the rest of the world. In a paper dedicated to the origins and diffusion of sister cities, Wilbur Zelinsky (1991: 3) defined them as theoretically long-lasting "formal agreements" made by "local officials but occasionally by ad hoc citizen groups" aimed at "a variety of shared activities, all presumably serving the overall objective of advancing mutual understanding and friendship". He further specified the contents of these partnerships, which beyond official visits of local dignitaries and businessmen, include various sport and cultural events; the travelling of people linked to the world of culture and of science; the organization of festivals as well as school exchanges; the provision of aid measures when needed; "and a basically one-way flow of advice, information, equipment, and other types of assistance when the pairing is between an advanced community and a less-developed one" (*ibid.*). City partnerships represented a sort of "organized phenomenon" in Western Europe, following a series of models established by a variety of organizations (Clarke 2011). Some promoted the European unity and bonds among European cities, based on common religious and ideological roots. Others, on the contrary, proposed to build bridges between the two sides of the Iron Curtain, to foster exchanges among culturally and ideologically diverse worlds (*ibid.*). Later, following the independence of third-world countries, other forms of partnership have emerged. City partnerships thus multiplied over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and extended their geographical reach beyond Western Europe.

The connections that the city of Duisburg established with its sister cities represent no exception or deviation to these broader trends. Early partnerships with the city of Portsmouth in the

UK, established in 1950, or with the city of Calais in France, of 1964, shared the objective of promoting the reconciliation of peoples who until a few years before had faced each other in war, and supported the idea of European unity to avert a new devastating conflict in the heart of Europe. The partnerships established in the following decades, first with Lomé (Togo) in 1973, then with Wuhan (China) in 1982, and then again with Vilnius (once in the Soviet Union, today in Lithuania) in 1985, aimed at bringing culturally and ideologically different peoples together, following the transformations that occurred in those years in Africa and in the communist world.<sup>1</sup> Those with Lomé and Wuhan, in particular, illustrated well the "one-way flow of advice" from "an advanced community" to "a less-developed one", as the components of social and economic development, as well as of assistance were a central focus behind their foundation.

In this paper we will zoom in on Duisburg's relationship with Wuhan. This was the first twinning ever made between a Chinese and a German city. Instituted after the introduction of the famous policy of "reform and opening up" in China (Qian 2000), this partnership aimed at "opening the doors to give space to economic commitment", as the Lord Mayor of Duisburg of the time, Josef Krings, put it (NRZ 1982). In other words, economic cooperation was at the heart of this relationship. This began with technical assistance programs for Wuhan, in the spirit of assisting China in its modernization process. It was then extended to other forms of cooperation, although their realization did not always prove simple. Nevertheless, despite the challenges, the exchanges between the two cities were maintained and diversified, strengthening their 'friendship'

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1 Further city partnerships were concluded in the more recent past: Gaziantep/Turkey (2005), Perm/Russia (2007), San Pedro Sula/Honduras (2008), Fort Lauderdale/USA (2011).

over the years. This has proved to be particularly solid in the recent times of crisis, first with the Covid-19 pandemic, and then with the Russian invasion in Ukraine, not to mention the detection of the serious violation of human rights against the Uyghur minority in the Chinese province of Xinjiang.

For its resilience and its evolutions, the case of this partnership is worth telling. It is particularly interesting to observe how, over time, the situation of the two cities has reversed, always giving reasons to maintain this connection. From an important economic centre, largely centred on the coal and steel industry, Duisburg dramatically lost its importance, weakened by the globalization and the restructuring of the German economy. If in the 1980s the at-the-time Lord Mayor spoke of assisting Wuhan with technical and managerial knowledge, and helping local companies to invest in China, today the current Lord Mayor talks about the need to attract new investors and talents, including from China. Interestingly, until not so long ago, he also stated that he wanted Duisburg to learn from China, especially for its developments in urban digitalization. Against this background, Wuhan represented and continues to represent an important partner for Duisburg, having developed into a major industrial centre. Therefore, yesterday as today, the two cities seem to have solid reasons for continuing their dialogue, even if this has not always led to the desired results, at least for the city of Duisburg, from the viewpoint of which this relationship is observed.

This paper describes the contours and evolutions of this partnership, which we cautiously define as an 'all-weather' friendly relationship, capable of withstanding the appalling events that characterized the end of the last century and those of our century. This continuity is due to the choices of the political leaderships that have governed the city of Duisburg, and in particular to the policy of the long-lasting Lord Mayor Josef Krings and its legacies; to the work of the local administration, which over time has equipped itself with various means and personnel to support and strengthen the relations with China; and to the commitment of the local industry and its representations, which in recent times has proved to be the main driver of the relations with China. To illustrate these points, we will dwell on the characteristics of this relationship, exploring its origins, its protagonists, its reasons, and its objectives. We will adopt a historical perspective, reconstructing the stages of this town twinning from its beginnings and the context within which these events unfolded. The analysis draws on various historical and more contemporary documents held in the archives and in the Office of International Relations of the city of Duisburg, and interviews with representatives of Duisburg city government, local industry, and other informed people, which helped in the reconstruction or provided information about the contemporary times. In this reconstruction, the activities directed towards promoting knowledge transfers and economic exchanges have been privileged, as they constituted important foci of this relationship.

## FROM A "STRANGE" BEGINNING TO A RUNNING PARTNERSHIP: THE 1980s–2000s

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"The partnership between Duisburg and Wuhan was not like all the others we had, so with Portsmouth or with Calais. The exchanges with them were very intense, very warm. With Wuhan it was a strange partnership". This is how a historian of

the city archives greeted our request to study the documents on Duisburg's twinning with Wuhan. After two decades of intense cultural and political exchanges with two European cities, which went well beyond formal governmental con-

tacts, and a few years of experience in partnering cities of the Third World like Lomé, in 1979 the administration of Duisburg received a formal request of twinning from Wuhan (Pilger 2022). Wuhan’s choice of Duisburg was not accidental: the German city had already been known to China for some years. Between 1972 and 1982, the local companies Mannesmann-Demag, Krupp Industrietechnik and Thyssen Consulting helped set up together with Siemag/Schloeman, an equipment manufacturer from the nearby city of Düsseldorf, a large iron and steel mill in Wuhan, the realization of which was discussed in the mid-1960s (*ibid.*). More than 300 engineers and their families – mostly from Duisburg – were sent to Wuhan to accompany the construction (Duisburger Journal 1984). This collaboration and the advanced German industrial knowledge were the most likely reasons that prompted Wuhan’s administration to seek a partnership with Duisburg. Wuhan’s Mayor at that time, Li Zhi, wanted more contacts with Germany with the precise scope of importing invaluable know-how (WAZ 1982).

The request was well received by the city of Duisburg, and its highest representatives agreed to organize a first official visit to Wuhan (Krings 2000). This occurred in late 1982. Beyond the Lord Mayor and the *Oberstadtdirektor*,<sup>2</sup> the delegation was composed by the president of the local Chamber of Industry and Commerce, the Rector of the University of Duisburg, and the representatives of Duisburg’s main companies. As various documents of the time testify, including an official speech by Josef Krings, even Duisburg’s city administration and industry saw major commercial and economic chances in this connection with China:

I saw in the China partnership the opportunity to give official support to my city’s economy with the “municipal foreign policy”. And the representatives of our business community encouraged me in this; they saw in this partnership a key that could open the doors to desired orders from a Chinese market that was catching up (Krings 1986).<sup>3</sup>

Three main reasons explain this decision. The first is Josef Krings’s hallmark “municipal foreign policy” for Duisburg. A representative of the local Social-Democratic Party (SPD) who governed the city for more than twenty years, from 1975 to 1997, Krings argued that an important city and economic centre for steel production like Duisburg should have a foreign policy, allowing it to increase its clout in economic, political, social and cultural affairs, and to best serve its citizens and companies. Second, an awareness was emerging that this centrality could be lost if the city remained passive, since the steel sector was undergoing important transformations.<sup>4</sup> Third, the historical situation also favoured the establishment of this partnership. In addition to the reform and opening-up policy launched by the Chinese government in the late 1970s, Germany was experiencing difficulties with its economy. Existing structural problems, especially in the heavy industry, combined with a global economic downturn, particularly hit the city of Duisburg (Pilger 2022). If until then the commercial partners of the city were based in the West, with their demand falling, the local administration and industry thought it well to explore the opportunities that China, with its dynamic modernization and urbanization processes, could offer (Krings 1989). This partnership was thence established with a clear economic direction. Lord Mayor Krings himself defined it as a “marriage of convenience without that kind of love that is known to make one blind” (RP 1985).<sup>5</sup> Coopera-

2 Abolished in the late 1990s, the position of *Oberstadtdirektor* was introduced in West Germany in 1945 in cities under British occupation. The *Oberstadtdirektor*, who was as important as the mayor, had the task of managing all matters pertinent to the work of the administration. Today these duties have been merged with those of the mayor (“*Oberbürgermeister*” in German).

3 Free translation from German.

4 Interview City archives – December 2022.

5 Free translation from German.

tion priorities were fixed in the “areas of economy, trade, science, technology, culture, education, health and city administration as well as in other areas of common interest in a variety of forms and on a broad spectrum” (Duisburg City Government 1982). The visit in Wuhan was the occasion to put these priorities on paper, with the signing of an agreement on 8 October 1982, which officially sealed the twinning between the two cities.

The steps that followed went precisely in the direction of favouring the transfer of know-how to Wuhan, while exploring commercial opportunities. Already in the spring of 1983, a business delegation from Wuhan visited Duisburg to learn about the local companies’ potential contributions in terms of technical know-how (Duisburger Journal 1984). In the same year, eight engineers from Wuhan moved to Duisburg to be trained in the local companies of the steel sector for circa a year (Duisburg City Government 1987). They were the first in a series of short study visits or longer training periods that were realized throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Participants not only included engineers, but also company directors, business administrators, port personnel, government officials, doctors, and many other professionals. Also in 1983, the first German experts were sent to Wuhan through a dedicated technical support program under the auspices of the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation of the time (WAZ 1983). Called *Senior-Experten-Beratungsservice* (consulting services from senior experts), or *Senior-Experten-Service* for short (SES), the program employed retired highly skilled workers or engineers to transfer know-how to developing countries. Duisburg participated in this initiative by sending, over the years, dozens of retired experts to Wuhan, to act as consultants in various local companies for a few months, but also to acquire commercial orders for Duisburg industries (RP 1984).

It is worth dwelling for a moment on this initiative. The city archives are full of documents detailing the goals of the SES, the services it

offered, the financial support it obtained, as well as information about the participants, and their reports of activities. In Wuhan the initiative focused on the modernization of small and medium-sized industries in different sectors of production. Services were also offered in the field of infrastructure improvement, financial management and modernization of the city administration (Duisburg City Government 1987). Particularly interesting is the story of one such retiree, Werner Gerich, who was 65 when he was first sent to Wuhan to help a factory producing small diesel engines (RP 1984). He was to stay only a few months, but his work proved so important that the company offered him the position of manager. For his significant contribution, the Chinese government decided to grant him honorary citizenship, making of him the third foreigner in the history of the PRC to obtain such an honour (WAZ 1985a).

But the work of Werner Gerich and of other retired experts sent to Wuhan was not acclaimed by everybody in Germany. Some representatives of industry claimed that such assistance programs were giving away valuable technical knowledge and experience as well as management experience (*ibid.*). Probably already at the time there were fears that China could soon become an industrial competitor.<sup>6</sup> Josef Krings himself, a few years after the beginning of the partnership, expressed concerns of this sort. In his words: “Chinese politeness has its pitfalls. And when the Chinese say they want to learn from us, they’ve already tricked us” (NRZ 1985). In fact, in addition to the transfer of know-how to China, the training of Chinese personnel and some cordial visits of convenience, the partnership did not seem to take off as hoped. Even though Duisburg’s industry could offer the technologies, skills and capabilities Wuhan needed for the construction and modernization of its infrastructures and industries, cooperation was still far from having satisfied its expectations

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<sup>6</sup> Interview City Archives – December 2022.



(RP 1985; Pilger 2022). During an official delegation visit from Wuhan, in 1985, Josef Krings expressly stated to his visitors that their desire to share the expertise of Duisburg’s experts was paralleled by Duisburg’s desire to secure jobs.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Duisburg companies wanted orders for specific industrial projects, which not only would have transferred knowledge, but also provided work for their experts and engineers.

However, Duisburg’s administration and industry did not lose hope in the partnership. Instead, in the following years they tried to increase their efforts to tap the much-desired commercial potential, while continuing the transfer of knowledge. Notably, in 1987 the University of Duisburg concluded a cooperation agreement with the two most prestigious universities of Wuhan: the Huazhong Technical University, and later also with the University of Wuhan. These efforts were made on the one hand to build knowledge about East Asian economics in Duisburg, and on the other hand to provide support in research and teaching on metallurgical technology in Wuhan.<sup>8</sup> In the same year, representatives of Duisburg’s city administration, university and industry founded the Company for maintenance of the Duisburg-Wuhan city partnership (*Gesellschaft zur Pflege der Städtepartnerschaft Duisburg-Wuhan*), with the aim of deepening and expanding exchanges, and supporting them financially. The city archives conserve several reports of their meetings, where various initiatives were discussed to intensify the economic and cultural relations with China. One of them was the opening and financing of a representative office for the city of Duisburg in Wuhan, in 1989. A person external to the administration, Dr. Thomas Weyrauch, was hired to manage this office. He remained in Wuhan until 1990 and was followed in 1994 by Johnny Erling, a former correspondent in China, who managed the office until 1997.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Their monthly reports document the manifold efforts made to help German companies collect information about the industrial needs in Wuhan, invest in China and establish joint ventures or to make agreements with the Wuhan government or local enterprises to carry out various projects or supply materials.<sup>9</sup> Industry also moved to multiply the opportunities for Duisburg (and more broadly German) companies in China.

The results of these efforts are nevertheless indeterminate. Press articles wrote about the chances for Duisburg companies to help in large infrastructure projects or to sell products in sectors where the German industry had a technical advantage, but also about lengthy negotiations with Chinese companies and authorities, and the need to be patient and wait, because the fruits of the relationship with China would take a long time to grow (e.g. NRZ 1984a; NRZ 1987b). But eventually neither the city archives nor the interviews with the administrative personnel having insights on this partnership could offer conclusive information of what it had been possible to achieve on the business side. A few notable successes were nonetheless recorded. The press reported on large industrial and infrastructural projects in which German companies actively participated, such as the construction of a new metallurgical plant by Thyssen and Mannesmann-Demag (NRZ 1987b; NRZ 1992). In one of his speeches, Josef Krings mentioned the signature of some joint venture contracts (Krings 1989). However, the Chinese market was not only coveted by Duisburg and its industries. Soon, other German cities started moving with a variety of initiatives, including establishing partnerships with other Chinese cities and opening China Offices (WAZ 1985b). Others competed to

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<sup>9</sup> The reports are also rich in information about the organization of various exchange activities, which starting from the late 1980s also intensified the cultural component (e.g. through the construction of a Chinese garden for the zoo of Duisburg and the construction of a dolphinarium in Wuhan, etc.) and the scientific component.

host Chinese economic representation offices. And German *Bundesländer* started to promote their companies in Wuhan, trying to get a foothold in the big projects planned by the city. The possibilities of Duisburg to serve as a “door opener” for China, as one can often read in the official communiqués of the local government and in the press of the time (RP 1988), collided with a reality where many in Germany – and in Europe too – were setting foot in China.

### **A CRISIS OVERCOME: THE DUISBURG-WUHAN PARTNERSHIP IN THE AFTERMATH OF TIAN'ANMEN SQUARE MASSACRE**

This struggle to gain access and visibility in the Chinese market was abruptly interrupted by the events that shook China in June 1989. The Tian'anmen Square protests, and the deadly violence that followed in Beijing and in other cities, put the relationship with Wuhan in question. Many, from local parties to local civil society associations and individual citizens, asked for the relations with Wuhan to be ended or for the relationship to be rethought. But in the aftermath of the tragedy, Josef Krings declared that the partnership should be maintained as a symbol of openness (NRZ 1989a). This was the official policy followed by the Duisburg government, despite the uneasiness of the decision (RP 1989). All official delegation visits were interrupted, while the planned festival dedicated to China (the “China week”) was converted into an opportunity to discuss together with representatives of the civil society the events of 4 June and China's general political, social and economic situation (NRZ 1989b).<sup>10</sup> Only study trips were allowed (NRZ 1990). And after a few months spent in Duisburg following the events of June 1989, Dr. Weyrauch was sent to Wuhan again to take care of university exchanges and professionals training (RP 1989).<sup>11</sup>

10 Interview City Archives – December 2022.

An act of pragmatism dictated by economic interests, or perhaps an act of diplomatic acumen, this ‘open door’ policy proved useful to address sensitive questions with the partners in Wuhan. For instance, during the study trip of a delegation of legal experts from Wuhan, in October 1990, Josef Krings helped a local representative of Amnesty International to meet the visitors, talk to them and give them a list of names of political prisoners arrested in Wuhan after the events in Tian'anmen Square (NRZ 1990). He also committed personally for the release of some political prisoners (RP 1991; RP 1992). Moreover, since the reopening of the relations with China in the early 1990s, he tried to introduce political themes during the official visits and exchanged confidential bilateral correspondence with the authorities in Wuhan, focusing on the release of prisoners and the question of human rights.<sup>12</sup>

However, seen from the outside, his political commitment was rather ambivalent, especially as business projects resumed in 1992,<sup>13</sup> together with official visits (RP 1992). As a matter of fact, during an official delegation visit in Wuhan to sign an order for the delivery of a steel plant, Krings avoided handing over a petition for the release of a scientist (NRZ 1992). In the same year, the two cities agreed on the organization of an economic symposium to help their companies discuss the possibilities to jointly implement specific industrial projects. This was followed by two similar events respectively in 1994 and 1996. Moreover, some German com-

11 Dr. Weyrauch later published a rather disillusioned account of his life in Wuhan during these years titled “*Graue Stahlstadt China. Tagebuch aus Wuhan 1989–1990*” [Grey steel-city China. Diary from Wuhan 1989–1990] (Bochum/Brockmeyer, 1991). The publication became a reason of conflict with the administration in Duisburg, who tried to always maintain a diplomatic tone in its official discourse on China.

12 *Ibid.*

13 In 1992, reform-oriented forces within the CCP returned to power and relaunched the country's marketization process.

panies, including Siemens, opened their branches in Wuhan (NRZ 1995). Already planned at the end of the 1980s (Krings 1989), in 1992 Wuhan also opened a representation office in Duisburg, which was also intended to help foster economic and cultural exchanges. This was established within Duisburg’s economic development agency, a fact that signals the strong economic orientation of the office.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, even after 1989, Duisburg’s policy vis-a-vis Wuhan continued to be primarily guided by economic interests. Nevertheless, the nature of the exchanges also diversified, and it is particularly in the 1990s that the other themes of the partnership, such as cultural, sport and school exchanges were significantly advanced. There were also several initiatives to assist the city of Wuhan, which was frequently affected by floods. This suggests that, in many respects, the twinning with Wuhan largely matched Wilbur Zelinsky’s (1991) description of city partnerships. If civil society exchanges were barely developed – in comparison with other city partnerships, notably with Portsmouth and Calais – it nonetheless cannot be said that other aspects of the partnership had been overlooked.

As a matter of fact, the 1980s and the 1990s, at least until 1997, can be recorded as the most intense years of the relationship between Duisburg and Wuhan. In this regard, the continuity of policy and government of Josef Krings, who was mayor of Duisburg for the entire period between 1975 and 1997, was a trump card. We cannot know if, throughout this period, he maintained the same position vis-à-vis the partnership with Wuhan, as he unfortunately passed away in 2019. But the speeches he gave in the 1980s seem to lend support to this hypothesis. The following words are very revealing: “if we have enough patience, in the long term, Duisburg can get the same place Düsseldorf has for trade with Japan in the trade with China” (NRZ 1984b;

see also Krings 1986, 1989).<sup>15</sup> The agency of the two Duisburg representatives living in Wuhan, as well as of the three representatives of Wuhan in Duisburg was also important. Working at the front lines in contacting companies, in looking for needs and opportunities, in studying the local situation and writing reports and studies for the administration, they provided invaluable input to government agencies in the two cities. Mention should also be made of the staff of the Duisburg city administration. The administrative records preserved in the city archives testify to the work of the *Oberstadtdirektoren* and of their co-workers in making the various facets of the partnership work. Several files collect studies on China’s economy, its culture, its political system, giving an idea of the means that these administrators used to better understand their very distant partners. The city government’s engagement with China was also mirrored by the local University of Duisburg, which in 1994 established a transdisciplinary *Institute of East Asian Studies* to deepen the locally available knowledge of economic, political and social developments in contemporary China and Japan. As a proof of the importance of China (and more broadly East Asia) to Josef Krings, the former mayor also became a member and then chairman of the Institute’s Advisory Council.

## THE PARTNERSHIP AFTER JOSEF KRINGS

Various exchange activities with Wuhan were maintained in the period following the end of Josef Krings’ mandate in 1997. But the level of engagement with the partnership was significantly reduced. Another SPD representative, Bärbel Zieling, was elected as Lord Mayor and governed until 2004. Unlike her predecessor,

14 Interview City Government – December 2022.

15 Starting from the 1980s, Düsseldorf became known as the informal capital of Japanese firms in Europe, as many located their European headquarters in the city. As a result, a substantial ‘Japan-oriented’ infrastructure was established, which encompasses banks, restaurants, shops, and other facilities.

Zieling did not attach much importance to city partnerships.<sup>16</sup> No new twinning was introduced, while the existing ones were not particularly cultivated;<sup>17</sup> or they went ahead 'as usual', with visits from various delegations, some school exchanges, and some joint cultural events. The Duisburg representative office in Wuhan and that of Wuhan in Duisburg were closed in 1997, lacking supporting funding. The title of a newspaper article that appeared in 1999, two years after the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the partnership is, in this regard, revealing: "after the anniversary, things got quieter" (NRZ 1999), signalling that nothing special was really happening. The files of the city archives also testify to this 'stillness': between the beginning of the 2000s and 2012, the administration collected very few newspaper clippings, seeming to indicate that relations between Wuhan and Duisburg had lost public relevance. This lack of interest is quite curious, since in those same years China experienced rapid economic growth and greatly expanded its international business links after having acceded to the World Trade Organization in 2001. Despite the existence of well-established links into China's political and economic spheres, the city government did not take any specific initiative to promote an intensification of bilateral business relations. These developments signalled a break with the former municipal foreign policy as inaugurated by Josef Krings, which aimed at making Duisburg a centre and facilitator of China business for industry in the city and the Ruhr Area as a whole, and a retreat towards more 'domestic' matters.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, with the coming of Bärbel Zieling's successor there was a return to a proactive foreign relations policy. Elected in 2004

by a black-green coalition (Christian Democrats and Greens), Adolf Sauerland reignited Josef Krings' municipal foreign policy, inaugurating a series of new partnerships with the cities of Perm, Gaziantep, and Fort Lauderdale.<sup>19</sup> Cultural exchanges were particularly central in his foreign policy, but economic relations were also not disregarded.<sup>20</sup> To strengthen cultural and social exchanges with China, he supported the foundation of the Confucius Institute Metropolis Ruhr, which is also directly sponsored by the city of Duisburg, as well as by the University of Duisburg-Essen and the University of Wuhan. Adolf Sauerland also tried to attract Chinese investors and talents to the city, promoting the opening of a Sino-European centre "Gate to Asia" that would offer products and services to the existing and potential Chinese community.<sup>21</sup> However, after years of negotiations the project was eventually stopped. In the final months of his mandate, Duisburg's industry champion, ThyssenKrupp, sold its global Tailor Blanks business operations to its long-standing Chinese partner, the Wuhan Iron and Steel Corporation (WISCO).<sup>22</sup> This transaction heralded a new era in which Chinese business partners were no longer in need of German assistance but had developed into competitive players capable of leaving their mark in the global economy. Now, it was a Duisburg company that took advantage of its Wuhanese partner to restructure its business model. The incoming Lord Mayor, Sören Link, would turn this idea of leveraging China's thriving economy for revitalizing the local economy into a cornerstone of his policy agenda.

16 Interviews University of Duisburg, City Archives, City Museum and City Government – October, November and December 2022.

17 Interview City Museum – November 2022.

18 Interview City Government and City Archives – December 2022.

19 Interviews City Museum and City Government – November and December 2022.

20 Interview City Government – December 2022.

21 Interviews University of Duisburg and City Government – July, October and December 2022.

22 <https://www.thyssenkrupp.com/de/newsroom/pressemeldungen/verkauf-von-thyssenkrupp-tailored-blanks-an-wuhan-iron-and-steel-corporation--wisco--abgeschlossen-3230.html> (last access 6.2.2023)

## ASPIRING TO BECOME GERMANY'S "CHINA CITY": THE COMING OF THE IRON SILK ROAD AND THE RENEWING OF THE CHINA CONNECTION

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With the election of Sören Link (SPD) as Lord Mayor in 2012, the connection with China was further strengthened. But this was not the result of strategic political agency, at least not from the very beginning of his mandate. On the contrary, as in the late 1970s, Duisburg was once again a recipient of attention from China, and the local government reacted to this new attention by trying to leverage it and seek for new economic opportunities. Namely, already during Adolf Sauerland's mandate, in 2011, the city acquired a special role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), beginning to act as the European 'main station' of the new network of rail-bound transport corridors between China and Europe, i.e. the "Iron Silk Road". As a matter of fact, over time approximately 30 % of all containers transported on trains between China and Europe have come to register Duisburg as their origin or destination – much more than any other logistics hub in Europe. This is by far the most intensive and significant cooperative relationship between the city of Duisburg and China since the beginning of the partnership with Wuhan and the deliberate cultivation of relations with China as a whole. Remarkably, however, the Duisburg city government initially played no role in initiating and implementing this connection. It was rather the management of the local inland port who took the initiative, interestingly without informing the city government.

As we illustrated elsewhere (Romano and Taube 2022), the rail-bound transport between Duisburg and China has its origins in a purely commercial calculation. Leading managers from the local *Duisburger Hafengesellschaft* (*duisport*), the company running the inland port of Duisburg, and the multinational producer of information technology *Hewlett Packard* met in 2009 during a logistics congress in the Baltic States (*ibid.*). At

this meeting, *Hewlett Packard*, which at that time was already operating large production facilities in Chongqing in western China as well as a logistics hub in Duisburg, complained about the major logistical problems (duration, adherence to schedules, transport damage) of transporting its products from Chongqing to the Chinese seaports. In the discussion the idea was born to minimize the intra-Chinese transport routes and to bring the goods directly to Duisburg by rail. The two companies eventually implemented this idea with the cooperation of Chinese government bodies, both from Chongqing and from the central government (Esteban and Li 2020: 45). German government institutions and the city of Duisburg were not involved. While *duisport* took responsibility for the overall business transaction, *Hewlett Packard* ultimately contracted with the German rail company *DB Schenker* to organize the specific trans-continental logistics operations. The first direct train traversing the 11,000 km between Chongqing and Duisburg was finally running in March 2011, loaded exclusively with *Hewlett Packard* products manufactured in Chongqing.<sup>23</sup>

The city government was not aware of *duisport's* initiatives and was only informed two years later, when the BRI was officially launched in 2013, about what was happening. This may seem a curious fact, since the city of Duisburg owns one third of the inner port, while the remaining two thirds belong to the state of North Rhine-Westphalia.<sup>24</sup> But its oversight and agency in the early

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23 Interview *duisport* management – April 2022.

24 *Duisburger Hafengesellschaft* was originally owned in equal parts by the Federal Government, the State of North Rhine-Westphalia and the City of Duisburg. In 2013, the State of North Rhine-Westphalia acquired the shares of the Federal Government and thus became a two thirds majority shareholder.

2010s was severely limited by the tragic events at the Duisburg Love Parade in July 2010.<sup>25</sup> Sauerland refused to draw personal consequences for the planning mistakes leading to the deadly disaster and clung to office. Until he was finally voted out of office in 2012, numerous political and administrative processes in Duisburg were blocked, while major decisions were put on hold. The CEO of *duisport* of the time, Erich Staake, could not wait for the local government and pushed ahead. And that is how the management of the port ended up laying the foundations for Duisburg's role as Western terminus of the Iron Silk Road. This first connection, built in cooperation with *Hewlett Packard* and *DB Schenker*, provided the proof of concept for such an inter-continental rail link and paved the way for the intensification of this transport connection in the following years. Since then, a multitude of destinations in Europe and China have been opened, which also included Wuhan.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout these developments, Duisburg always retained its central role as the main logistics hub of this new Iron Silk Road in Europe and continuously expanded the number of trains dispatched. At the height of this process – before the Corona pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine – up to 70 trains (incoming and outgoing) were handled every week at *duisport*.<sup>27</sup> This special role of Duisburg for the Iron Silk Road, and for the BRI in general, was underscored and greatly promoted by the visit of President Xi Jinping to the city in 2014. It must be noted that Xi's visit targeted the logistics hub of *duisport*, not the city as such. As mentioned, the city government was informed only in 2013 about these

new developments, much to its surprise. In the summer of that year, the Chinese ambassador to Germany informed the then Member of the German Parliament and citizen of Duisburg, Johannes Pflug, that the Chinese government had chosen *duisport* as a key business partner in Europe, thereby establishing Duisburg as the central terminal station of the BRI railway links.<sup>28</sup>

The visit of the Chinese President Xi Jinping brought about a change in this initial lack of agency of the city government. Suddenly, delegations of Chinese government cadres and business representatives travelled to Duisburg and asked for meetings with the city government as well as with representatives of *duisport* and the local business community to learn about the "terminus station" of the Iron Silk Road, explore business opportunities and establish other types of exchanges. A look at the most recent archives of the International Relations Office of the city of Duisburg gives a clear idea of the variety of reasons why these delegations came to visit, including the desire to conduct "urban policy tourism" (Gonzalez 2011) to learn from the administration and urban management experience of Duisburg. Among them can be noted several delegations from Wuhan, made up of representatives of different departments and city districts, interested in finding out what the city of Duisburg could offer them in terms of lessons to be learned as well as in terms of investment opportunities.

The city government thus quickly realized that the visit of Xi Jinping had brought enormous visibility amongst decision makers in China's political and business elites; a visibility that could be leveraged to promote Duisburg's economic development and overcome the structural crisis that had stricken the city for many years. In particular, Sören Link resumed the vision of his old predecessor, Josef Krings, and of Adolf Sauerland, of making Duisburg an important centre for trade with China, similarly to what Düssel-

25 Trapped in a completely overcrowded, narrow tunnel leading towards the main venue, 21 young men and women were crushed to death and more than 650 injured at a techno music festival.

26 In addition, a string of railway stations along the transit route became onloading and offloading hubs of their own right thanks to industrial centres created at these locations.

27 Interview *duisport* management – April 2022.

28 Interview City Government – February 2021.



dorf was – and still is – for Japan. To signal his intention to cultivate commercial relations with China and in some way imitate the experience of Düsseldorf, the mayor coined the brand of "China-Stadt" (China city) for Duisburg. This was followed by the establishment of a number of organizations and an *ad hoc* administrative position to promote the relationships with various Chinese partners, Wuhan included.

Namely, as a first measure, in summer 2014, the city government established the position of a "China Representative" (*China-Beauftragter*), whose main tasks were to act as official representative of the city government on behalf of the Lord Mayor in welcoming the Chinese delegations and to organize specific visit programs for them. This position was initially conceived as an unpaid honorary job, without any contractual basis. The job was taken over by the aforementioned Johannes Pflug, who at that time had just retired and volunteered to support his home town. However, with the steady increase in the number of visiting delegations from China, this format was not feasible.<sup>29</sup> The position was put on a contractual basis and a symbolic monthly honorarium paid.

Like the *Oberstadtdirektoren* who had supported Josef Krings' 'China policy' in the 1980s and 1990s, Johannes Pflug spearheaded an initiative to promote the intensification of economic relations with China through coordinating with the local business community. Namely, he promoted the establishment of a *China Business Network Duisburg* (CBND), officially founded in December 2016. In the Association Statute of the CBND the purpose of this network is stated as

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29 In 2019 – the last year before the Corona pandemic – ca. 60 official delegations visited Duisburg, with more than 50 % of those having registered specific questions to be discussed during their visit with the city government. In addition, a significant number of meetings had to be arranged with delegations from other German cities that wanted to inform themselves about Duisburg's engagement with the New Silk Road and China as a whole. Interview City Government – February 2021.

follows: "to develop and promote economic relations between public companies, institutions, private business enterprises and Chinese investors based in Duisburg and the surrounding area, who wish to establish themselves in Duisburg and the surrounding area for commercial purposes". These objectives were to be achieved through "joint events, media appearances, network meetings, regular members' meetings, information events for members and non-members, delegation trips, other joint activities with a connection to China".<sup>30</sup>

The municipal business development agency (*Gesellschaft für Wirtschaftsförderung* – GfW, from 2021: *Duisburg Business & Invest* – DBI), which had already been involved in promoting economic relations with China for years, also reorganized itself in order to foster business with China. In 2017, it set up a special China Desk, for which a native Chinese person was hired who had many years of experience in investment and foreign trade promotion with a focus on China. The purpose of this office was to promote Duisburg as an investment location, provide information and accompany prospective investors through German paperwork, as well as help them find suitable investment locations and housing for employees. With this move the city attained a new quality of location marketing and professionalized its approach of reaching out to prospective Chinese investors, particularly via social media. Again, to facilitate the arrival of Chinese investors and economic and commercial exchanges with China, the government agreed also to the construction of a *China Trade Center Europe*, a large building which was to house offices, exhibition halls, restaurants, and a hotel, to help Chinese investors to establish their business in Duisburg.

Still with this intention of attracting investors and talents from China (and beyond), and becoming a hub for China-oriented business in

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30 CBND Association Statutes, §2, 1–2.

Germany, the city of Duisburg intended to collaborate with Chinese tech-firms to upgrade its urban infrastructure and substantially improve its attractiveness as a city to invest, work and live in. The most outstanding initiative in this respect was the city government's partnership with *Huawei*. Having visited the showrooms of the company in Shenzhen and its exhibition at the Hannover CEBIT trade fair,<sup>31</sup> city officials were fascinated by the technological visions brought forward and hoped to implement some of these in Duisburg. As such the Lord Mayor and *Huawei* signed a Memorandum of Understanding in January 2018 and set out to identify concrete projects.<sup>32</sup> The city was especially interested in various aspects of smart city development, like the sensor and AI-based optimization of traffic flows, 5G and public Wifi networks, digital utilities management, e-government, digital classrooms in schools, etc.<sup>33</sup> Finally, still with the aim of attracting Chinese investors, transforming Duisburg into the "China city" of Germany, and revitalizing local business, Lord Mayor Link even tried to promote the transformation of some streets of the centre into a China Town, with the aim of increasing Chinese restaurants, shops and other facilities, and in this way encouraging more Chinese families to move to Duisburg.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, success on all these fronts remained modest. The capacity of the CBND in attracting and maintaining contacts with Chinese investors must ultimately be rated as rather moderate. The absence of *duisport* among its

members is conspicuous given that the majority of (actual and potential) Chinese investors in Duisburg are active in the export and logistics sectors.<sup>35</sup> The municipal business development agency was also unable to achieve any substantial success in attracting Chinese investors. After the China Desk was set up, only 40 additional investors from China were attracted – mostly smaller projects with only a minor impact on the local labour market and the local business fabric. Moreover, Chinese investments remained concentrated on the range of *duisport*'s business activities (logistics, import/export and complementary services). Spillovers into other industries and service sectors are almost non-existent. The attempt to establish the *China Trade Center Europe* also failed after several years of planning.<sup>36</sup> As for the collaboration with *Huawei*, except for some smart streetlighting and self-propelled sweepers, virtually none of the project ideas materialized and went beyond the test or pilot stage. Finally, there is no trace of any China Town in Duisburg, except for the meagre presence of a few restaurants and bubble tea shops scattered in the Western district of the city.

The reasons for these results are to be found in a variety of factors. The difficulty in attracting Chinese investors can be attributed in part to the lack of coordination between *duisport* and the city government until 2021. But the city also suffers from the strong gravitational pull of the neighbouring state capital Düsseldorf, which features a fully developed infrastructure and vibrant Asian community. The vagaries of the decision-making processes of Chinese investors, financial issues and the rising negative sentiment among residents and local politics towards the *China Trade Center Europe* project made its realization impossible. Regarding the collaboration with *Huawei*, the German legislation on private data protection, language barriers and

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31 The CEBIT has been one of the leading global trade fairs for the digital sector showcasing its state of the art and innovative technologies. The last CEBIT was held in 2018.

32 [https://duisburg.de/microsites/smartcityduisburg/partner/partner-huawei.php.media/85517/20190723\\_MoU\\_Huawei\\_Web.pdf](https://duisburg.de/microsites/smartcityduisburg/partner/partner-huawei.php.media/85517/20190723_MoU_Huawei_Web.pdf) (last access: 09.01.2023)

33 [https://www.duisburg.de/microsites/smartcityduisburg/digitales\\_duisburg/smart-city-duisburg.php.media/89106/Masterplan\\_Digitales\\_Duisburg\\_-\\_DIGITAL.pdf](https://www.duisburg.de/microsites/smartcityduisburg/digitales_duisburg/smart-city-duisburg.php.media/89106/Masterplan_Digitales_Duisburg_-_DIGITAL.pdf) (last access: 09.01.2023)

34 Interview City Government – July 2022.

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35 Interview CBND – April and December 2022.

36 Interview DBI – April 2022.



difficulties in project deployment significantly hindered the realization of specific projects. Furthermore, over the years, the political climate in the German relationship with China changed fundamentally. Growing fears that China – and explicitly *Huawei* technology – might subvert Germany's critical infrastructure made it virtually impossible for the city of Duisburg to implement ground-breaking infrastructure

innovations using technological solutions from *Huawei*.<sup>37</sup> Finally, the project of China Town ran into difficult negotiations with building owners, ending up with no results. At the dawn of major global upheavals that would also impact relations between Duisburg and China, the city's progress in becoming Germany's hub for China business was still far away from what the city government had hoped for.

## DUISBURG'S CHINA CONNECTION AMIDST CRISES: THE CORONA PANDEMIC, THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND RISING POLITICAL TENSION

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the city of Duisburg's efforts to leverage the Iron Silk Road, its long-standing partnership with Wuhan as well as the city's close contacts to other Chinese entities to raise Duisburg's profile and strengthen the local economy have been subjected to several challenges. However, despite the massive disruptions of global trade caused by the pandemic, China's zero-COVID lockdowns and the war in Ukraine, container transport via the Iron Silk Road remained comparatively stable. The massive congestions and delays at China's seaports that were triggered by the lockdowns forced logistics firms to shift shipments towards rail transport. Economic pressures superseded ethical and security-related concerns of many firms to ship goods through the territory of Russia and Belarus. As such, Duisburg continued to serve as the most important port for rail-based container shipments between China and Europe, with only minor reductions in the number of trains and containers handled in comparison to the pre-Corona and pre-war period.<sup>38</sup>

A different appraisal must be made for official contacts and visits by delegations, from Wuhan

and from China in general. Obviously, these had a setback with the travel restrictions and the various lockdowns introduced in China and Germany. But both Duisburg and Wuhan tried to maintain their friendly relations and mutual assistance throughout the pandemic. Namely, in the first months of the infection in Wuhan, Duisburg donated masks and other medical equipment, sent via the trains going to China on the Iron Silk Road. On the initiative of the German international cooperation agency, GIZ, Duisburg and Wuhan also participated in a virtual exchange of information regarding the municipal responses to Covid-19. Then, when it seemed that China had been able to keep the virus at bay, while the number of deaths in Germany increased, Wuhan reciprocated help by sending masks via trains to Duisburg.

Serious strain on Duisburg's relationship with China and its twin city Wuhan was rather caused by the general deterioration of the political climate in Germany. Prompted by an increasingly critical assessment of political developments in China, the documentation of massive human rights violations in Xinjiang and elsewhere, the realization of substantial dependencies of German business on China as a business location and supplier of important goods, as well as the fear of infiltration of critical German infrastructure by Chinese investors and technologies, any involvement with Chinese partners was in-

37 Interviews City Government – November 2022.

38 Interviews *duisport* – April and December 2022.

creasingly viewed negatively. All points of contact with China came under increasingly critical scrutiny from activists, the media, politics, and society. As a result, as happened in 1989, the city came under mounting pressure to justify its China-friendly policy and its relations with Wuhan.

Nevertheless, as in 1989, the City of Duisburg remained committed to maintain its partnership with the city and develop its relations with China (Duisburg City Government 2021). In spring 2021, Johannes Pflug handed over the office of China Representative to Markus Teuber, who had previously held senior management positions at *duisport*. With this move, the city strengthened its ties with the port company in the hope of being able to better coordinate their respective China activities and initiatives, which had hitherto developed rather independently of each other. The port and the city were also brought closer together by a change in the top management of *duisport*. In August 2021, Markus Bangen took over the chairmanship of the Executive Board from Erich Staake, who until then had maintained maximum distance from the city government.<sup>39</sup> Finally, in July of that year, in addition to the position of China Representative, a Department for China Affairs (*Referat für China-angelegenheiten*) was established under the direct authority of the Lord Mayor.<sup>40</sup> This was the first time that a formal unit had been created in the city hall to deal explicitly with cultivating the city's relationship with China.

However, maintaining and cultivating this relationship has once again proved to be a very difficult undertaking, perhaps more difficult than in the past. A series of events put pressure on

the city of Duisburg's decision to keep friendly relations with Wuhan and China. A first considerable strain on the city's relations with China arose shortly after the establishment of the *Department for China Affairs* from the cancellation of an event at the local *Confucius Institute*. The controversy erupted over a reading on a newly published biography of Xi Jinping. This reading was considered politically undesirable by the Chinese side, and the institute was asked to cancel the event. The institute declined to do so. But then the Chinese consulate in Düsseldorf intervened and exerted pressure on the institute's management. The Confucius Institute was thus coerced to cancel the event, which was eventually held – on a much larger scale – at the University of Duisburg-Essen.<sup>41</sup> This incident was intensively covered by the media and fuelled fears that Chinese state actors were trying to infiltrate German institutions and undermining German standards of free speech as well as the academic freedom of teaching and research. Duisburg city government and the University of Duisburg-Essen felt compelled to take an explicit stand and reject the Chinese intervention in the activities of the *Confucius Institute*, which is run as a non-profit association according to German law.

When the media attention on the cancelled reading at the Confucius Institute was still close to its peak, Duisburg's China connections came in new predicament. As mentioned earlier, the city of Duisburg is also twinned with Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. Lithuania became the target of massive Chinese sanctions at the turn of the year 2021/2022 when the country, according to Beijing's understanding, violated the "One China Principle" by opening a Taiwanese representative office in Vilnius under the name "Taiwan" (instead of "Taipei") (CSIS 2022). Duisburg found itself in a situation where it had to stand up for its partner Vilnius and reject Chinese initiatives

39 <https://www.duisport.de/markus-bangen-wird-neuer-vorstandsvorsitzender-der-duisburger-hafen-ag-dr-carsten-hinne-rueckt-in-den-vorstand/> (last access: 11.1.2023)

40 [https://www.duisburg.de/guiapplications/newsdesk/publications/Stadt\\_Duisburg/102010100000128905.php](https://www.duisburg.de/guiapplications/newsdesk/publications/Stadt_Duisburg/102010100000128905.php) (last access: 11.01.2023)

41 Interview Confucius Institute – December 2021 and January 2023.

to drive a wedge between Lithuania and the rest of the European Union. Still, the city stood firm in its commitment to its partnership with Wuhan. Nevertheless, the Duisburg administration could not pretend that nothing had happened. The celebrations for the fortieth anniversary of the twinning between Duisburg and Wuhan, in 2022, were thus cut down to a rather modest scale.<sup>42</sup>

The publication of the *Xinjiang Policy Files* in May 2022 put Duisburg's relations with China to an additional serious test. The *Xinjiang Policy Files* used trustworthy source material to reveal human rights violations by the Chinese authorities in Xinjiang in a previously unavailable level of detail.<sup>43</sup> This triggered intense debates in Germany, which ultimately called into question the justifiability of any cooperation with China. Duisburg's twinning with Wuhan was thus directly called into question. The year before, the Dutch city of Arnhem had already terminated its own twinning relations with Wuhan. At that time, i.e. before the publication of the *Xinjiang Policy Files*, the city council already justified its decision by stating that the treatment of the Uyghur ethnic group violated human rights and that a partnership with the Chinese city was therefore no longer morally justifiable.<sup>44</sup> The city of Duisburg pursued a different course. The city partnership was not broken off but continues to exist with the aim of maintaining the dialogue and being able to communicate the city's own (German) values through the twinning exchanges, exactly as it did at the times of Josef Krings after the massacre of Tian'anmen Square. As evidence of this willingness not to give up relations with

Wuhan and other Chinese partners, to try to attract Chinese investors and talents, and to better profit from the Iron Silk Road connection, in 2021 the Duisburg government commissioned various China experts from the University of Duisburg-Essen (including one of the two authors) to carry out an accompanying research project (*Begleitforschung*). The overall objective of the project was to determine strategies by which Duisburg and the surrounding region could improve their attractiveness for Chinese investors and leverage their China links for local economic development.

However, the city's efforts to adhere to its relationship with China were not enough to ensure smooth developments. The latest serious blow came with the decision of COSCO (a major Chinese shipping company) to terminate its participation in a high-profile joint venture with *duisport* for the construction and operation of the trimodal *Duisburg Gateway Terminal*. In summer 2022, COSCO sold its 30 percent share in the terminal to *duisport*, which is now exclusively in European hands.<sup>45</sup> This exit was not communicated to the public. It only came to public attention when a journalist consulted the commercial register entry of *Duisburg Gateway Terminal GmbH* as part of research into COSCO's politically controversial investment in the Hamburg port terminal Tollerort. None of the parties involved has so far publicly commented on the reasons for this withdrawal, thereby inviting widespread speculation about the potential role of political pressure exerted by Berlin, Brussels, or Beijing. Nevertheless, COSCO remains an active business partner at the Port of Duisburg and continues to collaborate with *duisport* in other business areas.

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42 Interviews City Government – January 2023.

43 <https://www.xinjiangpolicefiles.org/> (last access: 11.1.2023)

44 [https://www.uni-muenster.de/NiederlandeNet/aktuelles/archiv/2021/07123\\_staedtepartnerschaft\\_arnheim\\_wuhan\\_beendet.html](https://www.uni-muenster.de/NiederlandeNet/aktuelles/archiv/2021/07123_staedtepartnerschaft_arnheim_wuhan_beendet.html) (last access: 11.1.2023)

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45 Following the exit of COSCO, *Duisburger Hafengesellschaft* now holds 60% of the venture. The companies *Hupac* and *HTS Logistik* each hold 20%.

## A CONCLUSION ... WITH MANY QUESTIONS

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This paper has illustrated the fact that the partnership between Duisburg and Wuhan, alongside more generally the commitment of this German city towards China, has all in all remained very solid in the forty years of official relations. Apart from a few changes in political direction, which attached less importance to city partnerships, Duisburg has remained faithful to its project of becoming a 'gateway' to China – as Josef Krings had hoped for – or Germany's 'China city' – as his latest successor, Sören Link proposed in more recent times. We can therefore speak of a political continuity that is quite remarkable, because the relationships that the mayors and their administrations tried to build in these forty years went beyond the periodic exchange of niceties on the occasion of official visits. The relationships encompassed several of the activities identified by Wilbur Zelinsky (1991) and resisted the different crises that profoundly marked the past and the contemporary epochs. Economic motivations are certainly central in this continuity, the leaderships of Duisburg having reacted very pragmatically first to China's opening up, and later to its economic expansion in the world, although the results of their efforts were not as successful as they hoped.

These choices have attracted criticisms from many who, outraged by the violation of human rights in China – in 1989 as today – and worried by the developments in this country's political situation, wondered about the choices of the Duisburg government. In fact, one wonders why the partnership with Wuhan has been maintained, as well as that with the Russian city of Perm despite the Russian invasion of Ukraine, while the one with the city of Lomé was recently suspended due to the lack of progress in Togo's democratization process. Nevertheless, the Duisburg government has not remained insensitive to these developments. In view of the current political upheavals, the vision to position Duisburg as a German "China City" has been grad-

ually abandoned. At the beginning of 2023, this aspiration seems to have been renounced altogether – or at least set aside, waiting for better times. As evidence of this recent evolution, the research project conducted by the China experts of the University of Duisburg-Essen has been refocused towards the identification and mitigation of China-related risks, with the original focus on Chinese investment attraction and local business development relegated to secondary importance.

But as a sign that the government is waiting for better times, it can be noted that its administration is currently informally carrying out exchanges of experience between German municipalities on partnerships with Chinese cities, following the format of an official program that was lately suspended for lack of funding.<sup>46</sup> If for now the goal of leveraging the city's broad range of contacts in Wuhan and China and especially its pronounced role for the Iron Silk Road to stimulate the local economy has not yet been attained, the local government has not lost hope for better future developments. Likewise, the city of Wuhan seems to be committed to the partnership as well. The very first official Chinese delegation that Duisburg welcomed after nearly three years of COVID-related travel restrictions in November 2022 came from Wuhan.<sup>47</sup> Despite the highs and lows, this still seems to be an "all-weather" friendly relationship.

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<sup>46</sup> Interviews City Government – February 2023.

<sup>47</sup> Interviews City Government – January 2023.

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