

Artistic Exchange as Paradiplomacy: A Case Study on the Sister Print Exchange Program Between the US State of Maine and Aomori Prefecture, Japan

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Abstract

Sister Cities International (2021) defines a “sister city” or “twin town” agreement as a long-term partnership between two communities in two countries that is officially recognized after the highest elected officials from both communities sign an official document decreeing their partnership. Since the launch of President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s People to People program in 1956, sister cities practice citizen-led, people-to-people cultural paradiplomacy: subnational and nongovernment cultural initiatives within two officially linked communities. However, sister cities established towards the end of the 20th century shifted to regional trade initiatives, prompting more government involvement. The 21st century saw a decline in government involvement and funding for sister cities in the US, prompting a return to citizen to citizen paradiplomacy, and in turn a return to the artistic and cultural initiatives intrinsic to the sister city format. The visual and performing arts were intrinsic to the establishment of the modern incarnation of sister cities: as funding and municipal support continues to decline for these community partnerships, the volunteers who run these culture programs from within the community are inspired by and rely on the arts and shared lore of their local communities in order to maintain their sister links through artistic exchange activities, including the visual and the performing arts. This is certainly the case for the Maine-Aomori sister state relationship, which has shifted its programming away from the program’s long withstanding regimen of student and delegation exchange initiatives to focus on visual art exchange initiatives and an art residency program during the last decade. This article suggests that US-Japan sister cities which operate predominantly without government support like the Maine-Aomori relationship tend to rely on artistic exchange: this denotes a return to the seminal grassroots model of paradiplomacy modeled by early sister city activities and the seminal People to People program that relies on local culture for citizen engagement, recruitment, and communication between sister cities.

Keywords: Sister City, Citizen-led Diplomacy, Cultural Diplomacy, Paradiplomacy, Artistic Exchange

1. Introduction

Sister city partnerships today remain engrossed in their own local mythos. The establishment and further nurturing of this notarized “sisterhood” more often than not stem from sharing similar geographies, an experience, or even a historical event which links the communities together, long before

their official declaration as “sisters”. Once sister cities - or “twin towns” - became an official municipal initiative as promoted by postwar efforts such as the People to People Program out of the United States in 1956, sister cities - as well as their methods of contact - grew exponentially as a form of subnational paradiplomacy. Per what experts and cultural organizations have claimed to be the roots to today’s sister city initiatives (Cremer et al. 2001, Longonahl 2015, Sister Cities International 2021), this article argues that artistic exchange activities have long been a vessel of choice for translocal sister city contact from before direct government involvement, as a citizen to citizen method of translocal contact and goodwill. This is especially true for current sister city relationships that lack government support, helmed instead by a translocal network of community members. This practice has become more common in United States-based sister city organizations in recent years and is becoming more widespread, including Japan-based organizations, since the Covid-19 pandemic (Mori 2020). This article also argues that the lack of funding and government support has prompted a return to citizen-led sister initiatives using visual and material culture as vessels for pragmatic sister exchange activities.

This article explores artistic exchange as a form of translocal culture exchange activity for a sister city that is truly citizen-led, the Maine-Aomori sister state relationship between the state of Maine, United States and the prefecture of Aomori, Japan. Using the Maine-Aomori sister state relationship as a case study, this article argues that when citizens choose to run a sister initiative after local government support dwindles, local culture and the arts are some of the leading and most successful ways they choose to network with other citizens and engage the sister community with. This article explores the specific history of US-Japan sister city relationships using the Maine-Aomori sister relationship as a case study for this return to the program’s seminal citizen-led paradiplomacy model within the construct of the practice’s historiography globally, nationally, and locally. By analyzing the program’s current exchange method of choice - the Maine-Aomori Printmaking Society (MAPS), an exchange program of artist prints and artist-teachers - as well as the program’s strengths and weaknesses, we can better understand the volatile but dynamic trajectory these pragmatic programs can achieve under citizen-led diplomacy efforts within the US’ sister cities. This paper uses documents, interviews with Maine-Aomori sister state volunteers, and self-ethnography due to the author’s position as MAPS program coordinator pre-Covid-19.

2. Pragmatic Cultural Paradiplomacy as Sister City Model

Before the sister city model was formally established by the United States government, its inspiration came from a similar citizen-led diplomacy effort in Europe. The first sister city partnership in the world was formalized between Coventry, England and Stalingrad (now Volgograd), Russia in 1944, but the basis of their partnership stemmed from sororal gestures years before their official decree as sisters. In 1942, the Battle of Stalingrad occurred, devastating the city. 830 Coventry women led by then-Mayor Emily Smith together embroidered a tablecloth with their names and the words “little help is better than big sympathy” (Langonohl 2015, 18). The embroidered tablecloth and a donation of sixpence from each embroiderer were sent to the people of Stalingrad. After the two cities’ official establishment as sister cities in 1944, the concept of sister cities and their paradiplomatic activities like the embroidered

tablecloth began to spread across Europe and globally as nations recovered from the war (Langonohl 2015, 37).

This sororal gesture is but one possible method of the multifaceted concept of cultural paradiplomacy, with the use of material culture being both symbolic and pragmatic. Cultural paradiplomacy facilitates the subnational to engage in international relations utilizing cultural and artistic practices rather than simply signify: subnational sources have the potential to strengthen identity and achieve regional development goals through cultural diplomacy. (Issundari et al., 2021) This includes images and cultural practices which are deemed significant by the nations which actively engage in diplomacy with one another, whereas soft power diplomatic measures promote consumptional engagement. In the case of this paper, the MAPS project will be categorized into a subsect genre, visual culture diplomacy engagement is made through the exchange of visual culture objects such as printmaking derivative from the two locales. Engagement is also made via the exchange of artist-teachers and the teaching of cultural artist practices in the sister location. This term “engage” is especially important in understanding the cultural diplomacy occurring at the sister city level today in the United States, and will be explored further.

Cultural paradiplomacy research takes a bottom-up approach to cultural diplomacy practice. The citizen-led cultural paradiplomacy at the sister city level falls under what Andreas Langonohl (2015) describes as “translocal citizenship”. Undoubtedly, sister cities are tinged with a politicized agenda regardless of the subnational level of government involvement within the sister city model from which they were incorporated decades ago. However, the basis of the sister city model is “citizen-led diplomacy”, perhaps the farthest flung method of paradiplomacy on one side of the paradiplomacy spectrum. This can develop a vast variety of transnational goals and methods amongst the web of connected towns and their translocal activities with one another. As Ziga Vodovnik (2011) states, “Considering that translocal citizenship offers a different understanding of political community and stresses its constant reinvention, we should instead conclude that translocal citizenship represents a form of ‘unconstitutional patriotism’” (15). That is, a form of patriotism which is not aligned with a formal constitution of a nation but the constitution formed by the sister agreement. The meaning of this patriotic action has since been formed from more localized community values in connection with the sister community, a bottom-up and isolated approach that invites unique acts of global citizen patriotism to develop dependent on the citizen actions within the sister agreements.

Vodovnik further explores “translocal citizenship” as a mode of “new citizenship”, with “citizenship” as having political membership in a city rather than a state or nation (10). This research takes this a step further, suggesting that new citizenship dives deeper within a city into that of a specific community within the city itself. In this case, a very small, localized community of citizens within the states of Maine and Aomori choose to engage each other transnationally under the umbrella of the sister state relationship. Truly, the constellation of citizenship, as Vodovonik describes it, is a postmodern reality: it allows us to partake in a variety of citizenship roles that are built on different foundations. This includes functional, linguistic, cultural, territorial, historical characteristics; ranging from the political to the non-political, constantly in flux (9).

Previous studies have cemented sister cities as clearly political in their foundation and purpose

(Dupuis and de Bruin 2017, Langonohl 2015, Mori, 2020). Yet sister cities have grown exponentially and developed “thousands of methods of transnationalism” due to this citizen-led diplomacy model as popularized by the People to People Program implemented by US President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956, arguably more so now that government entities have largely abandoned the sister city agreements to the whims of its citizens in recent decades. What sister city agreements offer to their organizers and participants is a space in which translocal citizenship can be practiced using methods and means deemed significant by the specific communities active in the space. “Community” is not site-specific inasmuch as it is mediated by the translocal social interactions and cultural diplomacy they choose to engage in together. This term “translocal” is especially important to use instead of “transnational” here because of the sister city design linking two cities, not nations, allowing the mediation and reception of specific cultural practices and symbols derived from local culture and life, which are significant to citizens engaging within this translocal space of activity. In the case of the MAPS program, printmaking was the vessel of choice due to art historical context, but the contents and subsequent images mediated between the two locales denote a translocality. This will be explored further, but first the People-to-People program needs to be explained.

2.1 The “People to People” Program and US-Japan Sister Cities

In the case of Japan and the United States, staunch enemies during the war as opposed to allies such as Coventry and Stalingrad, Eisenhower’s “People to People” initiative proposed a post-Second World War and preemptive Cold War peacebuilding initiative through which the sister city model became a tool for the US to engage with other nations across the globe, including Japan (Sister Cities International 2019). The program was officially launched on September 11th, 1956 as a means “to enhance international understanding and friendship through educational, cultural and humanitarian activities involving the exchange of ideas and experiences directly among peoples of different countries and diverse cultures.”

Despite its ties to the United States Information Agency (USIA), the initiative was envisioned to be non-government-led by design: program design and execution was placed in the hands of the citizens within the linked communities. President Eisenhower’s vision of “thousands of methods” of people to people exchange included vast examples of grassroots, citizen to citizen contact through media and the arts, including pen pals and stamp exchanges, book drives, concerts, theatrical performances and more. The forty committees within the program were “chaired by prominent leaders, businessmen and citizens from all walks of American life.” and included a Music Committee, Literature Committee and even a Cartoonists Committee.

Today, the US alone has 1800 sister city agreements linking municipalities with 138 countries from all corners of the world (Sister Cities International 2019, CLAIR 2021). Of these 1800 sisters, Japan has the oldest sister city arrangements with the United States and the two nations share their strongest sister bonds with each other: as of August 2021, there are 452 sister-linked cities and/or regions between the two nations. Together, the US and Japan currently make up 25% of the world’s current sister city agreements.

2.2 Shift to Trade-focused US-Japan Sister City Agreements Near the 21st Century

The Japan Foundation (2021) recognizes that the current state of sister city relations between the US and Japan retains a continuation of the People to People program, however it is important to note that the very first sister city agreement between the two nations was the sister city relationship of Nagasaki and St. Paul, established on Pearl Harbor Day, December 7, 1955 by a citizen-led decree predating President Eisenhower's program. Undoubtedly, there has been a steady increase in the number of sister city partnerships since (CLAIR 2021). Their success as such frameworks was credited to the grassroots element of sister city exchange programming: "While the global outreach of the sister-cities phenomenon appears to transcend the geographic confines of cities, strong locality considerations and local activism nevertheless predominate" (Cremer et al. 2001, 1). This concept has since gained traction as a crucial element for both urban entrepreneurial and economic development strategies (Dupuis and de Bruin 2017).

The past two decades have seen a marked turn to a hyper-focus on transnational economic development via globalization in the US-Japan sister framework and beyond. An early study of this phenomenon framed international sister cities as key frameworks for municipal-community entrepreneurship - partnerships which develop from opportunities produced by community actors and initiatives which are responded to by municipal governments - development within linked locales (Cremer et al. 2001). This may be due to the USIA ceasing operations in 1999, which may be related to this widespread shift among US sister city entities to focus on economic development initiatives for local business and trade. The municipalities of Maine and Aomori form a sister state relationship around this pivotal moment in sister city history.

3. The Maine-Aomori Sister State Relationship, Origins and Establishment

It is key to understand the timing of the Maine-Aomori sister state's establishment in relation to the regions' shared lore. The state of Maine in the United States and the prefecture of Aomori in Japan officially entered a sister state agreement in 1994 during the aforementioned sister city "trade boom". Although the reasoning behind this pairing clearly stemmed from the two regions' geographical and natural resource similarities such as agricultural production, nature tourism, and cold climates, Maine and Aomori became connected in the 19th century via a catastrophic event involving an ill-fated ship. In 1889, the Cheseborough, a merchant ship from Bath, Maine, was en route back to the United States after completing a pickup in Hakodate when the ship ran aground during a typhoon off the coast of Shariki, now present-day Tsugaru City, Aomori. It was reported that villagers who witnessed the shipwreck ventured out to sea to rescue survivors while others ran over sixty kilometers to Aomori City to get help. Of the twenty-three crew members, only four were able to be rescued. The circumstances of the shipwreck and rescue established a sororal connection spanning nearly one hundred years until Maine and Aomori officially entered a sister state agreement. Various local accounts of citizen diplomacy over the century include letters of friendship exchanged between survivors' and rescuers' families for many years, the Cheseborough shipwreck monument erected in Shariki in the 1970s, and the Cheseborough Cup, an international swimming competition in the Sea of Japan near Tsugaru. This

tragic event permeates the Maine-Aomori sister state from its foundation, structure and activities and, although the Maine-Aomori sister state relationship began as a trade endeavor, this research argues that this local mythos contained within the Maine-Aomori lore is what drives the relationship by recruiting citizen diplomats and inspiring creative incarnations of exchange activities within the relationship, as intended by the People to People program.

At first, the sister state partnership was carried out through government and trade delegations: Aomori prefectural and business leaders marked the years of exploration and negotiations with quadrennial visits: Governor Morio Kimura led a large delegation visit to Maine in 1995 with Governor Angus King reciprocating via a trade delegation to Aomori in 1999. The delegations resulted in the development of the Maine International Trade Center (MITC) in 1996 with help from Aomori Bank vice president Kunei Takebayashi as well as reciprocating internship programs for junior staff in Aomori's International Affairs Division at the new Trade Center. Education exchange programs were also established during this time between six elementary school partnerships and two university direct exchange programs. A few years after the partnership's establishment, cultural venues in both Maine and Aomori collaborated by curating special exhibits in relation to their sister community and their cultural similarities. This included an "Apple and Pine Tassel" group photography exhibition hosted by the Maine State Museum and the Aomori Prefectural Museum in 2004. The Aomori Foundation for the Advancement of International Relations (AFFAIR) became heavily involved in the sister state partnership by funding an annual delegation of artists to Maine to present programs aimed at teaching Maine children about Aomori's regional arts and culture including kite-making, calligraphy, koto and the provincial Neputa-e painting and miniature Nebuta model floats.

3.1 Sister Activities Decline and Shift to NGO/NPO-led Programming

The partnership had a robust start with varied programming endeavors, but partnership activities quickly declined by the turn of the century. Both sides were plagued by economic woes and key programs were shifted or cut altogether. The AFFAIR program lasted six years before being cut and new management at MITC cut funding specifically from culture and education exchanges to focus predominantly on trade, which resulted in the scrapping of sister state-related exhibitions already in progress at the Maine State Museum and Aomori Prefectural Museum. The education exchange programs were placed directly in the hands of the participating schools to run and fund themselves. The shift caused government and community leaders active in the sister state program to call for the MITC to no longer have financial oversight over the sister state's culture and education programs. This resulted in the establishment of the Maine-Aomori Sister State Advisory Council (MASSAC) in 2002, a non-government entity placed in charge of advising and assisting with culture and education decisions for the sister state. The move may have been both a boon and a curse for the sister state's culture exchange programs: the new advisory council boasted key members from many of Maine's most active cultural organizations, including the Maine Humanities Council, the Maine Arts Commission, and the Maine State Museum. Other members included representation from Japan America Society of Maine and the University of Maine system. They were able to rekindle ties with past members of the now defunct AFFAIR and other Aomori-based non-profit groups such as the Aomori Rotary Club. From this change to MASSAC's leadership, delegations became less frequent but more focused on culture exchange

thanks to a change in governorship: Governor John Baldacci and his wife Karen Baldacci were both active in the sister state partnership on the cultural side. MASSAC-sponsored a delegation visit to Maine for Aomori-based illustrator Toshiki Sawada to meet with Maine-based illustrator Scott Nash to work on a bilingual illustrated book together to commemorate the sister state relationship, a suggestion spearheaded by Baldacci herself.

Although MASSAC was a non-government entity, it was still an advisory council to the Maine governor's office and not an authoritative body: Governor Paul LePage took office in 2011 and led a trade delegation in 2015 with business leaders to Japan and China, but was not invested in artistic exchange programs like the previous administration was. The artistic exchanges fell to the wayside during his tenure, but a new non-profit organization made up of community members formed and stepped in to promote the sister state through cultural programs called the Friends of Aomori (FOA). Among the board members were previous members of MASSAC and a mishmash of Maine community members who had personal ties to Japan, through working abroad in Japan or having family members from Japan living with them in Maine. Nevertheless, the sister state reverted to the citizen-driven model, a common fate for the US-end of sister city partnerships (Mori 2020).

3.2 The Maine-Aomori Printmaking Society and Maine-Aomori's Focus on Cultural Diplomacy

The Maine-Aomori sister state had remained stagnant for some time before the Maine-Aomori Printmaking Society program was proposed by Maine-based artist Jeff Badger as a one-time printmaking exchange between Maine and Aomori artists in 2014. The exchange would feature twenty prints by twenty professional artists - ten from Maine and ten from Aomori - compiling two collections of two prints of each submission divided in order to create a sister print collection in both Maine and in Aomori. Badger was introduced to Jiro Ono, director of the Munakata Shikō Memorial Museum of Art in Aomori City, via the FOA network. An agreement was made and the art exchange was immediately set in motion.

The first MAPS exhibition in Aomori was held in the Fall of 2015 at the Aomori Cultural Pavillion in Aomori City. The following Spring, the first MAPS exhibition in Maine was held at SPACE Gallery in Portland, Maine. The prints exchanged through the program continued the artistic exchange tradition of sharing local culture: images from both sides of the exchange featured regional geography and iconography unique to the sociocultural identity of the regions. The content of such images are prime examples of translocal diplomacy the sister city programs are capable of: "transnational" is too broad of a stroke to paint them with now that citizens on the ground are in charge. (Figure 1, see Note 1)

Through a generous grant from the Consulate General of Japan, Boston, an artist residency program was able to be realized: five of the Japanese artists featured in the exhibition visited Portland as part of a one-week residency with Portland-based printmaking studio, Pickwick Press. The artists conducted printmaking workshops on-site at Pickwick Press, inviting students enrolled at the nearby Maine College of Art to participate and work alongside the printmakers. Although the visiting artists predominantly practiced woodblock printmaking, they integrated woodblock printmaking alongside other printmaking methods such as chine collé and letterpress. This mixing of mediums was explored with the students participating at the workshop with the help of local volunteers translating between them and the visiting artists. (Figure 2, see Note 2)

The program's success helped turn it into an annual program: twenty new prints by local Maine and Aomori artists are newly added to the Maine and Aomori collections every year. The exhibition turned into a touring exhibition, hosted in venues such as galleries, universities, libraries and artist studios throughout Maine and Aomori. A children's print exchange program was added in 2018, linking schools through the arts and widening access to the Maine-Aomori program to more students. In 2019, a reciprocal week-long artist residency was held in Aomori for five Maine artists. The program was met with much enthusiasm on both sides of the exchange: the MAPS program quickly became the Maine-Aomori Sister State's leading exchange program. In 2021, Jiro Ono reflected after six years of MAPS programming: "Six years have passed between us, and the solid course of the relationship continues to find rewarding steps forward... who could have predicted the voluminous benefit at the beginning of the project?" (Badger, 2021). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the professional printmaking program and the children's printmaking program continued with the assistance of local schools, the Aomori Morning Rotary Club, and the creation and maintenance of virtual exhibitions through FOA and various art venues partnered with the program (Badger, 2020).

This program has truly been citizen-led throughout the program's tenure: most of the participants and funding have been sourced from public grants as well as citizen and non-government sources (Badger, 2021). One such source stemmed from the sales of a print series depicting scenes from the oral history of the Cheseborough shipwreck, sold at venues hosting the MAPS exhibition. Illustrated scenes included the account that two boys ran over sixty kilometers to Aomori to find help and the legend that one of the village women revived one of the sailors by wrapping his cold body inside her kimono. Through the cultural paradiplomacy of repackaging the local legend of the Cheseborough shipwreck into various cultural and artistic practices - from a swimming competition, to a memorial, to a series of exchanged prints - the citizens who chose to organize, execute and/or participate in this translocal artistic exchange program between sister locales operated at what may be considered a bottom-rung of paradiplomacy. They continue to do so as an act of new citizenship within the skeleton of the sister city model, including the bare bones funding they achieved through the sister state's translocal network of invested citizens on both sides of the globe.

Despite its successes, MAPS has been running on fumes throughout its tenure as an annual art and idea exchange program. The US-based team fluctuates between one and three volunteers to run it, depending on the year. Each year the program is aided by community support, including galleries where the prints are exhibited at no charge or local framing professionals who frame the prints at-cost. With no storage space for the growing amount of prints, Badger negotiated a print rental program with local Maine businesses, where local offices were outfitted with prints for a rental period and fee. This solved the storage problem, and provided the only means of income for Friends of Aomori during the Covid-19 pandemic, according to Badger. Without grant funding and a drop in volunteers, the program stagnated. However, with the rental income from MAPS providing about \$1500 per year according to Badger, the program had established a steady means of funding during and after the pandemic-induced hiatus. Programs like MAPS yield a lot of potential, but their volatile nature as volunteer-led programs with bare-bones funding threatens a supernova result rather than exponential growth. This can be monitored further as the MAPS program and Friends of Aomori recover post-pandemic.

4. Conclusion

An artistic exchange of this size may seem insignificant in the grand scheme of paradiplomacy efforts across the globe, but realizing the trajectory of a sister partnership of this size, as well as the struggles and work ethic of citizen volunteers working to connect through paradiplomacy efforts within the linked communities are crucial to understanding the sister city model and the “thousands of methods” that can be used to sustain. What began as a local government-linked sister partnership fell quickly into the hands of a network of disparate yet passionate volunteers: there is a desire to maintain the sister community nestled within these two regions, and they choose to do so through artistic exchange. Of course, there are logistical reasons to this decision: the low cost of mailing artworks benefits the meager funds volunteer groups can scrounge together, and visual images transcend language barriers, as the low populations of both regions do not share a common language. However, as previously mentioned in this article, paradiplomacy is a spectrum and this kind of paradiplomatic activity may seem to be a “bottom-rung” one. Performing case studies on the vast array of citizen diplomacy and its many incarnations can help us fill the current gap in paradiplomacy studies, which focuses predominantly on subnational governments, and better understand the web of diplomatic efforts and subsequent communities built.

Per the findings of this research, artistic exchanges have remained a capstone in sister city exchange activities. The case of the Maine-Aomori sister state is one that is truly subnational, solely citizen-led at this point in time. Nevertheless, through artistic exchange activities, the relationship is able to continue, despite their struggles, a new phase of translocalized cosmopolitanism via one of the “thousands of methods” as envisioned by the People to People program. The arts prove indispensable to those sister city partnerships with little to no government support today. This may expand further for US-Japan sister city relationships in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and Japan’s subsequent decline in government support, matching what has long-plagued the US side of their sister ties (Mori, 2020). This “new sororal citizenship” can be navigated in a plethora of ways within the sister city model, dependent entirely on how many and which citizens *choose* to helm the relationship, and how the network of citizens which bands together choose to steer it.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Notes

- (1) Figure 1: Two prints featured in the 2019 MAPS exchange program: “Approaching Neputa Festival” by Aomori-based artist Emiko Seki (left) and “Lobster” by Maine-based artist David Harmon (left). Both images are derivative of each artists’ home state’s local culture. From author’s personal collection.
- (2) Figure 2: Visiting artists from Aomori, Reiko Kudo and Yoshimasa Tsuji (center) participate in a workshop for printmaking students from Maine College of Art at Pickwick Press in Portland, Maine. Jiro Ono, Director of the Munakata Shiko Museum of Art, facilitates and helps translate for the artists and students. From author’s personal collection.

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