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**RISING TO GLOBAL PROMINENCE: THE SUBNATIONAL ROLE
OF HAINAN PROVINCE IN CHINA'S FOREIGN RELATIONS**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the trajectory through which Hainan, an island province of China, has emerged as an international actor. Drawing on the analytical framework of subnational diplomacy and employing a qualitative research approach, this study analyses the factors that have enabled Hainan to function as an international actor across four dimensions: motivation, opportunity, strategy, and presence. A comparative analysis is conducted with Guangxi, China's southwestern subnational region bordering countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The findings indicate that the trajectory of Hainan's international participation has been shaped by a combination of factors, including its geographical location, resource endowment, economic conditions, local leadership, and national strategies. These factors have contributed to Hainan's distinctive role in China's foreign relations, which differs from Guangxi's primarily ASEAN-oriented engagement. By highlighting this contrast, the study demonstrates the diverse patterns of international participation among Chinese provinces and contributes to expanding existing research on China's subnational actors in foreign affairs.

Keywords: Subnational diplomacy, China, Hainan Province, special economic zone, free trade port.

INTRODUCTION

Since China's reform and opening-up in 1978, provincial governments have increasingly participated in international engagements and cross-border cooperation. Established in 1988 as China's youngest province and the country's largest special economic zone (SEZ) after its separation from Guangdong, Hainan likewise sought to take part in these developments. In its early days, Hainan's economy was highly underdeveloped, and its involvement in foreign activities was correspondingly limited. Today, Hainan plays a significant role in China's 21st-century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) strategy, which aims

to further integrate the country with the global economy. On April 13, 2018, during the celebration of Hainan's 30th anniversary as both a province and an SEZ, President Xi Jinping announced that the Party Central Committee had approved the establishment of a free trade pilot zone covering the entire island. The central government also committed to supporting Hainan in eventually developing a free trade port with Chinese characteristics, with operations targeted to begin by 2025. This initiative provided Hainan with a major opportunity to expand its foreign engagement, particularly by strengthening trade and economic ties with countries participating in the MSR. Nevertheless, considering that Hainan began from a relatively underdeveloped base, an important question arises: how did the province become such an active participant in international affairs within just three decades? Furthermore, has Hainan's trajectory as an international economic actor followed a path similar to that of other coastal or border provinces in China?

To address these questions, this study analyses Hainan's trajectory toward becoming an international actor by examining its international actorness through the analytical framework of subnational diplomacy. It begins with a review of the evolution of subnational diplomacy in China, followed by a brief introduction to the research site and methodology. The analytical framework of subnational diplomacy used to explore Hainan's international actorness is then outlined. The subsequent sections examine Hainan's international actorness across four dimensions—motivation, opportunity, strategy, and presence. This analysis is complemented by a comparative assessment with Guangxi, China's southwestern subnational actor, bordering countries in Southeast Asia. The article concludes with a synthesis of the key findings.

REVIEW OF CHINA'S SUBNATIONAL DIPLOMACY

In contemporary international relations, actors are no longer limited to sovereign states. Subnational governments around the world are increasingly participating in international affairs (Ali, 2025). This phenomenon has been described using various terms, including "parallel diplomacy" (Soldatos, 1990), "substate diplomacy" (Crickemans, 2010; Nganje, 2016), and "subnational diplomacy" (Mannix, 2022). Much of the existing scholarship on subnational diplomacy, however, remains centred on the United States and Europe. Comparatively less attention has been given to subnational governments in non-Western countries (Wahid et al., 2023), and scholarly interest in foreign activities of China's subnational governments only began to emerge in the early 2000s. Since China's reform and opening up in 1978, provincial governments have gradually become active participants in international activities, thereby forming an important link in the country's diplomatic and political processes (Su, 2008). In this context, Chinese provinces have actively sought development opportunities and economic benefits through their external engagements.

Over the past two decades, scholarly interest in the foreign activities of Chinese provinces has increased. During the early period of reform and opening up, China's coastal provinces were pioneers in international engagement. As a result, coastal regions such as Guangdong, Fujian, Shanghai, Shandong, and Liaoning became key focuses of academic research (Goodman & Feng, 1994; Lampton, 2001; Long, 1994; Zhu, 2016). As the reform process continued, China's inland and border provinces gradually received greater attention from the central government and became increasingly involved in international affairs by the end of the 1990s. Correspondingly, a growing body of research has emerged examining these provinces (Clarke, 2003; Colin, 2013; Mackerras & Clarke, 2009; Mackerras, 2015; Su, 2013; Tubilewicz, 2017).

In particular, Yunnan and Guangxi, two representative border provinces, have gradually moved from a peripheral position in China's foreign affairs to a more prominent role. Against the backdrop of China's deepening neighbourhood policy towards countries in Southeast Asia and supported by their geographical advantages, these two provinces have seized opportunities to engage in various forms of external interaction, including economic and trade cooperation, cultural exchanges, and collaboration on non-traditional security issues between China and Southeast Asian countries. Since the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Yunnan and Guangxi have further aligned their local policies with national strategies, seeking support from the central government in Beijing, while also competing with each other to position themselves as China's gateway to Southeast Asia (Jian et al., 2010; Lee, 2020; Li, 2019a; Liu & Song, 2021; Summers, 2021; Zhang & Li, 2020).

However, despite its proximity to Southeast Asian countries, Hainan became involved in China-ASEAN economic cooperation relatively later than Yunnan and Guangxi. Compared with these two provinces, scholarly research on Hainan's international engagement remains limited. Existing studies mainly focus on its roles in the South China Sea (SCS) issue (Li, 2019b; Long, 2016; Zha, 2001) and its place in China's broader foreign policy (Wong, 2018). As an important hub of China's 21st-century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), an important question arises: how did Hainan emerge as an active player in foreign affairs? This issue has not yet been thoroughly explored in the existing literature. This study seeks to fill this gap by systematically analysing Hainan's international actorness. In doing so, it also aims to clarify the extent to which Hainan's trajectory of international participation differs from that of other Chinese provinces.

RESEARCH SITE AND METHOD

Historically, Hainan was incorporated into the territory of China during the Han Dynasty in 110 BC. Despite its favourable tropical climate and abundant natural resources—such as rubber, iron ores, bauxite, titanium—Hainan remained geographically distant from the political centres of China's northern dynasties and therefore received relatively little attention from successive rulers. Consequently, emperors of ancient China often regarded Hainan as a suitable place for the exile of criminals (Wang, 2019). In 1912, Sun Yat-sen proposed that Hainan be established as a separate province (Chen, 2008). However, due to persistent political and military upheavals with China at the time—including the Second Revolution (China) against Yuan Shikai and the Northern Expedition—the proposal was sidelined and never realized. From 1949 to the early 1980s, Hainan was regarded as an important frontline for national defence, which delayed its economic development. Owing to its prolonged status of military preparedness, Hainan was unable to develop large-scale industries and manufacturing, with production largely limited to primary goods (Chen, 2008). For the government in Beijing, rubber production in Hainan was of particular strategic importance, as it helped ensure the needs of national defense and industrial development during the period of economic blockade and rubber embargo imposed on the newly established People's Republic of China by the United States and other Western countries (Wang, 2004). This situation gradually changed with the launch of economic reforms and the opening-up policy in 1978. Deng Xiaoping repeatedly expressed strong support for Hainan's development, believing that, given favourable conditions, Hainan could catch up with the economic achievements of Taiwan within 20 years (Chen, 2008). The clearest indication of this commitment came in 1988, when Hainan was separated from Guangdong and elevated to the status of China's newest province, while also being designated as the country's largest Special Economic Zone (SEZ).

Geographically, Hainan is an island province located in the South China Sea (SCS). It is bordered by the north by Guangdong across the Qiongzhou Strait and separated from Guangxi by the Beibu Gulf (Map 1). From a geostrategic perspective, Hainan faces Vietnam across the Beibu Gulf to the west. To the east and south, it shares the maritime boundaries in the SCS with the Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Hainan administers a maritime area exceeding 2 million square kilometres, while its land area is only about 35,400 square kilometres. It is currently the only province in China with jurisdiction over such an extensive maritime domain. Consequently, Hainan plays a central role in the development of the marine economy and the construction of artificial islands in the SCS. Leveraging these geographical advantages, the province positions itself as an important maritime region and a southern gateway to China's maritime development.

Figure 1

Map of Hainan in the South China Sea



Source. Official map released by the Ministry of Natural Resources of the People's Republic of China in 2023.

Hainan was selected as the case study because of its distinctive geographic location compared with other border provinces (see Figure 1). The SCS, located between the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, serves as a maritime hub connecting the two oceans and constitutes a crucial sea lane for the foreign trade of many East Asian countries. For China, the SCS has become a particularly sensitive area in its foreign relations, involving issues such as sovereignty disputes, international trade, and access to oil and gas, biological, and mineral resources across multiple sectors (Wang et al., 2013). Hainan has played three important roles in the SCS disputes: as a firm defender of China's historical claims and sovereignty position, a proactive articulator of China's interests, and an operational supporter in safeguarding China's national security (Li, 2019b). Given these roles, examining Hainan's international engagement—particularly the process through which it has emerged as an active international actor—holds considerable practical and analytical significance.

In addition, examining Hainan can contribute to a better understanding of the diverse pathways through which Chinese provinces participate in foreign affairs. Compared to other border provinces, Hainan possesses notable advantages in diasporic resources. As the third-largest overseas China hometown after Guangdong and Fujian, Hainan has relied on these diasporic networks to create new opportunities for foreign exchange (Liu, 2022). In particular, Hainanese social organizations—such as the Hainan Fellow Association—are widely distributed across Southeast Asia. More than 200 overseas Chinese organisations in Southeast Asia maintain friendly exchanges with Hainan (Wang, 2016). These connections provide the province with a distinctive channel for international engagement.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, with documentary analysis as the primary method of data collection. The main sources of primary data are the Hainan Statistical Yearbook and the China Statistical Yearbook. Government documents and official media reports from government websites—such as those of the People’s Government of Hainan Province, the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China—also constitute important primary sources. In addition, reports produced from government-affiliated think tanks and journal articles obtained through online academic databases are used as secondary sources to complement the primary data.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

At present, there is no unified theory of subnational diplomacy within the field of International Relations. To examine the external activities of subnational governments, scholars have generally either borrowed theoretical approaches from other disciplines or developed their own analytical frameworks. For example, Lecours (2002) drew on the theory of Historical Institutionalism (HI) and proposed that the external activities of subnational governments are shaped by institutional factors operating at the international, domestic, and local levels. Subsequently, Bursens and Deforche (2010) also applied the HI theory to analyse the evolution of the diplomatic activities of subnational governments in Belgium. Other scholars (Lee, 2020; Nganje, 2016; Royles, 2017) have likewise used the HI perspective to construct analytical frameworks for studying diplomatic activities of subnational governments.

At the same time, some scholars have developed analytical frameworks for specific research purposes, such as analysing international actorhood. In this context, actorhood refers to the set of characteristics that a subnational government must possess in order to function as an international actor. However, scholars differ in their interpretations of what constitutes actorhood, and there is currently no standardised definition. Sjöstedt (1977) argued that autonomy and capability are two key factors in assessing the potential of a political or economic entity to become an international actor. Building on this foundation, subsequent scholars (Allen & Smith, 1990; Bretherton & Vogler, 2006; Duran, 2011; Hocking, 1999) further expanded the concept of actorhood by introducing additional dimensions such as opportunity, presence, motivation, strategy, and authority.

Liu and Song (2021) argued that there is no universal template for analysing the international behaviour of subnational governments given variations in political systems, socio-economic structures, and other contextual factors. Accordingly, they proposed an analytical framework incorporating the dimensions of authority, motivation, and instruments, drawing on existing conceptualisations of international actorhood. Inspired by this approach, the present study adopts a four-dimensional analytical framework based on established components of international actorhood: motivation, opportunity, strategy, and presence.

These four dimensions are essential for a subnational government to function effectively as an international actor. Only when all four dimensions are present can stable international actorhood be sustained; no single dimension is sufficient on its own. Specifically, motivation refers to the factors that drive a subnational government to engage in external activities and serves as a prerequisite for international actorhood. Opportunity captures the favourable external conditions that enable such participation. Strategy encompasses the tools and approaches employed by the subnational government to advance local interests and shape its international image. Finally, presence emphasises that a subnational government's international role must be recognised by both the central government and by the international community, rather than being self-declared.

ANALYSIS OF HAINAN'S INTERNATIONAL ACTORHOOD

Motivation

This section examines the first dimension of Hainan's international actorhood—motivation. The analysis suggests that Hainan's role as an international actor has been primarily driven by the pursuit of economic interests. Given its relatively weak economic foundation and early setbacks following its establishment during China's initial period of opening up, Hainan faced an urgent need to stimulate local economic development. In addition, intensifying competition with neighbouring coastal provinces in the development of the marine economy and in advancing the 21st-century MSR heightened Hainan's incentive to engage actively in international affairs.

The Pursuit of Economic Interests

Historically, Hainan has been strongly motivated to pursue economic benefits to overcome its disadvantaged economic situation. Since its establishment as a province in 1988, the process of opening up had been both challenging and uneven. Despite being China's largest SEZ, Hainan did not replicate the "Shenzhen miracle." In the early 1990s, substantial domestic and foreign investments flowed into the province, making it one of the most economically active regions in China at the time. However, this rapid growth was mainly driven by real estate development and fuelled by extensive bank loans (Brødsgaard, 2009). By 1993–1994, the local real estate bubble burst, causing economic stagnation and adversely affecting foreign investment and trade. Despite its SEZ status, Hainan had arguably lost much of its competitive advantage by the late 1990s, with its level of development more closely resembling that of a slow growing inland province than a vibrant coastal economy.

At the same time, Hainan missed a key opportunity to open up to international investment. In April 1988, the provincial government proposed the development of the Yangpu Economic Development Zone through foreign investors. A preliminary agreement was reached with the Japanese company Kumigai Gumi, allowing foreign investors to lease 30 square kilometres of land on the Yangpu Peninsula for 70 years (Brødsgaard, 2009). Within this zone, investors would have enjoyed significant autonomy in economic affairs, including manufacturing, management, and exports. This proposal, however, generated significant controversy and was criticized as a new form of colonialism (Brødsgaard, 2009). Political turmoil in 1989 ultimately shelved the plan. It was only in 1992, following Deng Xiaoping's southern tour, that the Yangpu Economic Development Zone was formally authorised for development by the State Council.

However, after the proposal was shelved, the foreign-invested projects originally planned for the Yangpu Economic Development Zone were redirected to other development zones, such as the Shanghai Pudong New Area and Tianjin Binhai New Area. The eventual revival of the Yangpu Development Zone, unfortunately coincided with the bursting of the real estate bubble and the onset of the Asian Financial Crisis, both of which contributed to a prolonged slowdown in the development and construction of Hainan SEZ. In short, Hainan's challenging path toward opening up made it one of the least successful examples among China's SEZ. It fell far short of its initial ambition to weaken—or even replace—Hong Kong as China's principal economic gateway to the outside world (Brødsgaard, 2009; Mierzejewski, 2021). Nevertheless, Hainan's underperformance as an SEZ further strengthened its determination to seek and seize new opportunities to promote local economic development. As Ruan Chongwu, then Provincial Party Secretary of Hainan, observed, it was imperative to carefully review past lessons and explore concrete measures to steer the province out of its economic downturn (Chen, 2008).

The Competition with Neighbouring Provinces

Hainan's efforts to play a more active role in global engagement were also arguably motivated by the growing enthusiasm for external activities among neighbouring provinces, including Guangdong, Fujian, and Guangxi. Since 1988, while positioning itself as the southern gateway to the Chinese mainland, Hainan has had to compete with these neighbouring provinces for access to resources and support from the central government. Although Hainan is the only province with extensive maritime jurisdiction in the South China Sea, it has lacked the advantages in maritime economic cooperation with ASEAN countries enjoyed by some other coastal provinces. For instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China approved the China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund in 2011 (Kang & Luo, 2014). The fund was designed to support maritime cooperation projects with ASEAN countries, including initiatives such as the joint development of fishing production bases. However, Hainan was not assigned a specific role under this initiative. Instead, neighbouring provinces Fujian and Guangxi received funding for projects involving the development of fishery industry platforms and port cities in cooperation with ASEAN countries, notably Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia.

It is also important to note that within the national strategy of building the 21st-century MSR, competition among coastal provinces for central government resources has been particularly intense. For example, Fujian was designated as the core area for the development of the MSR, giving it a higher strategic positioning than Hainan. Consequently, the scale of investment and trade between MSR-participating countries and Fujian has far exceeded that of Hainan. Similarly, Guangdong has explicitly expressed its commitment to participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through several government policy documents, including the Implementation Plan for Guangdong Province's Participation in the BRI and Guangdong Province BRI Key Tasks Plan (2015-2017). With its strong economic foundation, well-developed sea-land-air transportation network, and the support of a free trade zone, Guangdong enjoys significant advantages in securing national policy support. Moreover, although Guangxi remains a relatively less-developed coastal province, its capacity to seize opportunities associated with the MSR should not be underestimated. Guangxi's proactive participation in external engagement through the China-ASEAN economic cooperation framework predates that of Hainan. In addition to initiatives such as the "One Axis, Two Wings" framework and the Pan-Beibu Gulf Economic Cooperation initiative, Nanning, the capital of Guangxi, has served as the permanent host city of the China-ASEAN Expo since 2004. Furthermore, Guangxi joined the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Economic Cooperation Program in 2005, becoming China's second participating

province in the mechanism alongside Yunnan (Lee, 2020). Against this backdrop, Hainan has had to make greater efforts to enhance its comparative advantages amid intense competition with neighbouring coastal provinces in foreign engagement. Strengthening cooperation with countries participating in the MSR and securing support from the central government have therefore become key objectives in its pursuit of international participation.

Opportunity

Opportunity, the second dimension of international actorness, primarily concerns the organization and hosting of international platforms, as well as the leveraging of favourable external conditions that enable a subnational government to function as an international actor. In the case of Hainan, the regular hosting of the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) has significantly enhanced the province's international visibility and strengthened its confidence in global engagement. Furthermore, as an island province strategically located in the SCS, Hainan positions itself as a key defender of China's sovereignty and national interests in the region.

The Boao Forum for Asia

Hosting the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA), often referred to as the "Asian Davos," has drawn significant international attention to Hainan, enhancing the province's visibility and strengthening its confidence in global engagement. The forum was established in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. During this period, prominent political figures—including Morihiro Hosokawa, former Prime Minister of Japan; Fidel V. Ramos former President of the Philippines; and Bob Hawke, former Prime Minister of Australia—jointly initiated the idea of establishing a high-level platform led by Asian countries to explore pathways for regional economic development, and to strengthen cooperation across Asia. This proposal received strong support from both the People's Republic of China and the Chinese business community.

On October 8, 1999, Wang Xiaofeng, then governor of Hainan, accompanied Ramos and Hawke to meet Chinese leaders at the Great Hall of the People. During the meeting, Ramos and Hawke formally proposed establishing the BFA in Hainan and requested support from the Chinese government (Lu, 2006). The Chinese leadership promptly expressed its full support for the initiative. In 2001, the inaugural conference of the BFA was successfully held in Hainan. Over the past two decades, the BFA has developed into an important multilateral platform covering a wide range of fields, including economic cooperation, political dialogue, traditional and non-traditional security, and global sustainable development. It has gradually expanded its scope from focusing primarily on Asian affairs to addressing broader global issues, thereby evolving into a forum with growing global influence. Participants at the forum typically include senior executives of multinational corporations, business leaders, prominent scholars, influential media figures, and government officials. Notable participants have included Pascal Soriot, Chief Executive Officer of Astra Zeneca, Danny Quah, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, Zanny Minton Beddoes, Editor-in-Chief of *The Economist*; and Ilya Ovcharchuk, Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation ("Partial list of confirmed participants," 2025). Their participation has brought Hainan to the forefront of international exchanges and further enhanced Hainan's international image (Zhao, 2014).

Hainan's Role in the South China Sea Issue

The South China Sea (SCS) issue has positioned Hainan as both an executor and defender of China's foreign policy in the region. In addition to the administrative responsibilities delegated by the central government, Hainan also possesses clear economic interests in this semi-enclosed sea (Zha, 2001), which has made the province an active and important participant in matters related to the SCS (Li, 2019b). Hainan has consistently supported China's historical claims and official position in the SCS dispute through a series of initiatives. For instance, Luo Baoming, former Party Secretary of Hainan, described the SCS as the "ancestral sea" of the Hainanese people (Xu, 2016). This statement was later echoed by the central leadership, including Xi Jinping ("Xi meets Mattis," 2018). In addition, the Hainan government established the SCS Museum, which covers an area of 70,870 square metres and is dedicated to collecting and studying archival materials and artefacts related to the SCS. The museum aims to provide documentary evidence supporting China's sovereignty claims and to reinforce the country's defence of territorial integrity (Wang & Wei, 2015).

In addition, Hainan has also actively participated in exploration, development, and utilization of oil, gas and methane-integrated resources in the SCS since the mid-2000s (Yang, 2006). In line with China's policy of "setting aside differences and pursuing joint development" in the SCS, scholars from Hainan proposed the Pan South China Sea Economic Circle (Yu et al., 2008). This initiative sought to explore opportunities for cooperation with neighbouring countries in the joint development of marine resources and to promote broader economic and trade exchanges. However, this regional cooperation proposal has yet to be implemented, largely due to the ongoing disputes between China and other claimant states in the SCS, as well as Hainan's limited economic capacity.

Hainan has also been active in organising local maritime militias, which represent a form of "grey zone" strategy used to support China's claim in the SCS. The role of these maritime militias in China's SCS policy has attracted considerable international attention, particularly from the United States and Japan. This attention underscores the significance of Hainan's involvement in defending China's sovereignty claims in SCS (Li, 2019b). Following a visit by Xi Jinping to the Tanmen maritime militia in 2013, the Hainan provincial government introduced additional subsidy policies—medical allowances, duty-related benefits and pension support—to strengthen the development of local maritime militia forces. In early 2014, the provincial government further intensified its efforts to enhance local maritime militias, by establishing a dedicated working group led by provincial Deputy Party Secretary Li Xiansheng. This group focused on militia-related affairs such as recruitment, training, upgrading infrastructure and fishing boats (Jiang & Chen, 2014). Moreover, since the establishment of Sansha City in 2012, the city has gradually assumed a number of defence-support and jurisdictional responsibilities previously managed by the provincial government. Members the Sansha maritime militia have received specialized training in areas such as communication, navigation and maritime law enforcement. They have played an important role in supporting maritime governance and responding to foreign fishing vessels that are perceived to infringe upon China's maritime rights (Hou & Yang, 2016).

Strategy

The third dimension of international actorness—strategy—focuses and approaches adopted by a subnational government to participate in foreign activities. In this context, Hainan has sought to capitalise on its development opportunities, resource endowments, and alignment with national development strategies. Through its hosting of the BFA, Hainan engages in public diplomacy aimed at enhancing its international image and influence. At the same time, the province's distinctive natural

environment has attracted global attention to its development as an international tourism island. Additionally, the construction of the Hainan Free Trade Port—supported by central government policies in China—has further stimulated Hainan’s foreign engagement and strengthened its role in international economic exchanges.

Public Diplomacy

Hainan has sought to enhance its international image and influence through public diplomacy by actively establishing various platforms for international cooperation and dialogue. In 2012, the city of Wanning was designated as the permanent venue of the China-Africa Cooperation Roundtable Conference, creating an additional platform for Hainan’s foreign exchanges in trade, investment, and cultural cooperation. Moreover, the China International Consumer Products Expo, which has been held annually in Haikou since 2021, has also become an important platform for Hainan to strengthen its economic development by leveraging foreign affairs resources. In addition, Hainan hosts numerous other regular or occasional large-scale international events every year, including the Boao International Tourism Forum, the Sanya International Mathematics Forum, the Sanya Finance International Forum, and the Wanning International Surfing Competition. Collectively, these events have enabled Hainan to enhance its global visibility, reflecting the gradual development of its public diplomacy initiatives.

In addition, Hainan has taken the initiative to create opportunities for establishing international cooperation and dialogue mechanisms, thus strengthening its participation in China’s broader and neighbourhood diplomacy. Since 2013, Hainan has successively introduced sub-forums on public diplomacy and SCS issues during the BFA annual conference. In 2015, Hainan and the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries jointly established a sub-forum for the China-ASEAN Mayors’ Dialogue, providing a platform for dialogue between Chinese provinces and cities and ASEAN countries. In particular, the Islands Economic Sub-Forum of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road has facilitated a deeper understanding among island economies of the development opportunities associated with the Hainan Free Trade Port. This initiative has helped strengthen exchanges and cooperation between Hainan and island nations and regions ("Four Hainan-themed sub-forums," 2021).

Furthermore, the availability of diasporic resources has also provided an advantage for Hainan’s public diplomacy efforts. Since April 13, 2018, the number of newly registered overseas Chinese-funded enterprises in Hainan has shown a rapid growth trend. Between 2019 and 2021 in particular, the annual growth rates of such enterprises reach 174.65% and 101.51%, respectively. By the end of 2021, a total of 2,754 overseas Chinese-funded enterprises had been registered in Hainan, accounting for 50.12% of the province’s foreign-funded enterprises. In the same year, the total investment of these enterprises reached 36.449 billion RMB ("Hainan has issued 18 measures," 2023).

International Tourism Island Construction

The development of the international tourism island construction has also been an important factor enabling Hainan to expand its global engagement. Due to its relatively small economic scale and limited industrial base, Hainan has been unable to follow the development trajectory of strongly industrialized provinces such as Guangdong and Fujian. Nevertheless, the province possesses unique advantages in terms of natural landscapes and ecological resources. As a result, Hainan has gradually developed an industrial structure led by the tourism and modern service industries in order to accelerate its economic and social development. In 2007, Hainan provincial government proposed the establishment of an

International Tourism Island Comprehensive Pilot Zone to the State Council of the People's Republic of China (Suo et al., 2010). In 2010, the State Council formally approved the proposal, elevating it from a provincial initiative to a national development strategy. According to central government guidelines, the international tourism island was envisioned to be an important platform for global economic cooperation and cultural exchange (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2009).

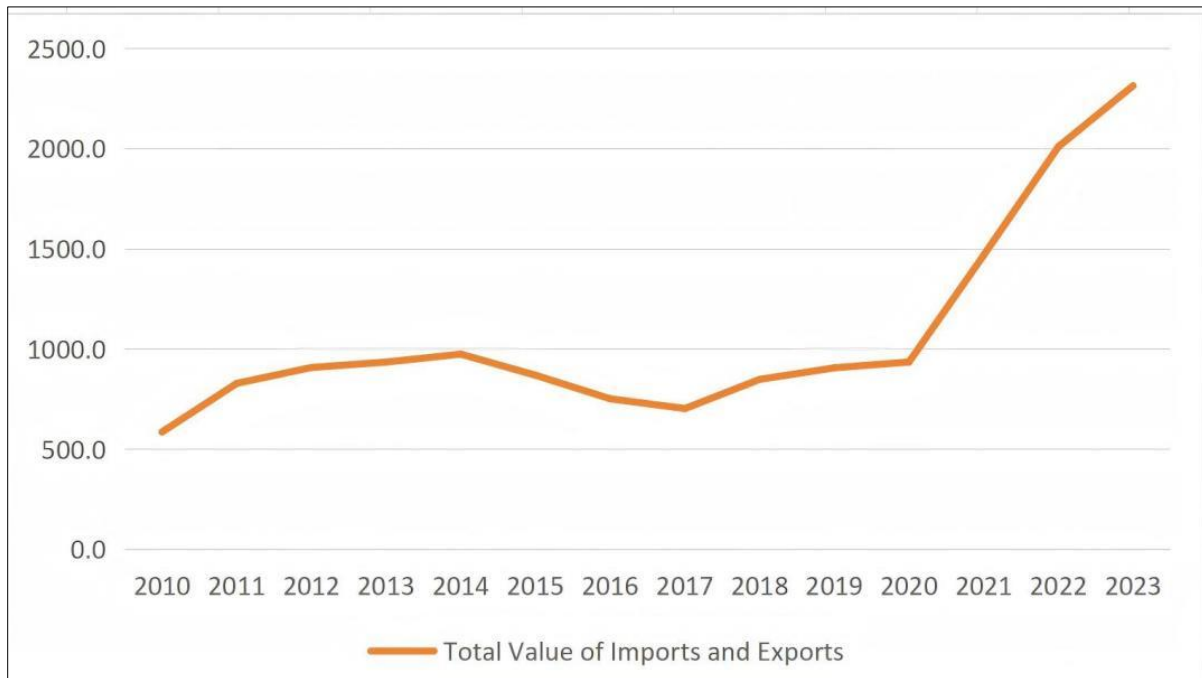
In order to align the international tourism island with the 21st-century MSR, Hainan has accelerated infrastructure connectivity by expanding international air routes and promoting what has been described as an "Air Silk Road". By the end of April 2024, Hainan had opened a total of 46 foreign passenger air routes, covering 16 countries, with the number expected to reach 80 by the end of 2025 (Li, 2025). In terms of international cargo transport, the Hainan Airport Group currently operates three major cargo routes—Haikou ⇌ Paris, Incheon ⇌ Haikou ⇌ Singapore, and Haikou ⇌ Bournemouth. These routes connect multiple international destinations and contribute to the development of a cargo transport network linking Haikou with Europe, Northeast Asia, and Southeast Asia ("Hainan has opened 46 overseas," 2024).

The Free Trade Port Construction

Hainan has further accelerated its international participation through the construction of a free trade port. In April 2018, during the celebration marking the 30th anniversary of Hainan's establishment as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), Xi Jinping announced that the central government would support the establishment of a free trade pilot zone covering the entire island, as well as the development of a free trade port with Chinese characteristics ("Xi Jinping: Speech at the conference," 2018). In his address, Xi emphasized that Hainan should leverage its unique advantages to pursue four key goals: establishing a comprehensive free trade pilot zone to deepen reform and opening up; creating a national ecological civilization pilot zone; developing an international tourism and consumption center; and building a major hub that serves national strategic objectives ("Xi Jinping: Speech at the conference," 2018). Collectively, these initiatives aim to present Hainan as a prominent showcase of China's development model and international image. At the same time, Xi also expressed the expectation that Hainan would take advantage of the free trade port initiative to strengthen cooperation in various fields with countries and regions along the 21st Century MSR. Subsequently, in 2020, the central government released the Overall Plan for the Construction of Hainan Free Trade Port, jointly issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the State Council of the People's Republic of China. The document outlined the development goals, institutional framework, and phased implementation arrangements for the construction of Hainan's free trade port ("The CPC Central Committee and the State Council," 2020). The policy advantages associated with the free trade port—such as zero tariffs, relatively low tax rates, and a simplified tax system—have not only accelerated Hainan's overall internationalization process but also strengthened its role as an important gateway for China's opening up ("The CPC Central Committee and the State Council," 2020).

Figure 2

Hainan's Total Value of Imports and Exports from 2010 to 2023 (100 million yuan)



Source: Adapted from Hainan Provincial Bureau of Statistics and Survey Office of the National Bureau of Statistics in Hainan (2024)

Hainan's foreign trade has expanded rapidly, largely stimulated by preferential policies associated with the construction of Hainan free trade port, including the implementation of the zero-tariff list (see Figure 2). Since 2020, Hainan's total value of imports and exports has increased significantly. Notably, the total value of Hainan's imports and export trade in 2023 was more than twice that recorded in 2020 and nearly three times the level of 2018. These figures indicate that the development of the free trade port has played a crucial role in promoting Hainan's foreign trade growth.

In addition, Hainan has achieved substantial progress in attracting foreign investment, as reflected in the notable increase in the actual utilization of foreign capital. From 2018 to 2020, the province's actual use of foreign investment doubled for three consecutive years (see Table 1). Between 2018 to 2022, the cumulative actual utilization of foreign investment in the province exceeded the total amount recorded during the first 30 years following its establishment as an SEZ. In 2022 alone, 1,320 newly established foreign-invested enterprises were registered in Hainan, placing the province among the top ten in China in terms of both the number of newly established foreign-invested enterprises and the volume of actual foreign investment utilized ("Hainan foreign investment enterprise," 2023).

Table 1

Actual Use of Foreign Investments in Hainan (2012-2022) (10,000 USD)

Year	Amount of Hainan's actual use of foreign investments	Growth rate of Hainan's actual use of foreign investments (Compared to previous year)	Growth rate of China's actual use of foreign investments (Compared to previous year)
2022	370716	5.3%	4.5%
2021	351927	16.0%	21.2%
2020	303324	99.5%	5.7%
2019	152020	85.7%	2.1%
2018	81876	-64.5%	1.5%
2017	230598	4.1%	2.0%
2016	221561	-10.1%	4.1%
2015	246567	28.7%	5.6%
2014	191558	5.8%	1.7%
2013	181060	10.3%	5.3%
2012	164119	3.8%	-3.7%

Notes. Calculations using data from Hainan Provincial Bureau of Statistics (n.d) and China Statistical Yearbook Network (2025).

Presence

The fourth dimension of Hainan's international actorness is presence, which refers to the recognition of a subnational government's foreign activities by third parties. Presence is demonstrated when external actors acknowledge the province's participation in international affairs. In this context, third-party recognition can be understood in two ways: first, the acknowledgement by the central government of Hainan's role as an international actor, and second, the recognition by foreign countries and international organizations of Hainan's participation in external activities.

Acknowledgement from the Central Government

Hainan's recognition at the national level is evident from the central government's authorization for the province to host significant national events. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Hainan plays a crucial role in shaping the China's positive image through leisure diplomacy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018). Since 2008, Beijing has repeatedly entrusted Hainan with hosting major national events. In April 2008, within just four days, Hainan held a series of grand diplomat activities in Sanya, including meetings between Hu Jintao and the leaders of four countries, as well as nine separate bilateral talks with foreign heads of state and government ("The Most Beautiful Civil Affairs Event," 2012). This marked the first time that Hainan had hosted national-level, high-profile diplomatic events on such a large scale and with such rigorous standards. It was also the first time unprecedented for any province or city outside of Beijing to conduct activities of such significance ("The Most Beautiful Civil Affairs Event," 2012).

Subsequently, in April 2011, the leaders of BRICS countries held their third summit in Sanya, culminating in the issuance of the Sanya Declaration ("Hainan's imprint shines," 2013). The summit attracted coverage from 188 media outlets across 33 countries and regions, including internationally renowned organizations such as Agence France-Presse, Reuters, and the British Broadcasting

Corporation. This widespread media attention significantly enhanced Hainan's global visibility and reputation. In 2018, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs organised a global promotional event for Hainan during which the Foreign Minister Wang Yi highlighted Hainan as China's platform to engage meaningfully with other Asian countries and the broader international community (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018).

Similarly, Hainan's national recognition as a vanguard of China's claims in the SCS is evident from its authorisation to participate in sensitive SCS affairs on behalf of the central government. The Hainan government actively supported the central government's proposal to establish Sansha City. On April 18, 2020, Sansha City established two municipal districts: Xisha District and Nansha District. Xisha District administers the Xisha and Zhongsha islands along with their surrounding sea areas, while Nansha District governs the islands and reefs of the Nansha archipelago ("The State Council approved the establishment," 2020). The administrative seat of Xisha District is located on Yongxing Island, whereas Nansha's District seat is on Yongshu Reef. From China's perspective, the establishment of these districts under Sansha City represents a more comprehensive administrative governance framework, enabling Hainan to develop service and support bases for resource exploitation and maritime rescue in the SCS. However, the move was met with strong objections from other claimant states. Vietnam argued that the creation of Xisha and Nansha districts violated its sovereignty and demanded that China rescind these actions, declaring them invalid and unrecognized (Tran, 2020). The Philippines similarly protested stating that Manila would not recognize Sansha City or its constituent units ("PH 'strongly protests' latest China move," 2020).

Acknowledgement from Foreign Countries

External recognition of Hainan is reflected in its growing interactions with countries and regions around the world. International sister-city partnerships serve as a key platform for Hainan's foreign engagement, with the number of such partnerships often indicating the province's level of internationalization. By 2024, Hainan had established ties with 68 international sister cities, while the number of international friendly exchange partners had reached 79, providing important avenues for international cooperation. For instance, as Hainan's second international sister city, Hawaii, has maintained close exchanges with the province over the years. According to Soden, Chief Representative of the Hawaii State Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism in China, both Hainan and Hawaii share extensive experience in traditional areas such as island tourism, while also identifying growing opportunities for cooperation in non-traditional fields, including education, economic and trade activities and people-to-people exchanges (Fan, 2024).

In addition, during the Global Free Trade Port Development Forum held at the BFA Annual Conference in 2023, Hainan collaborated with free trade zones of the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, and several other countries—including the United Arab Emirates, South Korea, Cambodia, and Malaysia—to launch the Global Free Trade Area (Port) Partnership Initiative. The initiative received positive responses from many free trade zones worldwide. By May 2025, Hainan had established partnerships with 39 global free trade zones, contributing to the formation of a global network of high-standard free trade zones in preparation for the implementation of customs closure operations ("Hainan welcomes its 39th global," 2025).

COMPARING THE INTERNATIONAL ACTORNESS OF HAINAN AND GUANGXI

A comparative analysis of the international actorness of Hainan and Guangxi helps to clarify Hainan's distinctive role in China's foreign policy and regional economic cooperation. Both provinces began engaging in international activities at roughly similar periods. Hainan has served as the permanent venue of the BFA since 2002, while Guangxi has hosted the China-ASEAN Expo (CAEXPO) annually since 2004. Geographically, the two provinces also share similarities. Both are located along China's southern frontier and maintain close proximity to Southeast Asian countries. However, while Hainan is an island province connected to Southeast Asia primarily by sea, Guangxi additionally shares a land border with Vietnam.

In terms of motivation for international participation, Hainan—like Guangxi—has actively engaged in external activities in pursuit of domestic economic development. The initial challenges during the early stages of China's reform and opening up encouraged Hainan to seek opportunities for economic recovery and local development. Nevertheless, the establishment of the BFA represented a major turning point in Hainan's engagement with the outside world. By contrast, Guangxi's motivation evolved somewhat differently. In the early 2000s, the region initially showed limited enthusiasm for China-ASEAN economic cooperation, largely due to concerns over potential trade shocks, particularly those arising from China's nationwide tax reforms and the reduction of import tariffs under the China-ASEAN framework. These policy changes significantly affected the border trade system, which had been the cornerstone of Guangxi's foreign trade during the 1990s (Lee, 2020). As a result, Guangxi gradually became more interested in China-ASEAN economic cooperation and eventually competed with Yunnan for the right to host the China-ASEAN Expo (CAEXPO).

In terms of opportunities and strategies for international participation, Hainan and Guangxi demonstrate notable differences. Guangxi's active engagement in China-ASEAN economic cooperation began after it secured the permanent right to host CAEXPO. Guangxi's success in winning the bid over Yunnan Province—which already possessed extensive experience in cooperation with ASEAN countries—was largely attributed to the formation of a functional coalition between Guangxi's regional leaders and central government decision-makers. This coalition was closely associated with Gao Hucheng, who had been dispatched by the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation of China to Guangxi as vice chairman on a temporary assignment. He was later promoted to vice minister of the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, further strengthening the institutional linkage between Guangxi and central policymakers (Lee, 2020). Following the establishment of the CAEXPO, Guangxi continued to promote regional initiatives such as the Pan-Beibu Gulf Economic Cooperation scheme and the construction of the Western Land-Sea Corridor, to enhance cooperation with ASEAN countries. These initiatives largely relied on path dependence stemming from earlier functional coalitions to maintain continued support from the central government (Lee, 2020).

In contrast, Hainan's early years as a province were characterized by limited opportunities to establish similar functional coalitions between local leaders and central government decision-makers. This was partly because Hainan's top leaders often served relatively short tenures due to frequent reassignment by the central government. Instead, Hainan's international recognition emerged through its role in hosting the BFA, an initiative that was initially driven by private enterprises. Prior to the inaugural BFA meeting in 2001, the China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company (COSCO), one of China's largest state-owned enterprises, had already intervened in and taken the lead in developing the Boao Water City project. At the time, COSCO chairman Wei Jiafu and Hainan governor Wang Xiaofeng accompanied former Philippine President Fidel Ramos and former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke when they

met with the then Vice President Hu Jintao. During the meeting, the proposal by Ramos and Hawke to establish the BFA in Hainan received the support of the Chinese central government (Lu, 2006). Thus, in the early stages of the BFA's establishment, entrepreneurs played a crucial bridging role between the government and the forum's initiators. Through the combined efforts of both government and enterprise actors, Hainan was able to rapidly elevate its international profile through the BFA while also helping to revitalize its previously stagnant economy.

Since the BFA has been held annually in Hainan since 2002, China's senior national leaders have regularly attended the event, thereby increasing opportunities for Hainan to interact with central government decision-makers and advocate for development initiatives. Even Xi Jinping, the paramount leader of China, has attended the BFA six times and delivered keynote speeches on China's opening up policies—far exceeding his participation in the CAEXPO. As a result, the BFA has arguably evolved into an important platform through which the international community observes China's policies of reform and opening up. Consequently, Hainan's approach to international participation differs somewhat from that of Guangxi. While Guangxi primarily focuses on cooperation with ASEAN countries, Hainan's strategic orientation—whether through the development of an international tourism island or the ongoing construction of the Hainan Free Trade Port—aims to create a platform for international engagement that is rooted in Asia while extending to the wider world, thereby supporting China's broader diplomatic objectives.

At the same time, intervention by the central government has further strengthened these differences in the international roles of Hainan and Guangxi. In the policy document *Vision and Actions for Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* (MSR) issued in 2015 by the central government, Guangxi was positioned to leverage its geographic advantages of land and maritime proximity to ASEAN countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2015). This positioning accelerated the development and opening up of the Beibu Gulf Economic Zone and the Pearl River-Xijiang Economic Belt, forming an important gateway linking the 21st Century MSR with the Silk Road Economic Belt (Wen, 2015). Although Hainan's role in this vision document was initially described primarily in terms of enhancing the development and openness of the international tourism island, the strategic positioning of Hainan had already been highlighted earlier. In 2010, the State Council of the People's Republic of China issued the *Opinions on Promoting the Construction and Development of Hainan International Tourism Island*, which clearly articulated the province's strategic role in China's broader development and opening-up agenda (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2010).

The central government expects Hainan, as a pioneer of China's opening to the outside world, to leverage the brand advantages of the BFA in promoting comprehensive regional and international exchanges in the field of economy, trade, cultural exchange, and high-level diplomacy. Through these efforts, Hainan is envisioned to develop into an important platform for international engagement, serving as China's foothold in Asia and a gateway for opening up to the wider world (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2010). Furthermore, the *Overall Plan for the Construction of the Hainan Free Trade Port* issued in 2020 by the central government proposed positioning Hainan as a testing ground for China's comprehensive deepening of reforms and the implementation of its highest level of opening-up policies. This initiative further highlights Hainan's strategic importance as the largest SEZ in China ("The CPC Central Committee and the State Council," 2020).

CONCLUSION

The distinctive trajectory of Hainan's international participation in economic and diplomatic affairs has been shaped by a combination of factors, including its geographical location, resource endowment, economic conditions, local leadership, and national strategies. Despite being the largest SEZ in China, Hainan did not replicate the development miracle of Shenzhen. Although the province faced considerable challenges during the early period of reform and opening up, the establishment of the BFA marked a crucial turning point in its development. The forum not only revitalized Hainan's previously stagnant economy but also guided the province toward a more suitable path for international engagement. Hainan's reliance on the BFA as a mechanism of public diplomacy has been evident in its efforts to leverage its island resources to develop an international tourism island and to construct a comprehensive and open Hainan Free Trade Port. This approach differs markedly from the international engagement strategy of Guangxi. While Guangxi functions primarily as China's gateway to Southeast Asia, Hainan has positioned itself as a broader platform for international exchange—rooted in Asia yet oriented toward the wider world. In this regard, the present study provides an example of the diverse patterns of international participation among Chinese provinces, and contributes to expanding existing research on China's subnational actors in foreign affairs.

With the anticipated operational launch of the Hainan Free Trade Port in 2025, its role in China's foreign relations and regional economic cooperation is expected to become increasingly significant. One of the key objectives of the port's construction is the establishment of two headquarters bases: one to support Chinese enterprises expanding into Southeast Asian markets, and another to facilitate the entry of Southeast Asian enterprises into the Chinese market. In addition, the initiative aims to promote comprehensive strategic cooperation between China and ASEAN countries through coordinated development with the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area.

Nevertheless, the construction of the Hainan Free Trade Port also faces practical challenges, including the need to further improve the business environment and strengthen related legal and regulatory frameworks. Perhaps the greatest challenge lies in identifying a development path suited to Hainan's unique conditions and in building a free trade port with Chinese characteristics—one that genuinely reflects China's high-level opening-up policies rather than merely replicating established international free trade ports such as Singapore and Hong Kong. This issue warrants further scholarly attention in future research on Hainan's evolving role in international engagement.

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