

bilateral meeting with Guangzhou Municipality

26 Mar. 2023

29 Mar. 2023

After a couple public events and some mostly protocolary meetings on our first two days in Guangzhou, Tuesday was devoted to visiting two potential members, Foshan and Dongguan, both industrial powerhouses of over 10M inhabitants, within commuting distance of Guangzhou, around 70km east and west of it, respectively. By the end of the visit, both were very positive and inclined to become members, probably before the Congress. Another city in the Hong Kong – Guangdong – Macao Greater Bay Area macro-metropolitan region which we did not have the time to visit, the port city of Zhuhai (adjacent to Macao), of around 3.5M, attended Wednesday's event and also clearly expressed their intent to become members. We will need to follow up, but all three sounded rather persuaded.

On Wednesday we had the event organized by Guangzhou with Chinese members (and the three potential members). This was organized at our request, and consisted of two parts. The first part was mostly protocolary speeches and a 30-minute presentation about Metropolis. In the second part, a few cities shared their experiences in international work with Metropolis, UCLG ASPAC, C40 and a couple more regional and thematic initiatives. The coffee break, lunch, and visit afterwards provided additional time to meet in person and get contact details.

Member cities Guangzhou, Harbin, Shenyang, Hangzhou, Fuzhou, Jinan, Zhengzhou, Changsha, Xiamen, Kunming, Guiyang and Xi'an, and potential members Dongguan, Zhuhai and Foshan all sent at least one person (most of them sent two, or more). Additionally, member cities Shanghai, Dalian, Wuhan, Wuxi, Jilin, Nanning and Chengdu, and potential member Qingdao* participated virtually. Agnès has the WeChat details of almost all attendees in person, which is crucial, given that this is the predominant means of communication in China now, substituting both texting and email.

We enjoyed a lot of undivided attention to present our work, and could explain Metropolis comfortably. We additionally could distribute the invitation letters, the various print outs, and visit cards. Only with time will we know the actual results, but the overall feeling Agnès and I share is that the energy in the room was positive and receptive. The session was useful to start signaling the difference between Metropolis and UCLG/UCLG ASPAC. There was interest in knowing more, and we think we will have a few Chinese members attending the Congress in Brussels. Taking into consideration that each city tends to travel with a delegation, maybe up to five (even if the Mayor cannot head it), we may be looking at a considerable number of Chinese participants at our Congress.

On the 'things to improve' side, four observations:

1. Chinese cities are ready to work with us, but we need more specific opportunities to engage in Metropolis activities, for instance thematic working groups. Our offer of contents is too abstract. We should consider a couple working groups on very specific urban management issues (transport, logistics, sanitation, solid waste, that kind of things) that Chinese cities can easily identify and decide to join.
2. Our communication needs to improve. We had some concrete points that were useful (Congress, Clearing House opportunities), but hearing us it is still difficult to imagine exactly what it is the advantage and what are the concrete opportunities that come with membership. Work in progress, of course.
3. We can definitely go beyond Guangzhou, respecting the preeminent role that the Chinese Association for Friendship with Foreign Peoples reserves to that city in the Metropolis space, that Guangzhou insists on, and that other cities acknowledge. It is not easy to activate the 'famous three': Beijing was not even responsive to my request for a meeting when I was there;

Shanghai has so far been rather silent and not very active; and, although Hong Kong is now in C40, their special status will make it difficult for them to join. But there are a number of very large cities that are active internationally and that could certainly participate more in our network (Xi'an, Chengdu, Hangzhou and Fuzhou, in particular) and other cities that are less active elsewhere and look to expand their global network (for instance cities of the northeast like Shenyang and Harbin, in the south like Guiyang, Changsha or Nanning, or the potential new members Foshan, Dongguan and Zhuhai). Yesterday's meeting may already activate them to some extent, but it now behooves us to find places and spaces to include these other Chinese cities in Metropolis activities. We have untapped potential.

4. Chinese cities make up a fifth of our official membership, and a third of our paying membership. However, our team at the General Secretariat knows next to nothing about most of them. Without knowledge, we will not think of them when we design projects, when we prepare trainings, when we communicate, or when we give examples. We need to think about ways to get to know them better as a team.

We have requested the email contacts of all participants to follow up, and I anticipate there will be activity around the Congress. Agnès, please complement, amend or contradict the above as needed!

There are strategic considerations about the Chinese cities and their role in the network, and there is a proposal by Guangzhou to open an office, I will treat those in a separate e-mail (this one is long enough already!)