

# Qiaoxiang 2.0:

## The People's Republic of China and Diaspora Governance at the Local Level

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**MARTINA BOFULIN** is a permanent research associate at the Slovenian Migration Institute, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Novi trg 2, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia (martina.bofulin@zrc-sazu.si).

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**ABSTRACT:** The article examines recent transformations in diaspora governance at the local level, particularly the new, more integrated approach towards emigrated Chinese developed in places with longstanding and strong emigration movements. These places, known as “hometowns of Overseas Chinese” or *qiaoxiang*, have been actively reaching out to their expatriates for decades, but the initiatives and strategies for reaching out have changed recently due to central government policies, increased return migration, and the widespread use of information and communications technologies. Based on the case study of Qingtian County in the eastern province of Zhejiang, the paper examines different ways in which local government is reaching out to its members abroad, focusing on activities in the area of legal affairs and public administration, investments, digital transformation, public diplomacy, local urban restructuring, and response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings reveal innovation and experimentation at the local level rather than the passive implementation of central policies, and point to the need for further unpacking of the role of the state in diaspora engagement.

**KEYWORDS:** diaspora policies, local government, *qiaoxiang*, public diplomacy, digitisation, China.

### Introduction

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) diaspora engagement policies have been amongst the government's top decision-makers' priorities since the opening-up reforms in the 1970s. They have been pushed into an even more prominent position in the Xi Jinping 习近平 era with his “Chinese Dream” strategy and Belt and Road Initiative (Liu and van Dongen 2016). This stimulus has not only impacted the reorganisation of diaspora structures and the implementation of strategies at the PRC central-government level but has also reached the lower levels of China's bureaucratic apparatus. Recently, scholars have highlighted the most recent transformations of the diaspora engagement policies in China by examining policy priorities (Thunø 2018), specific mechanisms (Ding 2015), diaspora governance structures (Liu and van Dongen 2016), or interplay with Chinese communities abroad (Schäfer 2019; Ren and Liu 2022). Still, there is a lack of understanding of how most recent reformulations of the PRC central government's diaspora policies have played out at the local level. In addition, there is a dearth of information on how local governments implement diaspora policies, not just in China but in other states with considerable emigration. The general belief is that policies trickle down to lower levels, which are passive receivers and implementers of these policies. In this article, I first argue that local

governments are not passive recipients of top-down diaspora policies but rather innovators that can expand existing policies and activities or even design and pilot new initiatives. This understudied approach examines the actors below the central-state levels and contributes to further unpacking of the “state” in the diaspora engagement policies. It heeds the call by Alonso and Mylonas (2019: 476) for “opening a ‘black box’ of the state and studying the various actors driving diaspora policies.” A multitude of actors implement diaspora policies in China. Although the state (at various levels) was and remains central, the interactions and the relations among actors (state, migrants and diaspora associations, international organisations, etc.) significantly shape the final design and impact of diaspora policies (Liu and van Dongen 2016; Schäfer 2019).

There has been some important work done on local-level diaspora engagement in China (Huang 2003; Yow 2013; Lin and Bax 2015; Wang 2017; Hou et al. 2018; Hasić 2020; Liu 2022), but more research is needed to reveal the complex dynamics between the central government's diaspora policies and their implementation by provincial, prefecture, and county governments. In the study of China's administrative system's hierarchies, this dynamic between the central government and provincial, prefecture, and county governments is considered essential for understanding China's impressive economic growth (Donaldson 2017), while

experimentation with decentralisation is perceived to be crucial for the Party-state to adapt to a rapidly changing economic environment and generate institutional and policy innovations (Heilmann 2008). Through this mechanism of central-local relations, local governments have received greater powers over some areas of decision-making (e.g., entry and exit policies, investment policies, and resource allocation). This allows them to make provisions based on their local characteristics and even take the initiative or experiment to ensure better public services (Dong, Cui, and Christensen 2015). This greater autonomy is said to provide county-level governments with opportunities to strengthen relationships with investors (both domestic and foreign) and to enhance economic growth (Gong, Liu, and Wu 2021). This process, as argued by Teets and Noesselt (2020), is continuing and expanding with various social actors learning how to maximise benefits and/or challenge imposed central policies.

In highlighting a local government's role in engaging the diaspora, the characteristics of the locality and the plethora of social actors, and the resources at its disposal need to be considered. Areas with sustained and sizeable emigration known as "hometowns of Overseas Chinese" (*qiaoxiang* 僑鄉) have been one of the pillars of the Party-state's diaspora apparatus due to their extensive networks and experiences with emigration. These networks are crucial in connecting state and social actors across national borders (Liu and van Dongen 2016). My second argument, therefore, is that these hometowns and their administrative structures are ideally placed to experiment with and pilot new approaches in diaspora engagement because of their familiarity with diaspora members' constraints and possibilities abroad and their needs when returning home. The insight into how "Overseas Chinese work" (*qiaowu gongzuo* 僑務工作) is carried out at the local level thus confirms that place matters in the transnational spaces and has an important bearing on how the "interplay of the international migrants and the control practices of states (either disciplining or harnessing migrants' activities) that forms the transnational space, takes shape" (Collyer and King 2014: 6).

The article begins with a short contextualisation of Qingtian County as a hometown of Overseas Chinese. In what follows, I then examine the most recent local diaspora governance in Qingtian concerned with engaging the county's numerous emigrants abroad, on the one hand, and local modernisation on the other. This section provides an analysis of three fields where local diaspora governance comes to the fore: strategies and initiatives directed towards attracting diaspora returning "home," diaspora engagement activities that harness the power of information and communication technologies (ICT), and finally, local-level public diplomacy. In the concluding part, I discuss the characteristics of the local-level diaspora governance in light of China's central-government-led modernisation policies. I gathered the material for this article during my month-long fieldwork in Qingtian County in 2019. The analysis is based on content analysis of print materials published by the Qingtian County government (especially Qingtian Public Diplomacy Association's reports, Qingtian County yearbooks), official documents and speeches, and local and national media outlets' reports, as well as on participant observation conducted in Qingtian. The article examines local diaspora governance and the discourse on this governance but does not delve into the implementation, the effects of these initiatives, or their reception among the locals or diasporic members abroad.

## "Beautiful Qingtian, happy Overseas Chinese hometown": The architecture of a *qiaoxiang*

While *qiaoxiang* denotes a locality characterised by the emigration of its inhabitants, this term, as already noted (Pan 1998; Yow 2007; Li and Wong 2017), has been in the post-reform era (self-) ascribed rather indiscriminately to various municipalities and counties across China. Several authors (Huang 2003; Yow 2007; Hou et al. 2018) compared the development of *qiaoxiang* areas in China and found considerable variation in their economic and other development priorities, and the modes of their relations to the overseas populations, here designated as *qiaoxiang* architecture. Yow Cheun Hoe, taking a social constructivist approach to examine the development of these localities, compared several *qiaoxiang* areas in Guangdong and Zhejiang and, for example, characterised *qiaoxiang* in Wenzhou as "expanding *qiaoxiang*, actively stretching linkages abroad" (Yow 2007: 102) with emigrants actively maintaining ties with the hometown, where a lot of kith and kin still depend on remittances and donations. The great vitality of the connections between the *qiaoxiang* and the emigrated population is seen as Qingtian's distinguished characteristic in comparison to other types of *qiaoxiang* areas (Huang 2003), especially in the light of ICT's ubiquitous use in global trade and governance relations enabling new modes of connectivity (Hou et al. 2018). This type of *qiaoxiang* is thus characterised by "diasporic placemaking" (Liu 2022), a deliberate process of capitalising on diasporic resources to boost the consumption-based urban local economy. In other words, as such, *qiaoxiang* can be a result of local actors (mainly local authorities and the associated organisations) actively pursuing engagement with their diaspora members for the sake of local modernisation and building their development model on the financial return flows as well as on the cultural manifestations of emigration. Local resources are thus invested heavily in "heritage theatre" (emigration-related dramatic museum representations, monumental architecture, and grand ceremonies) (Wang 2017), and especially in various economic measures to transform a "traditional mundane urban space into exotic, diasporic one" (Liu 2022: 15), boasting cosmopolitanism and internationalisation in a relentless quest for advantages in the competition between China's localities (Yow 2007; Wang 2017).

All this can be applied to Qingtian, a small rural county situated on the mountainous banks of the Ou River, in the proximity of the more urban *qiaoxiang* Wenzhou. More than a century of sustained movement, primarily to Europe, but also to Asia, the Americas, and most recently Africa, has resulted in more than a half of Qingtianese moving abroad.<sup>1</sup> According to Li Minghuan and Diana Wong (2017), this particular *qiaoxiang* is characterised by a distinctive type of emigration, where the ethnically controlled and managed migration industry is symbiotically intertwined with an ethnic ownership economy in the diaspora (Li and Wong 2017). In Qingtian, the constant flows of money, objects, and people have created cultures

1. "近10萬青田籍華僑回國投資：國外生意再大也要回家" (*Jin 10 wan Qingtian ji Huaqiao huiguo touzi: Guowai shengyi zai da ye yao huijia*, Nearly 100,000 Overseas Chinese from Qingtian return home to invest: Despite good business overseas, they still want to return), *Zhongguo qiao wang* (中國僑網), 28 November 2018, [www.chinaqw.com/jkji/2018/11-28/209437.shtml](http://www.chinaqw.com/jkji/2018/11-28/209437.shtml) (accessed on 5 May 2020).

of migration (Hahn and Klute 2007) with a distinct value system, a way of life (Bofulin 2016), and an elaborate network of local-level diaspora agencies and organisations with complex diaspora policy mechanisms (Zhang 2007).

Qingtian has a long history of establishing local-level diaspora engagement structures that date back to the republican era (Belrán 2003). After a pause during the Cultural Revolution, “Overseas Chinese work” resumed in 1978 with a gradual establishment of a complex local-level rendition of 條/塊關係 *tiao/kuai guanxi* structure (Liu and van Dongen 2016) – the cooperation between the vertical “Overseas Chinese structures” at the local, provincial, and central level of government, and horizontally among different types of agencies (local government, state administrative agencies, and civil society organisations) at the local level. In Qingtian, the key organisations at the local level are the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO) and the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (ACFROC) (a civil society organisation).<sup>2</sup> Along with these are myriad other local government agencies, private entities, and associations that cooperate in local diaspora engagement policies (e.g., local public security bureau, Qingtian County court, township and village leaders, etc.). These agencies have been actively pursuing the central government’s “going out, inviting in” policy since the 1980s and devised a “Project of Overseas Chinese as the key element to return flows” (*Huaqiao yaosu huiliu gongcheng* 華僑要素回流工程) in 2001 that has promoted Overseas Chinese capital investment (Zhang 2007). Nevertheless, the policies were initially not remarkably successful in practice as Qingtian lagged behind other counties developmentally and was removed from the underdeveloped list of Zhejiang Province only in 2015.<sup>3</sup> After 2013, however, encouraged by the grand state-level strategies of “Chinese Dream” and Belt and Road Initiative, increasing mainstreaming of the diaspora engagement policies underlined by vigorous digitisation took place, as the success of these has become an essential part of China’s modernity project (Schäfer 2019). In the following section, I delve into three aspects of Qingtian diaspora governance that started a decade ago but took off in 2018, not long before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Local diaspora engagement governance for the twenty-first century

### New initiatives and infrastructure for “returned” Qingtian emigrants

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, local diaspora governance received a new impetus. The local government, departing from the previous emphasis on attracting only investment and donations, devised several documents aimed at attracting diaspora members to return to the county. Due to growing economic prosperity and increased investment opportunities in China, many developed a renewed interest in Qingtian. Consequently, and following the central government guidelines, the local government devised measures for more flexible trans-local citizenship (Schäfer 2019). In 2017, it introduced a document titled “Several opinions on promoting Qingtian’s Overseas Chinese to return to their hometowns and live prosperously.”<sup>4</sup> By promoting the return of capital and people (i.e., talents) this document also lays out concrete actions to

address the creation of economic opportunities and access to social security, housing, and children’s education for “returned” migrants.<sup>5</sup>

Re-applying for either household registration (*hukou* 戶口) (in the case of Chinese citizens with permanent residence abroad) or obtaining a residence permit (former Chinese citizens who became naturalised citizens of the countries of settlement) used to be one of the major obstacles for Qingtianese migrants, as the procedure was complicated and time-consuming, demanding many visits to relevant governmental offices. In 2019, however, a new policy for Overseas Chinese wanting to settle down in the county legally (*Huaqiao huiguo luohu xinzheng* 華僑回國落戶新政) was introduced in Qingtian, which streamlined the procedure to only one agency – the local public security bureau (PSB).<sup>6</sup> This debureaucratisation follows the key central government public administration reform called “only once” (*zui duo yi ci* 最多一次), which aims to reduce the number of visits to public service offices to only one stop at the service counter.<sup>7</sup>

Besides the administrative aspect of “return,” the greatest attention in the new local level diaspora governance is given to creating a welcoming investment environment. In 2017, the Qingtian County government established the Overseas Chinese investment projects’ trading centre to attract investment to the county and improve investment transparency for often sceptical investors. This online platform currently lists 1,227 different investment projects, providing information on project analysis, bank loan availability, and project approval to investors before they come to Qingtian and is “tailormade for Overseas Chinese investors.”<sup>8</sup> Another ambitious project approved in 2018 – the “Zhejiang (Qingtian) Overseas Chinese economic and cultural cooperation pilot zone” – is said to be one of Zhejiang Province’s top ten initiatives for opening up to

2. Qingtian county local compilation editorial committee 青田縣地方誌編纂委員會 (eds.). 2020. 青田年鑑 2018 (*Qingtian nianjian* 2018, Qingtian yearbook 2018). Beijing: Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe.
3. “浙江: 26縣摘掉‘欠發達’帽子努力變‘綠富美’” (*Zhejiang: 26 xian zhai diao ‘qianfada’ maozi nuli tuibian ‘lü fumei’*, Zhejiang: 26 counties that took off the underdeveloped cap are trying to become “green, rich, and beautiful”), *Gov.cn* (中國政府網), 28 February 2015, [www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-02/28/content\\_2822995.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-02/28/content_2822995.htm) (accessed on 6 May 2020).
4. Zhejiang government’s service platform 浙江政務服務網, “部門年度重點工作目標 (2018年)” (*Bumen niandu zhongdian gongzuo mubiao (2018 nian)*, Department annual key work targets, 2018, <http://lisqt.zjzwfw.gov.cn/col/col87290/index.html> (accessed on 5 July 2019).
5. The media report on an extremely high number of returnees – more than 100,000 persons. In the absence of reliable statistics, the sceptics among the Qingtian public speak about not more than 10,000 people. “十萬僑商‘回鄉記’” (10 wan qiaoshang “huixiangji,” 100,000 overseas entrepreneurs “return home”), *Xinhuanet.com* (新華網), 12 July 2018, [www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-07/12/c\\_1123114596.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-07/12/c_1123114596.htm) (accessed on 2 March 2020).
6. “青田再造流程助力歸國華僑落戶” (*Qingtian zaizao liucheng zhuli guiguo Huaqiao luohu*, Qingtian simplified process that will help Overseas Chinese to settle down), *The Paper* (澎湃新聞), 20 August 2019, <http://paper.snews.com.cn/lrpb/attachment/201908/20/874c2e1e-edee-4e56-a3db-50e8015248fc.pdf> (accessed on 7 February 2020).
7. Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council 國務院僑務辦公, “僑胞們, 別來回跑啦! 這些業務都能線上辦!” (*Qiabaomen, bie laihui pao la! Zhaxie yewu dou neng xianshang ban!* Overseas Chinese comrades, don’t come back! You can do this business online!), 11 November 2020, [www.gqb.gov.cn/news/2020/11/11/50033.shtml](http://www.gqb.gov.cn/news/2020/11/11/50033.shtml) (accessed on 20 May 2021).
8. Overseas Chinese investment projects’ trading centre 僑鄉投資項目交易中心, “中心簡介: 僑鄉投資項目交易中心” (*Zhongxin jianjie: Qiaoxiang touzi xiangmu jiaoyi zhongxin*, Introduction: Overseas Chinese investment projects’ trading centre), 2017, <https://www.qtpcc.com/#/yyzx/zxj?categoryId=9> (accessed on 1 June 2020); “青田高質量發展華僑經濟” (*Qingtian gao zhiliang fazhan Huaqiao jingji*, Qingtian’s high quality development of Overseas Chinese economy), *People’s Daily Online* (人民網), 4 January 2019, <http://finance.people.com.cn/n1/2019/01/04/c1004-30502974.html> (accessed on 5 June 2020).

the outside world and an important contribution of Qingtian County to the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>9</sup> The pilot zone includes several key projects aimed at invigorating the Qingtian economy: Overseas Chinese imported goods city, the world red wine centre, the world Overseas Chinese imported goods expo, and imported wine fair. The flagship project is the Overseas Chinese imported goods city, a huge investment in a sprawling mall-type commercial platform selling imported goods from abroad. By 2019, more than 100 companies and 300 stores were selling a dazzling array of imported goods, including the mainstay of imported goods in China (wine, milk powder, cosmetics, and children's nappies) as well as more obscure European local produce. The county officials envisioned this project, set up ten kilometres outside the county seat, as the key investment opportunity not only for wealthy businessmen but also for small local entrepreneurs. The latter could capitalise on their European networks by importing and selling items of everyday use from foreign countries after returning and resettling in Qingtian or while staying in Europe and investing in China. For this reason, they even established an in-house customs office that ensures swift processing of fast-moving consumer goods such as dairy or meat.<sup>10</sup>

Current diaspora governance initiatives not only aim at achieving economic prosperity, but also at culturally renewing the century-old *qiaoxiang* by gradually introducing more and more Western elements in the experiential character of Qingtian. This urban transformation entails the construction of "European-style" buildings with faux European historical architectural styles and symbolic references to Europe (e.g., Napoleon statue, Johann Strauss statue, a life-size replica of a Dutch windmill). There is also a strategic and sustained effort to standardise the particular brand of local "European Overseas Chinese culture" by creating "brands" and regulations that designate a "Western" experience in Qingtian: coffee bars, Western food establishments, wineries, and the world red wine centre with its imported wine fair. The county has also devised training called "Qingtian Western restaurant master" focused on nurturing Qingtianese Western food chefs, baristas, sommeliers, and pastry chefs. More projects extolling "Overseas Chinese experience" are underway: a new Overseas Chinese museum, the Overseas Chinese health care centre, education project for Overseas Chinese children, etc.<sup>11</sup>

The described initiatives' primary short-term goal is to attract emigrants, their skills, and investment to serve Qingtian and construct an economically more welcoming environment for those returning to settle. Moreover, beyond these short-term goals, the long-term goals pertain to total urban and rural transformations, giving rise to Qingtian as a tourism hotspot with unique fusion culture, branded to domestic and foreign visitors as an authentic mixture of West and East.

### Going online: The development of virtual service platforms for qiaoxiang's diaspora

In the case of engagement with its overseas populations through fast-developing ICT, Qingtian undertook pioneering work in many ways. The beginnings go back as far as 2007, when the local county court started experimenting with proceedings that involved overseas clients without their physical presence. The first such case was a housing dispute between the plaintiffs in Spain and defendants in China using the Tencent QQ service.<sup>12</sup> This pilot, called the "QQ

video court trial model" (QQ *shipin tingshen moshi* QQ視頻庭審模式), attracted a lot of attention and was one of the provincial top ten legal news items at that time.<sup>13</sup> The Qingtian court successfully upgraded the model to an "overseas online court" (*sheqiao wanglu fating* 涉僑網路法庭) in 2014 and "mobile micro court" (*yidong wei fayuan* 移動微法院) in 2018.<sup>14</sup> Following the national policy of establishing overseas "service centres" (Ceccagno and Thunø 2022), the Qingtian court set up five "Overseas Chinese litigation service centres" and "judicial liaison platforms" where prominent Qingtianese from abroad were hired to serve as overseas liaison officers, investigators, and jurors.<sup>15</sup> According to local sources, this approach has resolved many problems endemic to a locality with a large part of the population living transnational lives. In the past, the local court experienced difficulties with regard to obtaining emigrants' necessary legal documents, notarisation, the actual appearance of parties living abroad before the court, the long cycle of trials, and enforcement of court rulings.<sup>16</sup> With these new measures, Qingtian predated not only other *qiaoxiang* localities but also the central government institutions – at the national level, the first online court was established in Hangzhou in 2017, followed by Guangzhou and Beijing Internet courts established only in 2018.<sup>17</sup>

Another early example of an innovative approach to expanding online services for their local constituency abroad is "Sister Ye's study," a local All-China Women's federation project. Since 2018, under the guidance of Yinwei Ye or Sister Ye, a combination of online and offline counselling, education, and mediation activities aimed at resolving family disputes, psychological counselling for families, caring for women's mental health, and protection against domestic violence have been organised. For Qingtianese women abroad, Sister Ye formed a special WeChat group called "Qingtian

9. "浙江(青田)華僑經濟文化合作試驗區建設十大標誌性工程: 印發" (*Zhejiang (Qingtian) Huaqiao jingji wenhua hezuo shiyan qu jianshe shi da biaozhi xing gongcheng: Yinfā*, Zhejiang (Qingtian) Overseas Chinese economic and cultural cooperation pilot zone builds ten big iconic projects: Press release), *Qingtian wang* (青田網), 25 July 2019, [www.zgqt.zj.cn/qingtian/h5/web/details/pc/564335](http://www.zgqt.zj.cn/qingtian/h5/web/details/pc/564335) (accessed on 16 May 2020).
10. "浙江青田縣委書記: 搭平台打'僑牌'引僑商回歸" (*Zhejiang Qingtian xian weishuji: Da pingtai da 'qiaopai' yin qiaoshang huigui*, Secretary of Zhejiang Qingtian Party committee: Building a platform to realise the "Overseas Chinese brand" and attract Overseas Chinese businessmen), *Chinanews.com* (中國新聞網), 22 April 2017, [www.chinanews.com/hr/2017/04-22/8206316.shtml](http://www.chinanews.com/hr/2017/04-22/8206316.shtml) (accessed on 3 April 2021).
11. "浙江(青田)華僑經濟(...)" (*Zhejiang (Qingtian) Huaqiao jingji (...)*), Zhejiang (Qingtian) Overseas Chinese economic (...), op. cit.
12. Tencent QQ is an instant messaging software service that was ubiquitous in China before the arrival of Tencent's WeChat multipurpose mobile app.
13. "浙江青田'移動微法院'巧妙化解華僑糾紛" (*Zhejiang Qingtian 'yidong wei fayuan' qiaomiao huajie Huaqiao jiufen*, "Mobile micro court" from Qingtian, Zhejiang cleverly resolves disputes between Overseas Chinese), *Chinanews: Zhejiang* (中國新聞網: 浙江), 19 June 2019, [www.zj.chinanews.com/jzkzj/2019-06-19/detail-izkzhie5802573.shtml](http://www.zj.chinanews.com/jzkzj/2019-06-19/detail-izkzhie5802573.shtml) (accessed on 14 April 2020).
14. See footnote 13.
15. "打造海外版'楓橋經驗': 浙江青田涉僑跨域糾紛多元化解" (*Dazao haiwai ban 'Fengqiao jingyan': Zhejiang Qingtian sheqiao kuajing jiufen duoyuan huajie*, Creating an overseas "Fengqiao experience": Zhejiang's Qingtian overseas transnational dispute resolution), *Renmin fayuanbao* (人民法院報), 29 October 2020, [www.court.gov.cn/zixun-xiangqing-267251.html](http://www.court.gov.cn/zixun-xiangqing-267251.html) (accessed on 5 June 2021).
16. "青田多元化解涉僑糾紛模式解讀" (*Qingtian duoyuan huajie sheqiao jiufen moshi jiedu*, The interpretations of the Qingtianese diversified model of dispute resolution), *Legaldaily.com* (法製網), 10 October 2019, [www.legaldaily.com/mediation/content/content\\_8014173.htm](http://www.legaldaily.com/mediation/content/content_8014173.htm) (accessed on 20 May 2020).
17. Du Guodong 杜國棟 and Yu Meng 餘萌, "China's Supreme Court Issues a White Paper on Chinese Courts and Internet Judiciary," *China Justice Observer*, 8 December 2019, <https://www.chinajusticeobserver.com/a/supreme-peoples-court-issues-a-white-paper-on-china-court-and-internet-judiciary> (accessed on 13 May 2020).

County marriage and family growth group” (*Qingtian xian hunyin jiating xingfu chengzhang weixin qun* 青田縣婚姻家庭幸福成長微信群). Here, she posts online classes on family and marriage from legal, psychological, and other aspects as well as carrying out virtual consultations.<sup>18</sup> Most recently, Sister Ye has expanded her activities overseas as she has, with the help of Qingtianese abroad, established a branch in the Czech Republic for “timely, efficient, and accurate services for women and children of Qingtian origin in the Czech Republic.”<sup>19</sup>

Since 2018, further online services for Qingtianese emigrants have been established in Qingtian. The Qingtian PSB founded a non-profit organisation called overseas police station (*jingqiao yizhan* 警僑驛站), which works closely with the overseas service centres abroad and has hired 135 emigrants as consultants, deputy directors, and liaison officers. The station reaches Qingtianese abroad through their WeChat account “Global Office,” where they can arrange matters related to entry and exit, vehicle management, electronic certification of documents, and administrative approval through virtual meetings and without the need of returning to China.<sup>20</sup> Yet, another even more ambitious undertaking is an online service by the ACFROC “world e-matrix” (*qiaolian tianxia e-juzhen* 僑聯天下e矩陣). It is a hierarchical network of the county’s representatives of ACFROC and Overseas Chinese association heads, village-level heads, and members of overseas associations. It is divided into overseas and domestic activities, with the county’s ACFROC leaders mediating between the two. These are achieved through large numbers of WeChat groups connecting villages, various governmental bodies, non-profit organisations, and other relevant institutions in Qingtian with overseas constituencies.<sup>21</sup> Other government departments and agencies also offer their services online. In 2019, for example, a centre for handling tax-related matters and payment of social security premiums was established.<sup>22</sup>

The process of local services going transnational took off just before the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in China. The urge to fight against the spread of the virus gave the newly established platforms a strong impetus for further development. At the onset of the pandemic, the platforms were information lifeblood for Qingtianese abroad about their kin as well as the general situation in Qingtian. In the first months of the pandemic in 2020, they played a crucial role in communicating the patriotic concern of Overseas Chinese for their motherland, the *qiaoxiang*’s care for their overseas members, the logistics of accessing the protective equipment, as well as the apprehension and measures towards “imported cases.” When the virus started to spread rapidly in Italy, Spain, and other European countries, the platforms served as hotlines for medical advice, dissemination of protective equipment and medicine, as well as legal and psychological counselling. According to local sources, e-matrix organised 530 WeChat and DingTalk groups at home and 1,600 abroad, and claimed to have a coverage rate of 95% among Qingtianese living in Europe. The e-matrix organised shipments of protective equipment from Qingtian to Europe and was used for collecting donations for the Overseas Chinese charity relief fund. Doctors from Qingtian County hospital and other medical institutions in Lishui Prefecture provided medical counselling for distressed Overseas Qingtianese who often lacked information or access to relevant institutions in their countries of settlement.<sup>23</sup> These

platforms were also used to fight the spread of panic among Overseas Qingtianese and to discourage returning home to decrease the influx of the virus into the county.

In the last few years, the Qingtian County government has taken steps to fully utilise the potential of ICT in bridging the physical distance between Qingtian and emigrants. The distance as an obstacle to closer, day-to-day interaction between emigrants and the *qiaoxiang* can now be overcome by membership in WeChat and DingTalk group-based services. The county’s current activities using ICT to deliver services are not only expanding existing central government guidelines on enhancing public services for emigrants at home and abroad<sup>24</sup> but are also the result of a more than decade-long local experimentation with new approaches to delivering services to overseas constituencies. While many of these digital services are responding to the real needs of emigrants and aim to cast the Party-state as responsive and effective, at the same time they enable the gathering and streamlining of a large amount of information on emigrants, something not previously possible in analogue mode. In this way, ICT-enabled diaspora governance is both part of “caring and serving” (see van Dongen in this special feature) and of monitoring and controlling. In addition, these mechanisms are now taking place across borders and exclusively in virtual space, circumventing traditional channels of the state’s interaction with its citizens abroad (e.g., through embassies) and therefore greatly expanding the conventional reach of local governments over their emigrant constituencies.

### “Overseas Chinese as a bridge”: The practice of Chinese public diplomacy in Qingtian

In recent decades, diasporic Chinese are increasingly seen as important targets as well as actors of Chinese public diplomacy who can lobby for Chinese interests abroad and impact public opinion in the countries of settlement (d’Hooghe 2011; Thunø 2018). Endorsing Overseas Chinese as “public diplomats” signals an important change

18. “青田女版‘老娘舅’ 葉姐工作室有看頭” (*Qingtian nü ban ‘lao Niang jiu,’ Yejie gongzuo shi you kan tou*, Qingtian’s female version of “Old uncle Niang” Sister Ye’s Studio is worth following), *The Paper* (澎湃新聞), 12 July 2019, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_3915668](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_3915668) (accessed on 7 February 2020); Personal interview notes, August 2019, Qingtian.
19. “葉姐工作室海外工作站(捷克站)成立” (*Yejie gongzuo shi haiwai gongzuo zhan (Jieke zhan) chengli*, Sister Ye’s studio overseas branch (Czech Republic) was established), *Qingtian wang* (青田網), 21 January 2020, [www.zgqt.zj.cn/6870782.html](http://www.zgqt.zj.cn/6870782.html) (accessed on 7 February 2021).
20. “青田警僑驛站海外服務中心正式啟動” (*Qingtian jingqiao yizhan haiwai fuwu zhongxin zhengshi qidong*, Qingtian overseas police station service centre officially launched), *Qingtian wang* (青田網), 30 September 2018, [www.zgqt.zj.cn/5264668.html](http://www.zgqt.zj.cn/5264668.html) (accessed on 16 May 2020).
21. Yao Hui 姚慧, “青田用心解決海外華僑華人‘心頭小事’: ‘e矩陣’串起海外鄉親鄉情” (*Qingtian yongxin jie jue haiwai Huaqiao Huaren ‘xintou xiaoshi’: ‘e-juzhen’ chuan qi haiwai xiangqin xiangqing*, Qingtian solves “little problems” of Overseas Chinese: “E-matrix” strings up the feelings of compatriots), *The Paper* (澎湃新聞), 28 July 2020, [http://paper.people.com.cn/mrbhwb/html/2020-07/28/content\\_2000043.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/mrbhwb/html/2020-07/28/content_2000043.htm) (accessed on 7 February 2021).
22. Zhejiang Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese 浙江省歸國華僑聯合會, “好消息! 青田縣為海外僑胞推出‘涉僑不見面全球代辦’服務” (*Hao xiaoxi! Qingtian xian wei haiwai qiaobao tuichu ‘sheqiao bu jianmian quanqiu daiban’ fuwu*, Good news! Qingtian County launches “Global virtual agency for Overseas Chinese”), 23 June 2020, [www.zsqj.com.cn/index.php?m=content&c=index&a=show&catid=14&id=44131](http://www.zsqj.com.cn/index.php?m=content&c=index&a=show&catid=14&id=44131) (accessed on 5 May 2021).
23. See footnote 20.
24. Xu Yousheng 許又聲, “Report to the State Council on work to protect the rights and interests of Overseas Chinese (Translation),” 10 June 2020, <https://cset.georgetown.edu/research/report-to-the-state-council-on-work-to-protect-the-rights-and-interests-of-overseas-chinese> (accessed on 5 June 2021).

in the government's policy (Thunø 2018) and aligns with the new public policy approach in Xi Jinping's administration, one that is transitioning from "listening" to "telling," as in "telling the China story well, spreading China's voice well" (Xi Jinping quoted in Zhao 2019: 174).

In this process, *qiaoxiang* Qingtian has emerged as an important actor in China's multilevel public diplomacy mechanism. In March 2013, the Qingtian Public Diplomacy Association (QPDA) was established. This is the first county-level public diplomacy association in China, a fact reiterated with much pride in the association's communications.<sup>25</sup> In the province of Zhejiang, there are only two other public diplomacy associations, one in Hangzhou and the other in Wenzhou, both first- and second-tier cities. The leaders of the QPDA are selected among county-level representatives of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), local level United Front departments (e.g., All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese), and county government departments (e.g., public security bureaus' exit and entry administration).<sup>26</sup> The association aims to adhere to the goal of the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party of forming a positive image of China, but at the same time clearly emphasises the local dimension:

The association has always followed the concept "The country's image is formed by its people" and has aimed to serve the national diplomacy and the economic and social development of Qingtian. With the focus on Qingtian people at home and abroad, the association has shown the courage to research and innovate, to build on the local characteristics and create (local) brands.<sup>27</sup>

One of the main stated tasks of the QPDA is the consolidation and further development of the association, especially the quality of its directors as well as representatives of Overseas Chinese abroad who participate in public diplomacy. They use seminars and training classes to train the directors, most often organised by an umbrella organisation, the China Public Diplomacy Association (CPDA), or provincial and central-level state organs. Many training sessions for the associations' members are jointly organised by associations from Wenzhou, Hangzhou, Nanjing, and Qingtian, while members of the QPDA are often sent out on "study tours" (*xuexi kaocha* 學習考察) to other public diplomacy associations. The QPDA is also visited by a number of other public diplomacy associations much higher in the administrative hierarchy.<sup>28</sup> These activities highlight the relative importance of Qingtian and notably increase the relative power of the county in comparison to not only the same-level localities, but also in comparison to higher administrative bodies (e.g., recognition from the Zhejiang Province CPPCC for being an "example of innovation" – *chuangxin anli* 創新案例).<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, implementing public diplomacy at the local level has allowed the local government to reevaluate and reestablish existing ties with representatives of local Overseas Chinese organisations abroad. The overall central government initiative on public diplomacy and the establishment of the local QPDA recognises these individuals not only for their role in local development but also for shaping the image of China abroad and assisting the central government's diplomatic efforts. The QPDA has thus designated

them as "people's diplomats" (*minjian waijiao jia* 民間外交家) and has invited them to "recharge and polish the business card of local public diplomacy."<sup>30</sup> One of these people's diplomats, the president of the Overseas Chinese association in Venice and the founder of the Sino-Italian International School in Padua, Zhou Yong, stated that "public diplomacy is the responsibility of every Overseas Chinese. Our foreign friends learn to understand Chinese people, Chinese culture, and finally, the Chinese state through Overseas Chinese. The conditions of diplomatic relations between two states impact the life and work of Overseas Chinese; for this reason, every Overseas Chinese is also a diplomatic envoy."<sup>31</sup>

Apart from networking and training, the QPDA has organised or participated in a wide variety of events at home and abroad in the seven years of its existence. In its reports,<sup>32</sup> these events are categorised by central policy aims, e.g., Belt and Road Initiative, sincere sentiment (*chizi zhi xin* 赤子之心), social activities and integration. The activities include but are not limited to liaison between chambers of commerce in Qingtian and abroad, promoting peaceful reunification with Taiwan and the resolution of the South China Sea dispute, protesting visits by the Dalai Lama, and conducting commemoration services for Chinese who die abroad.<sup>33</sup> They also engage in a variety of cultural and philanthropic activities.

Meetings with foreign dignitaries abroad and in China, donations, cultural exchanges, promotion of China and Qingtian, and trade and business collaborations have been essential to the construction of *qiaoxiang* ever since the opening up and (re)establishment of Qingtianese communities abroad. However, as claimed by a *Chinanews* report,<sup>34</sup> it was only after the creation of the QPDA that

25. Qingtian Public Diplomacy Association 青田公共外交協會. 2019. 青田公共外交協會實踐2013-2017年度 (*Qingtian gonggong waijiao xiehui shijian 2013-2017 niandu*, The practice of Chinese public diplomacy in Qingtian in 2013-2017). Qingtian: Qingtian Public Diplomacy Association.
26. Qingtian Public Diplomacy Association 青田公共外交協會. 2019. 青田公共外交案例 – 2018 (*Qingtian gonggong waijiao anli – 2018*, Cases of Qingtian public diplomacy – 2018). Qingtian: Qingtian Public Diplomacy Association.
27. Qingtian Public Diplomacy Association 青田公共外交協會. 2019. 青田公共外交 (...) (*Qingtian gonggong waijiao (...)*, The practice of Chinese public diplomacy (...)), op. cit.
28. Ibid.
29. General office of the Zhejiang provincial committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference 政協浙江省委員會辦公廳, "浙江省政協工作'創新案例'簡介" (*Zhejiang sheng zhengxie gongzuo "chuangxin anli" jianjie*, Introduction to the "innovative cases" of the Zhejiang provincial committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference), 19 November 2019, [www.zjzx.gov.cn/Upload/zjszx/ContentManage/Article/File/202001190936316996.pdf](http://www.zjzx.gov.cn/Upload/zjszx/ContentManage/Article/File/202001190936316996.pdf) (accessed on 5 May 2020).
30. "僑鄉青田依靠25萬華僑優勢擦亮公共外交新名片" (*Qiaoxiang Qingtian yikao 25 wan Huaqiao youshi ca liang gonggong waijiao xin mingpian*, The hometown of Overseas Chinese, Qingtian, relies on the advantages of 250,000 Overseas Chinese to promote public diplomacy), *Chinanews.com* (中國新聞網), 8 April 2014, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/qxcz/2014/04-08/6040746.shtml> (accessed on 21 November 2022).
31. Ibid.
32. Qingtian Public Diplomacy Association 青田公共外交協會. 2018. 青田公共外交案例 – 2017 (*Qingtian gonggong waijiao anli – 2017*, Cases of Qingtian public diplomacy – 2017). Qingtian: Qingtian Public Diplomacy Association.
33. Two commemorations are mentioned: the commemoration of Chinese "martyrs" in Belgrade who died in the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in 1999, and the commemoration service for Liu Shaoyao 劉少堯, who was shot by French police in Paris in 2017. Qingtian Public Diplomacy Association 青田公共外交協會. 2019. 青田公共外交 (...) (*Qingtian gonggong waijiao (...)*, The practice of Chinese public diplomacy (...)), op. cit.
34. See footnote 30.

“Qingtian’s scattered and spontaneous public diplomacy began to become systematised and organised.” But while there is no doubt that the establishment of the QPDA gave new impetus to a decades-long campaign of “going out and inviting in,” closer examination of the QPDA’s work reveals that these activities remain scattered and are still highly contingent on the (human) resources the QPDA has at its disposal at home and abroad. For this reason, most of the events lean towards diverse examples of cultural exchange, which is the most benevolent type of public diplomacy. At the same time, the activities are concentrated in only a few countries of settlement (e.g., Italy, Bulgaria, Serbia, Austria), either because of a large number of Qingtianese or because of active Qingtianese being willing to serve as “public diplomacy envoys.” The reports’ photographic material reveals that these activities are still predominantly oriented towards diaspora members, with only a small number of non-Chinese attending the activities organised or co-organised by the QPDA. This points to the fact that Qingtian diaspora networks still have only a limited reach to local populations in the receiving countries, reflecting the largely marginal position of Qingtianese in these societies. They are, however, increasingly recognised by higher levels of diaspora governance within China.

### Discussion: Characteristics of qiaoxiang-style diaspora governance

Despite the influential critique of the free-floating notions of space and calls for locating and placing transnational processes (Collyer and King 2014) and the international organisations’ promotion of local governments as crucial in engaging their members abroad (Agunias 2010), studies of local-level diaspora engagement policies are scarce. In the context of China, Kang (2016) and Hasić (2020) have shed some light on the diaspora engagement policies of Shanghai, especially in terms of talent attraction and return. But the scale, as well as the historical underpinnings, are much different in *qiaoxiang* localities, which are characterised by long-term and sustained processes of emigration but also their mostly rural location and low position within the hierarchical, bureaucratic system in China.

While *qiaoxiang* localities differ in their perception of development and consequent motivation and mode of engagement with diaspora (Huang 2003; Yow 2013; Hou et al. 2018), Qingtian is characterised by active migration flows (emigration and return movement), which give the local government ample opportunities to intervene in diasporic networks and apply policies that lead to thickening (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999) of existing diaspora networks. One of the main tools at its disposal is the communication technologies used to effectively bridge the physical divide between the diasporic populations abroad and the *qiaoxiang*. Here, the local government harnesses an immense communication potential of web 2.0 solutions that enable interactive modes of engagement and collaboration of users, unlike the mostly one-way interaction and passive use of web 1.0 tools. The use of WeChat and DingTalk group accounts is not unique to *qiaoxiang* – there is a sweeping e-government reform taking place across China with strong participation of some local governments (Gao 2020). Still, the increasing integration activities between home-based networks and abroad-based networks (e.g.,

world e-matrix) are specific to these emigration localities and a crucial aspect of the “expanding *qiaoxiang*” (Yow 2007), which experiments with these new tools to more effectively reintegrate populations abroad and inform, promote, and disseminate policy priorities beyond the domestic and national territory.

Apart from connecting with diasporic members abroad, digitisation also serves other national priorities in diaspora governance, most notably ensuring responsive and effective protection and caring for Chinese abroad and therefore increasing the acceptance of the Chinese Communist Party regime (Ceccagno and Thunø 2022). In concrete terms, the *qiaoxiang* works to fulfil the priorities of “enhancing public services at home and abroad for Overseas Chinese,” “promoting Overseas Chinese rights and interests,” and “encouraging and supporting Overseas Chinese compatriots to repatriate”<sup>35</sup> by making a range of services (arranging residence status, online judicial processes, tax returns, access to investment opportunities, etc.) more readily available to emigrants. Through these activities and accompanying discourse, the local government manages to recast the Party-state as “a caring guardian of the people” (Nguyen and Chen 2017), including the people outside its direct territorial reach, especially in the light of increasing wealth disparity (see van Dongen in this special feature). To this end, there is an increased mainstreaming of “Overseas Chinese work” and growing cooperation among local government departments and agencies.

But at the same time, these activities may be enhancing the controlling mechanisms of the state towards emigrants. The implementation of digitisation implies personalisation of a formerly largely anonymous diaspora (Kang 2016) as village and emigration association heads are called upon to ensure all emigrants abroad, returned emigrants, and relatives are registered to one of the government WeChat groups – a Qingtian government initiative that was carried out vigorously after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and touted as part of “epidemic prevention and control.”<sup>36</sup> This personalisation inevitably increases control, as for the first time the local government succeeds in obtaining real-time data on the vast majority of Qingtian emigrants. This could therefore be understood as the PRC going beyond just merely extending “thin sovereignty over non-residents” (Gamlen 2006) but rather applying tools for achieving domestic stability to a transnational context.

Finally, as the analysis shows, much of the diaspora governance at the local level is not directed towards the overseas populations but rather towards transforming the *qiaoxiang* into an economically prosperous place with a distinct culture based on a century of emigration. Local decision-makers increasingly imagine *qiaoxiang*’s modernity as an authentic heterotopia of cosmopolitanism that can draw on ICT-enabled real-time connectivity with overseas emigrants, people-to-people international connections through public diplomacy activities, and an economy that builds on emigrants’ return financial and cultural flows. While this type of authenticity may be disputed by *qiaoxiang* inhabitants (Liu 2022), the local government is successfully

35. Xu Yousheng 許又聲, “Report to the state council (...),” op. cit.

36. “五‘管齊下’! 高湖鎮僑情調查完成率達100%” (“Wu” *guanqi xia!* Gaohu zhen qiaoping diaocha wancheng lǜ da 100%, “Five-pronged” approach! The completion rate of Overseas Chinese survey in Gaohu Town reached 100%), *Qingtian wang* (青田網), 24 March 2020, [www.zgqt.zj.cn/qingtian/h5/web/details/pc/603911](http://www.zgqt.zj.cn/qingtian/h5/web/details/pc/603911) (accessed on 7 February 2021).

claiming legitimacy in the PRC's diaspora apparatus as Qingtian is increasingly recognised as an important actor and innovator of diaspora governance – a status that greatly transcends its nominal position in China's administrative hierarchies.

## Conclusion

The more nuanced understanding of state diaspora engagement includes the unpacking of the state, that is, gaining insight into the multiplicity of state agents (Nyíri 2005). This article highlights a largely neglected area of study – the diaspora governance carried out at the local level. With the case study of Qingtian County in eastern China – a locality branded as *qiaoxiang* and characterised by long-term emigration – I have highlighted the fields of most intense diaspora governance. I identified a wide array of measures targeting emigrants, “returned” emigrants, and the local population. These initiatives, strategies, and activities follow the central government's policies but have considerable leeway in the implementation and crafting of supplementary measures. In line with the PRC's established decentralised experimentation model to harness policy innovation, small localities such as Qingtian are ideally suited for experimenting with diaspora governance as they have extensive experience with emigration and are part of diaspora networks, either through formal or informal links.

The characteristics of *qiaoxiang* diaspora governance in the twenty-first century include the mainstreaming of “Overseas Chinese work,” cooperation among many local-level agencies, fast-paced digitisation of services for emigrants, and many innovative approaches that exert the state's caring practices *and* controlling measures and are simultaneously directed towards overseas and local transformations. These characteristics became especially apparent during the Covid-19

pandemic, with a wide-scale registration and inclusion of emigrants into the local government's WeChat platforms.

Apart from underscoring the role of local governments in diaspora governance, this article also expands the rationalist argument about states pursuing mostly material gains through diaspora engagement by highlighting the role of regime legitimation and local modernisation as a motivation behind this engagement. As my analysis is limited to government policies at the national and local level, I do not discuss how these policies have been received “on the ground,” especially among emigrants, returned emigrants, and other inhabitants of Qingtian. This pertinent question is beyond the remit of this study. Still, future research on local-level diaspora engagement is needed, which will give a more nuanced insight into the mechanisms of diaspora-making in China and beyond.

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