

Engendering Transnational Space: China as a High-capacity Diaspora State and Chinese Diasporic Populations

I METTE THUNØ Mette Thunø is Associate Professor in China studies, Department of Global Studies, China Section, Jens Chr. Skousvej 5, DK-8000, Aarhus University, Denmark (mettethunoe@cas.au.dk).

This special feature is the result of increasing research interest in exploring China's diaspora policies and governance as well as the implications of the Chinese state's extraterritorial reach for Chinese diasporic subjects. The three articles making up the special feature were among the papers presented and discussed at online workshops held within the framework of the research platform China-Europe Research Platform on Chinese Migration to and beyond Europe in 2020 and 2021.¹

The articles focus on local Chinese diaspora governance, voluntary Chinese associations, and Chinese transnational policies and practices of care to highlight local approaches of governance and migrants' agency, in an effort to challenge more state-led approaches to studying Chinese diaspora policies and governance. In so doing, these contributions seek to identify new conceptual frameworks and develop new research approaches by exploring the interactions of a major diaspora state such as China and migrants' responses and reactions. So far, several studies on diaspora governance have focused on the Chinese state as a macro-agent dispatching top-down initiatives of coercion, control, and co-optation of migrants (To 2014; Ren and Liu 2022). The three contributions to this special feature, however, all highlight the importance of unpacking the state to study a variety of actors involved to better understand the workings and impact of diaspora policies and strategies as called for by several scholars within this field (Délano Alonso and Mylonas 2019; Baser Ozturk and Hoyo 2020).

The three contributions underline the agency of transnational Chinese vis-à-vis the growing attention paid to the Chinese diasporas by the Chinese state at its central and local levels. Drawing on empirical research on diverse domains in different geographical contexts such as Japan, the Netherlands, and China, these articles add to existing studies on how Chinese migrants give meaning, articulate, and react to the efforts of the Chinese central and local state to increasingly control and influence transnational space (Thunø 2018; Liu 2022). Chinese diasporas engage with the Chinese state by supporting, co-opting, contesting, resisting, and/or subverting its efforts. These processes of negotiation in turn shape the physical places and virtual spaces where Chinese migrants manage their transnational lives, perform their multiple and changing identities, and pursue their dreams and aspirations.

As a major "emigration state,"² China has a long history of inciting emigration and proactively shaping transnational space (Fitzgerald 1972; Thunø 2001; McKeown 2010). Moreover, Chinese diasporas are, in gross numbers, among the largest and geographically most widespread in the world. By focusing on China, we intend to contribute with new knowledge about Chinese international migration, which is often overshadowed by a voluminous scholarship on internal migration within China. Existing research on recent Chinese international migration is also in need of being supplemented by studies considering key transformations brought about by digital technology and economic globalisation since Xi Jinping 习近平 rose to power within Chinese's Communist Party in 2012. The focus on the dynamic relationship between the Chinese state and Chinese diasporas also fills a gap in the recent "China rising" literature, which has been preoccupied with the Chinese state's role in building soft power or "infiltrating" foreign countries and populations (Hamilton and Joske 2018).

As an emigration state, China has progressively incorporated Chinese migrants and their descendants within the national imaginary through state-led diaspora policies and strategies designed to mobilise Chinese overseas for the purpose of economic development, nation building, and gaining political support for the Chinese Party-state (Liu and van Dongen 2016; Thunø 2018). By and large, studies on the governance of Chinese diasporas have so far focused on delineating the content of policies "claiming" (Ho 2011) Chinese overseas. In this feature, Martina Bofulin points in her article "*Qiaoxiang* 2.0: The People's Republic of China and Diaspora Governance at the Local Level" to the need to also understand the implementation of diaspora policies conducted at the local levels of the state. Based on a case study of Qingtian County in Zhejiang Province, a prominent source of emigration to Europe, she argues that diaspora policies are not simply passively implemented by local authorities in the county, but also go through a process of experimentation and innovation.

1. China-Europe Research Platform on Chinese Migration to and beyond Europe (CERPE), <https://projects.au.dk/cerpe> (accessed on 8 December 2022).
2. Alan Gamlen has coined the term emigration state to challenge ordinary conceptualisations of institutionalised relations between states and their diasporas as being extraordinary (Gamlen 2014).

By exploring various local approaches to mobilising Chinese overseas within the area of legal affairs and public administration, investment, e-governance, public diplomacy, local urban restructuring, and Covid-19 responses, Martina Bofulin argues that diaspora policy implementation at the local level is undertaken with a high degree of independence from the centre in Beijing. Local authorities have thus been able to experiment with different policy schemes and to innovate their activities to better reach out to emigrants as well as to exert transnational control. By unpacking the state and focusing on the local administration, she reminds us of the importance of local actors in the implementation of diaspora policies and the implications for both Chinese “sending” localities and transnational Chinese lives.

One body of research on diaspora governance focuses on how emigration states not only claim diasporas through particular strategies of engagement and mobilisation, but also construct diasporas based on national and cultural attachments (Gamlen 2008; Leung 2015). Some of these studies explore how diaspora engagement is pursued by the state through economic, political, and cultural motivation. In the case of China, it has, for example, been argued that the Chinese Party-state should be regarded as a “networked state” reaching out beyond its territory to incorporate diaspora populations through the creation of transnational institutions such as business and professional associations to accelerate elite transnational networks (Ren and Liu 2022).

In the second article in this special feature, Els van Dongen explores how this type of “institutional transnationalism” is best approached by focusing on the dynamics of the state at various hierarchical levels in interaction with Chinese diaspora populations. She demonstrates in her contribution “‘New Migrant’ Organisations and the Chinese Diaspora State(s) in the Twenty-first Century: The Case of Japan” the importance of not privileging elitist forms of agency, but rather of highlighting the involvement and interactions of multiple diasporic actors at numerous levels within the hierarchy of the state(s). With reference to the approach to relying on “assemblage” or “creative bricolage” to study the interplay and interactive nature of diaspora policymaking (Dickinson 2017), she examines the evolving diaspora processes related to establishing voluntary associations and federations among new Chinese migrants in Japan.

From hometown associations organised according to shared native place, surname, and dialect, to fraternal organisations based on common agendas, the diverse range of civil institutions has historically been an important organising feature of Chinese overseas societies (Liu 1998; Kuhn 2008). On this basis, Els van Dongen demonstrates how chambers of commerce and Chinese professional associations have proliferated in Japan. They serve as platforms for foreign trade and information exchange, for supporting talent recruitment, and since the twenty-first century for public diplomacy. Her research on the federation-type association called All-Japan Federation of Overseas Chinese and Ethnic Associations in Japan (*quan Riben Huaqiao Huaren shetuan lianhehui* 全日本華僑華人社團聯合會) founded in 2003 reflects how these associations both serve Chinese official diaspora engagement agendas and promote regional or local economic interests. She reminds us with her study to broaden our analytical approach from exclusively focusing on co-optation efforts made by the central authorities in Beijing to focus more on

the varied local Chinese government and diaspora authorities at the provincial and city levels, as well as Chinese migrants’ agency, in order to fully comprehend the more recent developments of Chinese transnational institutions.

Finally, the third contribution by Maggi W. H. Leung investigates the notions, politics, and practices of the caring Chinese transnational state emerging during the Covid-19 pandemic. She argues in her article “Covid-19 Care Circuits: The Chinese Transnational State, Its Diaspora, and Beyond” that the pandemic has provided a new platform for the transnational Chinese state to engage with Chinese diasporas based on mobilising emotional ties, patriotism, and moral obligations. Her article contributes to the burgeoning studies that explore the changing relationship between the Chinese state and its diasporas (from being first asked for donations such as health care equipment to later being deterred from returning to China in 2020), and research focusing on the rise of racism against Chinese overseas³ (Wang et al. 2020; Ceccagno and Thunø 2022). In doing so, she approaches the topic of care from the perspective of complex and intertwined relationships of utilitarianism and benevolence between diasporas and the “homeland.” Her paper problematises seemingly dichotomous notions such as “making use of” vis-à-vis “taking care of,” care vis-à-vis control, and care-giver vis-à-vis care-receiver.

Drawing on analyses of Chinese official statements, Chinese media and ethnic Chinese media, Chinese social media comments, and interviews with Chinese students and recent graduates in the Netherlands, Maggi W. H. Leung explores three circuits of care-giving: donations from Chinese diasporas to China, China’s donations such as health kits to Chinese diasporas, and China’s aid to the wider world. Through careful analysis of China’s diaspora governance and discourses as well as lived experience among Chinese students and graduates, she explores how these three “care circuits” intersect and mutually reinforce each other to underpin a homeland-diaspora relationship based on strengthened patriotism among Chinese diasporas, but also in some cases scepticism with increased transnational social control.

The three articles in this special feature all push forward scholarship on China as a decentralised emigration or diaspora state in interplay with Chinese diasporas in Japan, Europe in general, and the Netherlands in particular. They contribute with new approaches to our conceptualisation of diaspora governing strategies that has been well documented in existing literature mainly from the perspective of the central state (Ragazzi 2014; Cohen 2017). A notable gap in our understanding persists in disaggregating the state as the key player by focusing more on local representatives of the state as undertaken by Martina Bofulin. In the mature field of diaspora policies and governance research, the question of how state-led diaspora mobilisation is received by diverse diasporic actors who respond and act based on their own agendas in different national contexts is highlighted by Els van Dongen and Maggi W. H. Leung. As such, this special feature moves beyond a geopolitical focus to the way state power is decentred and re-enacted to broaden our understandings of the implementation and implications of Chinese diaspora governance.

3. Martina Bofulin, “Chinese Migrants and Covid-19 Pandemic,” *Global Dialogue*, 21 February 2021, <https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/articles/chinese-migrants-and-covid-19-pandemic> (accessed on 24 November 2022).

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