



Harnessing the sending state: Pragmatic improvisations and negotiated memberships of the Chinese diaspora in Laos

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ABSTRACT

As a form of state-led transnationalism, diaspora strategies have garnered much scholarly attention over the past two decades. Yet, the robust intellectual field still sees a dearth of works addressing how the power of the sending state is lived and experienced in the prosaic lives of transnationality. This paper fills the gap by examining the grounded ramifications of a specific approach that the Chinese government deploys to cultivate diaspora. It prioritizes coopting civil association leaders (*hui-zhang*) from populations abroad for diaspora governance. I unpack how street-level bureaucracies involved in the execution of this sending state strategy has been exploited by the Chinese entrepreneurs in Laos through qualitative fieldwork. My analysis reveals that these situated actors scrambled to set up their own diaspora associations in an attempt to make themselves *hui-zhang* eligible for the home country government's targeted engagement. In doing so, they accessed opportunities to appropriate and rework resources from the Chinese state for self-interested accumulation of symbolic and social capital. Both forms of capital are crucial to propel their wealth amassment in private career as intermediaries who extract commissions and kickbacks by brokering Chinese investments into Laos. Detailing these dynamics, the paper elucidates how the power of the sending state is disseminated and enacted through mundane and pragmatic improvisations of diasporic actors. Empirics presented also bring forward a nuanced understanding of the *de facto* convoluted relations between the Chinese government and the overseas Chinese populations.

1. Introduction

In mid-November 2017, Laos' capital Vientiane turned unusually red. The city was draped with banners carrying Mandarin slogans and filled with cheerful, flag waving crowds. It became a grand welcome stage set up to greet an important guest: the Chinese president Xi Jinping (Gao, 2017). The level of fanfare on display in Vientiane constituted the theme of a televised propaganda that targeted audiences in China. For several consecutive days, the Chinese state media CCTV aired footage of the people responding the most fervently to the diplomatic event, i.e., the diaspora in Laos. The camera quickly panned across the exuberant mass on the streets only to focus on a few Chinese who shared a particular identity, the leaders of the local diaspora associations. Addressed by their public title, *hui-zhang* ('head of association' in Chinese), these individuals were showered with substantial media coverage highlighting their dedications to China. A few even starred in mini documentaries that featured their rise to prominence in Laos through businesses enabled by ties with their homeland (CCTV, 2017).

These mediated representations of Chinese in Laos manifest the

People's Republic of China's (hereafter PRC) cautious efforts in cultivating diaspora. Since the 1990s, the PRC has joined the trend with countries across the world to reach out to, and cultivate long-distance nationalism among the population abroad (Gamlen, 2008; Varadarajan, 2010; To, 2014; Ragazzi, 2017). Policy agendas in this vein, commonly referred to as 'diaspora strategies', are underscored by the sending state's ambition to harness resources from emigrants and sojourners for its political and developmental pursuits (Pellerin & Mullings, 2013; Délanon, 2014; Ho & McConnell, 2019). As well noted by scholars, these governmental initiatives of transnational community-building are selective processes coopting migrants from dominant class, race, and ethnic groups in particular (Larner, 2007; Fischer, 2015; Leung, 2015). CCTV's mediation on the Chinese people in Laos, as detailed in the opening vignette, reveals further nuances in the ways by which nation state 'members' its diaspora (Dickinson & Bailey, 2007). With this, a small cohort of individuals, the *hui-zhang*, has ascended into celebrity status while others remained the rank-and-file constituencies in the imagined community.

Tracing how the PRC diaspora has been membered in Laos through

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ethnographic fieldwork between 2016 and 2018, I arrived at a space of encounter between the sending state and a situated group of business transmigrants. As the home country government's desire to engage with overseas Chinese (hereafter OC) came into negotiation with the diasporic actors' personal accumulationist interests, a peculiar phenomenon emerged. It refers to how Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in Laos scrambled to set up OC associations in a race to make themselves *hui-zhang* legible for PRC's targeted courtships. These endeavors belie individuals' cautious efforts to harness symbolic and social capital, which can propel wealth amassment in a niched business many operate in today, i.e., extracting commissions and kickbacks by mediating Chinese investors' ongoing adventures into Laos (Chen, 2020; Lu & Schönweger, 2019). Dissecting the micro-politics that occurred as PRC took the *hui-zhang*-centered approach to govern diaspora in Laos, I enrich understandings on how the power of the sending state is lived and experienced in the prosaic lives of transnationality—a question that remains seldom addressed in the albeit robust scholarships on diaspora strategies (Ashutosh, 2019; Dickinson, 2015; Ho, 2011; Williams, 2019).

Additionally, this paper unpacks the complicated ramifications generated by *hui-zhang*'s pragmatic improvisations with PRC's diaspora strategies. The tedious labor they performed to organize and control local Chinese in the processes of procuring elite diaspora membership deepened the reach of the sending state power into emigrant communities. However, the dubious practices they deployed to cash out on the stardom of *hui-zhang* in the brokerage business partly disabled the accumulation of outbound Chinese capital. These diasporic actors' intentional display of loyalties to PRC through their associational platforms also contributes to augment the neo-colonial appeal of China's contemporary ascendance on a global scale. In this light, the interests of the Chinese state and its extraterritorial population are simultaneously converging and diverging. The findings supply important nuances to ongoing debates on the role of business diaspora in the Chinese political economy (Hsing, 1998; Oliveira, 2019; Ye, 2014; Young, 2020).

The rest of the paper is structured into five parts. Section II provides a review of the scholarly debates on diaspora strategies and identifies an analytical gap on the prosaic state in this field of inquiry. Section III maps out the PRC's *hui-zhang*-centered approach to govern OC and the bureaucratic informalities involved in this way of membering diaspora. It also lays out the methodology and data deployed for this paper. Section IV elucidates the negotiated processes through which the Chinese diaspora in Laos comes to be constituted and grasps their grounded implications. In the conclusion, I highlight that the everyday corruption of diaspora strategies is productive in drawing emigrants into a collaborative relation with the sending state, but not without unintended consequences.

2. Membering diaspora

The term “diaspora” once connoted populations that were spatially dispersed from their homeland, such as the Jewish and Armenian in exile. This classical definition however, has increasingly lost register with contemporary realities. Given the proliferation of hyper-mobile individuals who are simultaneously embedded in multiple societies regardless of their whereabouts, the very notion of permanent dislocation that constitutes the core of the traditional perception of diaspora has been unsettled (Basche et al., 1994; Ong, 2003; Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004). This conceptual unease is further aggravated by the ever-contested meanings of “homeland” in the post-colonial world (Ashutosh, 2019; Abramson, 2019; Han, 2019). As such, the application of the word “diaspora” in the social sciences and humanities has been extensively revamped since the 1990s (Brubaker, 2005; Dufoix, 2008).

Coming from the interdisciplinary field of migration studies, the first major intervention recast “diaspora” as the hybrid identities of transnational populations that defy any singular sense of belonging, and further, an analytical framework that transcends methodological nationalism (Basche et al., 1994; Ong, 1999; Wimmer & Glick Schiller,

2002; Blunt, 2007; Chan, 2018). This transnationalism from below continues to be heavily mediated by nation-state rather than bypassing or eclipsing its power as some initially assumed (Kearney, 1991; Larner, 2007; Mountz, 2010; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). The trend epitomes in the popularization of government institutions and initiatives dedicated to “diaspora”, which have now reached a critical density across the world (Gamlen, 2008; Kunz, 2012; Ragazzi, 2014). Here, the word stands for an imagined community that the sending states, amongst others, cautiously invoke and enroll heterogenous emigrant groups into (Dufoix, 2008).

The concomitant rise of diaspora strategies globally marks a major shift in the history of state-emigrant relations (Pellerin & Mullings, 2013; Délano, 2014). In the official lens today, leaving can be patriotic, and returning is no longer mandated (Nyíri, 2001; Saxenian, 2005; Leung, 2015). Extraterritorial populations are expected to fulfill obligations like remittance and knowledge transfer, but also enjoy the rights and protections extended by the sending countries (Fitzgerald, 2008; Brand, 2014; Raj, 2015). Simply put, today's governments demonstrate explicit intentions to help those departed to achieve secured status in foreign societies and contribute to the welfare of the homeland from afar (Portes et al., 1999). This governing rationality, posited on a de-territorialized conception of nation, overturns past policies that overwhelmingly criminalized and constrained departure (Chan, 2018; Délano & Gamlen, 2014; McKeown, 2008; Zahra, 2017).

The “diaspora turn” in the global policy arena initially oriented many scholars to inquire how it has gained foothold and achieved momentum across a wide range of geo-historically specific contexts (Kunz, 2012; Boyle & Kitchin, 2014; Dickinson, 2017; Gamlen et al., 2019). Works from the Foucauldian tradition maintain that the phenomenon is an ensemble of place-based expressions and reinforcements of neoliberal governmentality (Larner, 2007; Kunz, 2011; Ragazzi, 2017). They are co-produced by state officials, international developmental institutions, think tanks, NGOs, etc., under a shared belief in a globalizing market and an enterprising self (Pellerin & Mullings, 2013; Larner, 2015; Leung, 2015; Cohen, 2016). Another stream of scholarships, inspired by historical materialism, concerns the power relations that are reproduced through state-led projects of diaspora-making (Glick-Schiller, 2005; Varadarajan 2010, 2014). Following their interpretations, these policy agendas are yet another instrument deployed by the bourgeoisie to re-hegemonize privilege (Varadarajan, 2010), and a vehicle leveraged by imperial powers to sustain global dominance (Glick-Schiller, 2005). Collectively, these insights help advance a relational understanding of state as decentered and networked, as opposed to the Weberian notion of bounded entity “*causal and explanatory of its own right*” (MacLeavy & Harrison, 2010, p. 1037).

As academic dialogue on diaspora strategies evolves, analysts increasingly move into dissecting the concrete mechanisms that sending states develop to exert control over their populations beyond state borders. These ranges from discursive acts of naming and claiming diaspora (Dickinson & Bailey, 2007; Ho, 2011), data regimes for overseeing and managing diaspora (Larner, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2008), all the way to flexible policies like dual citizenship provision and special economic zone programs designed to draw targeted emigrants into reciprocal ties with their homeland (Gamlen, 2008; Jöns, 2015; Raj, 2015; Xiang, 2011). Such regulatory interventions constitute a new transnational space where state power operates to bring an imagined community into existence (Brenner et al., 2003; Collyer & King, 2015; Gamlen, 2008).

By and large, the extent and nature of diaspora strategies have been well documented in the existing literature. Nevertheless, a notable gap of understanding persists in this now matured field of inquiry—namely, the juncture where the transnationalism from above meets with that from below (Abramson, 2017; Alonso & Mylonas, 2019; Ho, 2011). In other words, the question of how state-led diaspora-making processes are received by diverse groups of diasporic actors, who mediate lives with their own logics and agendas, is yet to be thoroughly unpacked

(Mavroudi, 2008; Ong, 1999; Xiang, 2011). It warrants a conceptual rescaling that moves beyond comprehending the sending state in the realm of “big-power politics”, and down to its permeation into the everyday (Painter, 2006). The envisioned intellectual endeavor necessitates a genre of analysis from critical geopolitics that focus on the ways by which state power is enacted through prosaic improvisations (eg. Jeffrey, 2012; Pinkerton & Benwell, 2014).

It is here that the negotiated and contested nature of diaspora membership acquires analytical significance (Ho, 2011). Experiences derived in navigating the boundaries by which governments demarcate their “nations abroad” constitute an important subjectifying force for emigrants, hence a convenient window to observe how transnational lives are transformed by sending states. To this end, feminist geographers who come from an intellectual tradition that primes the understandings of the political through embodied experience have contributed important pioneering works (Hyndman 2004, 2012; Silvey, 2004). For instance, Ashutosh (2019) dissected the affective geographies underlining India government’s claims of unity and integration for diaspora building, which sought to overcome the diversities and ruptures amongst emigrants yet ended up seeding additional emotional barriers from within. By tracing how specific state programs and tactics deployed to “member diaspora” (Dickinson and Bailey, 2008) restructure the feelings of transnational populations, feminist intervention as such brings to light the complicated lives that these policy initiatives can take up on their own in reality (Faria, 2014; Ashutosh, 2019; Dickinson, 2015; Fischer, 2015; Williams, 2019).

The state-led diaspora-making projects contain subjectifying implications for emigrants beyond the affective dimension. They invite extraterritorial population into interaction with the sending state also by providing opportunities to access protections and benefits. The point has been highlighted in Fitzgerald’s (2008) illuminating conception of “citizenship *a la carte*”, which detailed migrants’ afforded room to select from the menu of rights that their home country government offers and customize their relations with it accordingly. Their power to choose whether or not to obtain membership (and which type) within the diaspora is foregrounded in the state’s lack of coercive reach beyond border (Larner, 2007; Fischer, 2015; Gamlen, 2013). The structure of the bureaucracy preconditions that diaspora governance is essentially a flexible transnational space open for willful agents to explore and stretch (Larner, 2015; Ong, 1999; Xiang, 2011).

The primacy of politics in shaping the boundary of diaspora is further enhanced by the often-blurred lines that sending states draw to map out the imagined communities in the first place. It increases the degree of bureaucratic informalities needed to actualize pertinent policies in geohistorically specific contexts. Broad claims to diaspora, as Dickinson (2015) pointed out, would not acquire legitimacy without being properly re-articulated with the interests of situated migrant groups. Even in dual citizenship programs with seemingly concrete standards for membership, street-level bureaucracies are still heavily presented when evaluating one’s eligibility case by case (Williams, 2019). In the intricate processes through which emigrants make themselves (il)legible for home country government’s cooptation, their identities and subjectivities are simultaneously reworked (Jöns, 2015; Ashutosh, 2019).

As such, this paper dissects the everyday politics encapsulated in the membership of diaspora to grapple with the imprints of the sending state in the mundane lives of transmigrants, and vice versa. The focus of inquiry here is the PRC’s *hui-zhang*-centered approach to diaspora governance. Precisely, I explore how the governing tactic has been quickly transforming the structure of Chinese communities in Laos and nurturing new diasporic subjects.

3. A *Hui-zhang*-centered engagement: locating PRC’s diaspora strategies in practice

The PRC began actively encouraging dual allegiance and promoting long-distance nationalism among overseas Chinese (hereafter OC) at the

turn of 1990 (Nyíri, 2001; Thunø, 2001; To, 2014). This policy shift, echoing fundamentals of neoliberal diaspora strategies, significantly expanded the scope of the extraterritorial population it sought to engage, which was previously confined to those retaining Chinese citizenship abroad (Xiang, 2003). It occurred during a moment when the government was yearning for capital and talent to step up domestic modernization, while also coping with global backlashes after the Tiananmen Incident (To, 2014). The renewed diaspora-making project thus reflected the state’s intention to harness both economic resources and political support from a broad band of OC, ranging from descendants of early settlers to “new migrants” (*xin yimin*) who departed from China after the market reform in 1978 (Liu & Van Dongen, 2016).

In executing the policy initiative, the state has been consistently taking what To (2014, 82) termed as a “people-to-people” approach, which revolves around building close liaisons between PRC officials and leaders from OC communities (Nyíri, 1999). The practical bureaucratic strategy aims at coopting the power and resources of prominent migrants to actualize vernacular diaspora governance. In long established communities, these informal authorities are easily identifiable—they are individuals who preside over voluntary local OC associations that sometimes also develop regional and global reach (Liu, 1998). From hometown associations (*huiguan*) organized along the line of shared native place, surname, and dialect, to fraternal organizations based on common activist agendas, the diverse range of endogenously grown civil institutions has been an historically important organizing conduit of OC societies (Godley, 2002; Kuhn, 2008). Their leaders, ascend through rather democratic consensus forming processes, often command paternalistic authorities over the groups they represent (Liu, 1998; Visscher, 2007). As such, the PRC state is far from the first to court these individuals in efforts to govern OC communities. This mode of control had long seen adoption in the *capitan china* system emerged during colonial Southeast Asia (Godley, 2002).

However, when it comes to the new migrant groups, legible subjects for people-to-people engagement are not easily seen by the state from the onset (Nyíri, 1999). Given their brief settlement histories, these OC communities often have yet to develop mature institutional infrastructure and leadership from within. As such, PRC outposts, including embassies and consular offices, typically work first to cultivate useful local contacts and encourage the formation of migrant organizations through them (Nyíri, 2001). These state-sponsored new migrant associations, based on province or other geographical units of origin, or professions (eg. student association), have been mushrooming across the OC world (Kuah-Pearce and Du-Dehart, 2006; To, 2014). Their leaders, compared to those heading traditional OC associations, enjoy a much closer relation with PRC officials, as they secured legitimacy from the Chinese state rather than community consensus (Nyíri, 2001). Their associational careers contain both transnational spheres and local dimensions. They are the targeted guests for PRC-organized diaspora conferences, workshops, and seminars, the themes of which range from enhancing networking across OC groups, preaching the latest state policies, all the way to team-building skills for community management (Liu & Van Dongen, 2016; To, 2014). In their situated settlement locales, presidents of new migrant associations play a key role in receiving and sending delegations, organizing celebratory cultural and political events, as well as communicating PRC messages to their communities and more broadly, their host societies (Liu, 2016).

These leaders of new migrant associations, conveniently referred to as *hui-zhang* in Chinese, are the focus of this paper. They constitute the elite members of PRC’s diaspora who are eligible to access a substantial amount of resources the state devoted for OC outreaches. However, a glimpse into the processes through which they obtained such membership status reveal visible traces of street-level bureaucracy (Williams, 2019). Factors like lobbying skills, professional reputations, and wealth are important but far from decisive in shaping one’s chances of becoming *hui-zhang* or further ascendance into rare celebrities in the cohort (Nyíri, 1999). The opaque and arbitrary nature of the PRC’s

hui-zhang selection leaves ample room for corruption. As critical observers have long noted, it opens the door for diasporic actors to exploit the system for practical, self-interested purposes, like accumulating symbolic and social capital, which is the common case in the lives revolved around diaspora associations (Nyíri, 2001; Calgar, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2008; Godley, 2002; Iskander, 2012; Mercer & Page, 2010; Visscher, 2007). However, the exact ways in which these forms of capital are put to use by pertinent individuals remain vaguely inferred.

To examine the grounded ramifications of PRC's *hui-zhang*-centered diaspora engagement strategy, I embedded myself in the Chinese community in Laos, where the state-sponsored institutionalization and *hui-zhang* making were rather recent occurrences. Though bordering China to its southwest, Laos historically hosted one of the smallest Chinese communities in the region of Southeast Asia due to its land-locked geography and backwater status in the colonial economy (Tan, 2012). Early Chinese settlement in the country further diminished during Laos' turbulent years of decolonization and socialist nation building (Evans, 2002; Baird, 2018). Only towards the end of the 1980s did a new wave of migrants begin to arrive, as the post-socialist Pathet Lao state and PRC's bilateral relation normalized (Hansen, 1999; Tan, 2012). As is the common case across Chinese emigration frontiers, these pioneers were peddlers who endured hardship to make a living by selling cheap Chinese merchandise at the local markets (Haugen & Carling, 2005). They remained largely forgotten by the Chinese government until it gradually moved to strengthen relations with Laos out of geo-economic and geopolitical calculations since the early 2000s (Nyíri, 2011; Liu, 2016). The pivot reached its apogee in the vision of the Belt and Road Initiative (hereafter BRI) laid out by Beijing in 2014, which portrayed Laos as a host of its flagship project in mainland Southeast Asia, the Kunming-Singapore railway (Chen, 2020). The changing contour and content of PRC's overall developmental agenda reworked the geographical focus of its diaspora work along the way. As a result, the semi-settled, small merchant community in Laos have been experiencing escalated courtships from the Chinese state over the past two decades.

The extent to which China's diaspora engagement has transformed the community is already visible from the outside. In 2005, the first PRC-sponsored new migrant association, the Lao-China Chamber of Commerce was established (Nyíri, 2011). Since then, organizations representing lower-level territorial units (eg. provinces and cities in both home and host countries) have sprung up and formed an ever-expanding, hierarchically structured chamber of commerce clan. Diaspora associations organized along other lines, thus independent from this system emerged as well. They overwhelmingly cluster in Laos' capital city Vientiane, where the PRC's embassy is also located. The intensity of China's recent diaspora-making project in Laos is also reflected in the extent of resources that it has been allocating to the community. Its representatives began gaining seats in some of the most privileged PRC diaspora conventions, like the Global OC Media Forum, the World Chinese Entrepreneur Convention, and the BRI Forum for International Corporation (Lao-China Chamber of Commerce, 2017; Ran, 2019). One Lao Chinese association even stood among the awardees of the 2017 Annual Global OC Award ceremony, a broadcasted event orchestrated by the PRC's top diaspora engagement organ, the State Council's OC Affair Office (Chinaqw, 2018; Liu & Van Dongen, 2016). This level of honor was previously reserved for prominent OC figures like nuclear physics scientist Chen-Ning Yang, but is now extended to enshrine a newly made *hui-zhang* from Laos ^{ibid}.

In this respect, Vientiane serves as an ideal site to trace the encounters between OC and PRC's *hui-zhang*-centered diaspora outreach. In order to gain a fine-grained understanding on the negotiated processes through which individuals obtained *hui-zhang* status, as well as the complicated ways by which they leveraged the credential for practical purposes, I conducted a total of 14 months' qualitative fieldwork in the city (July 2016 to August 2016, June 2017 to June 2018). My primary source of data was collected from long-term participant observation in two OC associations in the city. As a young Chinese female, I

gained consent to access these institutions as an informal aide to their *hui-zhang*. Through their networks, I became embedded in the Vientiane-based Chinese community and gained opportunities to inquire politics underpinning the rapid emergence of *hui-zhang* and their pertinent associations through semi-structured interviews.¹ I further supplemented the data with archival materials from these associations and explorative interviews with Chinese officials involved in the OC affairs in Laos. The information assembled through the mixed-method fieldwork collectively brings to light a story in which the PRC's resources for OC engagement were harnessed by local Chinese for symbolic and social capital that can be swiftly converted into material wealth in the age of global China. In what follows, I use an ethnographic snapshot to first crystallize the autonomous lives that the state's diaspora strategy has taken on as it unfolded in the Chinese world in Laos. These nuanced dynamics carry far-flung implications that put the efficacy of the policy initiative in question.

4. Negotiating diaspora membership: Institutionalization and *Hui-zhang* making among the Chinese in Laos

4.1. *Send in the Hui-zhang*

It was a typical weekday morning in October 2017. I had been working in my office inside a Chinese hometown association in Vientiane. The institution, housed in a roomy villa with multiple fully furnished offices and meeting rooms, was generally run alone by me, the secretary, unless some newly arrived Chinese investors wandered in. That day, a pair showed up at around lunch time. As the bell at the front door of the association rang, I walked out and saw two strangers, whose curious look and hesitant body language were clear giveaways to their identity—the association's primary business began from that moment onward.

I seated them around a Chinese tea tray in the association's reception room. Pu'er was served and routine conversation began. As I was a female secretary, they did not bother me with serious questions about doing business in Laos. Instead, the visitors focused on making inquiries about the history of the institution. Their casual questions gradually became more oriented toward the association's *hui-zhang*, as they noticed the dozens of framed photos hanging on the wall. These photos were all clearly captioned with a line saying, XX *hui-zhang* and XX Chinese and/or Lao government officials at occasions like policy forums and diplomatic banquets. The ones carefully placed at the most noticeable spots on the wall portrayed *hui-zhang* posing with politicians highly recognizable to Chinese audiences. The visitors' fascination over *hui-zhang* escalated to a new level after learning from me the fact that they had been on Chinese state media before. One immediately pulled out his phone and Baidu-ed the association. They made the surprising discovery that the life story of a particular *hui-zhang* had been featured in a couple recently released Chinese documentaries. The films propagated him as a self-made man with a fairy-tale marriage to a Lao lady and an endless passion to promote the BRI. This discovery truly impressed the visitors. They started making genuine requests to meet with the *hui-zhang* of the association during their stay in Laos, if possible.

What the investors saw after they walked into the association was a carefully orchestrated scene that cued them towards particular ideas about the absent *hui-zhang* (Miller, 2009). All of the details, from the photos and the locatable media coverage online, to me, a US-educated Chinese woman working as secretary, hinted that *hui-zhang* were successful, resourceful, patriotic, and community-serving businessmen.

¹ This research was undertaken with the approval from the institutional review board of my host academic institution then. To all contacts I met through OC associations, I introduced myself as a graduate student who was hosted in these organizations for data collection. I gained consents from them before conducting related participant observation and interviews.

Certainly not all visitors who wandered in bought into this fabricated vision, but the two who showed up that day became rather convinced by then. The time had come to send in the *hui-zhang*.

I went back to my office for a quick phone call to Zhou, one of the *hui-zhang* in the association who lived just two blocks away. He and three other *hui-zhang* of different nominal ranks (vice, executive, honorary) were the only active members of this institution. They formed a closely knitted group with certain internal division of labor. Together, the team hustled capital from inexperienced Chinese investors into local outlets and extracted kickbacks in this process. Precisely how the job was done was well illustrated by Zhou's interaction with the two visitors after he arrived 20 min later.

Conversations in the meeting room took a turn as soon as the *hui-zhang* walked in. After a brief greeting, the investors began consulting Zhou about the sketchy business ideas they had in mind: "*Hui-zhang, any recommendations for farmland to test out a noni project?*"; "*Hui-zhang, what are the regulatory procedures one needs to walk through to mine alluvial gold from rivers?*"; "*Hui-zhang, are there any reliable channels to move a lump sum of capital from China into Laos?*" ... A while into the conversation, Zhou seized an opportunity to redirect the flow.

"I know you are keen to invest in Laos. But keep in mind this will be a highly risky process. My advice is to take things slow—don't jump into a big project that you cannot immediately pull out if you want to quit. Park your capital from China first in the real estate assets (land) in a place like Vientiane to reserve its value. And when you decide on other investment projects, sell the land or take out a loan through it. Remember, always make the safest move when you are just testing out the water for business in a foreign country."

Zhou's seemingly sincere advice enlightened the investors. It dawned on them that they could use the urban property market as a risk-free springboard into Laos. After all, what could go wrong by putting money into the property sector of a city like Vientiane, which was expecting a game-changing transnational railway from China? The visitors were so hooked on Zhou's advice that one of them ended up putting in a 30% down payment for a parcel of land referred to him by Zhou before he left Laos after a week-long trip.

'The Lao owner of this land is in debt. She is selling it at a discounted price. So, it is a lucrative deal. You are lucky!' This was how Zhou marketed the land to the investors as he drove them down to check on its condition the day after the first meeting in the association. It was a 40/40 m² parcel near an industrial park at the outskirts of the city. The 'lucky' investor agreed on a unit price of 115 USD/m²,² whereas a local could easily have negotiated it down to 800 to 1000 baht/m² (26–32 USD/m²). He also had no idea that the 'desperately indebted Lao lady' who had her name on the land title was Zhou's wife. The property was in fact, a piece of land Zhou scooped up cheaply a couple years ago and registered under her name.

Individuals like Zhou exemplify the generation of Chinese trader emigrants in Laos who now act as investment intermediary for profit extraction. This phenomenon is reflexive of their swift repositions in the shifting terrain of the regional economy. Following the PRC's policy pivot to Laos, especially after BRI, an unprecedented amount of Chinese capital has flooded into the country. By 2018, the figure of Chinese foreign direct investment in Laos had ballooned to 8.25 billion USD, a near tenfold growth from that of 846 million in 2010 (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2019). Many of the Chinese coming with this wave of capital influx are qualitatively different from the pioneers in the 1990s, who crossed the border with the bare minimum to escape poverty at home. The newcomers, as depicted in the story above, are loaded with capital and eager to hunt down lucrative

investment outlets. From expatriate representatives of state-owned enterprises to wealthy private investors ... They harbor "great aspirations" for Laos, despite possessing a dearth of knowledge about the country (Lu & Schönweger, 2019). As the dynamics unfold, they naturally turn to the local Chinese to guide the way.

This pattern of small ethnic businesses paving the way for the later arrival of more elite streams of capital is common throughout the history of globalization (Zhou & Tseng, 2001; Ley, 2011). Yet in the context of Laos, where rent-seeking has become an entrenched and institutionalized element of the political economy, it takes on a much more thorough and encompassing form (Nyíri, 2011; Young, 2020). Nearly every move towards engendering an investment project has to be realized through informal intermediaries. They range from obtaining a long-term multi-entry visa, registering a company, all the way to identifying and seizing business opportunities. As such, local Chinese are presented with ample chances to amass wealth by maneuvering the opaque brokerage processes. It is now a standard practice for them to extract commissions whenever possible. Many, like Zhou, have further improvised out sophisticated, fraudulent schemes to cash out on the inexperience of Chinese investors. Brokerage businesses in the global South, after all, have always been fraught with intentional misinformation that undermines market order (Haugen, 2018). However, not all who dived into the niched sector have succeeded to secure the scale of fortune as Zhou did in his urban land hustles. In reality, it is impossible for many, who still struggle to collect meager kickbacks in mediating trivial deals like arranging taxi rides, to pull off the kind of scam he mastered.

A glimpse into individuals who excel at profit extraction as investment intermediary like Zhou reveals one evident commonality—they are all *hui-zhang* who head Chinese associations in town. The position, for one, broadens their chances to meet with potential clients. During my time in these institutions, I encountered many visitors who had come alone or in groups to look for information from these seemingly legitimate portals, and wound up in some *hui-zhang*'s trap. More networking opportunities present when *hui-zhang* journey back home to attend PRC government organized events fusing diaspora engagement with business promotion, which is increasingly the case since BRI discourse prevailed. These diasporic actors take such occasions to spread myths of Laos as an untapped capitalist frontier and mobilize domestic investors to explore this unfamiliar land under their guidance. For instance, every time when Zhou came back from these trips, he would ask me to prepare some coarse business plans for new clients secured in China.

Additionally, the *hui-zhang* credential is not only in itself a form of symbolic capital, but also a pathway to obtain additional stardom. This is well-illustrated by the ensemble of honorary records that Zhou managed to collect over years of his associational career. The two strangers' reactions to them, as depicted in the above vignette, showcase the extent to which these items have worked to consecrate Zhou in the eyes of the general Chinese public. Without the state-endowed prestige, how would incoming investors, who are generally experienced in navigating China's own fraud-ridden domestic economy, readily followed his advice without a second thought (Osburg, 2018)? In this regard, the group of *hui-zhang* active in Vientiane's social arena embody the "symbol manipulator" in Ong's (1999) depiction. They deliberately procure elite membership in PRC's diaspora to appeal to investors as resourceful and trustworthy figures.

Tracing how Chinese in Laos discovered this symbolic route to wealth, I located a milestone moment back in 2005, when the first state-sponsored new migration association was established in Vientiane. The Lao-China Chamber of Commerce (hereafter LCCC), which marked the beginning of PRC's *hui-zhang*-centered diaspora outreach in the country, initially failed to garner substantial interests from local Chinese. As many recalled, it was "*a product straight out of the embassy's pocket*".² The succinct description perfectly captures the fact that it was the PRC officials stationed in the Vientiane outpost who pulled strings together to register the institution as a civil organization in the local context. This alone was a tough task, given the authoritarian Lao state has always

² This direct quote repetitively came up in personal exchanges and interviews during the fieldwork.

been taking a hardline stance against civil society and constraining the growth of institutions fell under this category. Besides challenges to acquire proper paperwork, the embassy was also faced with difficulties in finding a *hui-zhang* for the association. Liao, a now retired businessman who first came to Laos in the early 1990s was amongst the list of candidates officials once approached to offer the position. The arbitrariness of the PRC bureaucracy for OC affairs at the ground level was readily exposed by the pragmatic standard the embassy held for *hui-zhang* selection then. According to Liao, officials expected whoever assumed the position to provide a proper office space to house the chamber of commerce. Reluctant to take up the burdensome honor, he turned down the embassy's offer. Eventually, an individual running a hotel business in town agreed to the position: he converted a small room in his chronically under occupied, dilapidated hotel into the association's headquarter.

It did not take long for Liao to regret his short-sighted decision. By the mid-2000s, the moneyed Chinese investors had started setting foot in the country. Newly arrived from Vientiane's airport, they deemed LCCC as an official gateway to connect with Chinese business diaspora in Laos and looked up to its *hui-zhang* with enormous respect. The extent to which the strangers disproportionately turned to him over others local Chinese for investment advisories was captured in Liao's bitter complaint:

*"He (the LCGCC hui-zhang) lived just across the street and hung around all the time with us. It was ridiculous that those clueless newcomers called him hui-zhang and took his words much more seriously than the rest of us. They all went to him for help – for obtaining visas, renting houses, sourcing connections with Lao officials – but not us."*³

The value of the *hui-zhang* credential in the age of global China quickly dawned on local Chinese upon witnessing such dynamics. When these business transmigrants became eager to hunt for wealth in the emergent arena of investment intermediation, they unsurprisingly looked to replicate the inadvertent success of the hotel business owner who headed the LCCC. It was precisely against this background that the PRC's infiltrative moves to "member diaspora" (Dickinson & Bailey, 2007) accrued more subjectifying power among Chinese in Laos.

4.2. Making and breaking a diaspora

While the LCCC was a top-down creation by Vientiane's Chinese embassy, its first branch, the Lao-Hunan Chamber of Commerce (hereafter LHCC) that emerged three years later, showed traceable evidence of bottom-up institutionalization. Behind the association was a small clique of local Chinese who first succeeded to make themselves eligible for the PRC's targeted courtship in Laos. The path they eventually carved out was a negotiated outcome between their personal interests, China's diaspora bureaucracy and the Lao legal-judicial system. On one end, the PRC side holds a rigid standard to engage primarily with OC associations that have been formalized in their situated contexts. On the other, the Lao regulatory regime leaves little room for civil organization. As a result, the actors mobilizing for LHCC developed an adaptive strategy to first register it as a social enterprise (a business entity with social objectives), and then legitimize its relationship with the LCCC and the embassy.

In the LHCC's grand opening ceremony back in 2008, both the commercial counselor from the embassy and the LCCC *hui-zhang* attended and made congratulatory speeches. The scene sent a strong message to the entire Chinese community in town. Clearly, the association's founders had put together a feasible scheme to turn themselves into *hui-zhang*. Their ad hoc invention was soon deployed by other self-mobilized local Chinese. They churned out chambers of commerce representing

lower-level territorial units that were progressively fitted under the LCCC like Russian matryoshka dolls (Nyíri, 2001). As spots within this clan have been quickly filled up, organizations created in other names also sprung up, resulting in an ever-sprawling world of OC associations in Vientiane. All the *hui-zhang* ascended from these institutionalization processes are engaging in a tooth and nail fight for the PRC's resources for diaspora governance.

For these diasporic actors, the attainment of a *hui-zhang* title marks just the first step towards a long journey of symbolic accumulation. The pinnacle of prestige one can scale is dependent upon an individual's ability to access the high-profile venues that the PRC orchestrates for OC outreach. Thus, the prospect of rare rewards, like seats in seminars with prominent Chinese politicians during diplomatic tours, and roles in widely aired propaganda films, often spark fierce competitions between *hui-zhang*. It sets in motion a day-to-day race where these actors scramble to find favor in the eyes of the Chinese state. In particular, they compete to satisfy the PRC officials who wield influence over the distribution of pertinent resources. As a result, they actively seek guidance from the local embassy and commit labor into tasks crucial for the PRC's diaspora governance on the ground.

A critical component of *hui-zhang*'s associational works for instance, centers on updating the state with information about Lao Chinese communities. Leveraging personal networks and institutional platforms, these individuals reach out to the populations that their organizations claim to represent and closely monitor their everyday lives. To this end, China's ubiquitous social messaging app WeChat has emerged as a convenient instrument through which informal surveillance works are carried out. All the diaspora associations in Vientiane organize their contacts into chat groups on the app, where members frequently share their mundane encounters in Laos and express their personal opinions. The PRC officials working on diaspora affairs in Laos are sometimes invited to join these digital chat groups by *hui-zhang* to observe the community directly. Otherwise, conversations occurring in these spaces would be distilled and summarized into *hui-zhang*'s reports on formal occasions where their advice on local diaspora governance is valued. The pool of contacts these associations have accumulated over the years also enable small census projects that collect precise data about the Chinese population in the country. They are presented in extended brochures that contain details of individual migrants, including their contact information, address, and profession, etc. Many migrants would otherwise remain out of the state's sight as they crossed the porous, overland border into Laos without obtaining passports and/or visas.

What is worth clarifying here is that the range of practices *hui-zhang* undertake to enable the Chinese state to see its diaspora more clearly are often not conducted out of explicit commands from PRC officials. Instead, these activities reflect the ways by which these diasporic actors behave by their own interpretations of the PRC's general policy lines. Besides such partakes, *hui-zhang* also voluntarily fulfill a myriad of other duties like hosting delegations and organizing Chinese cultural events. The labor inputs required are often enormous and tedious, upon a closer look. They test *hui-zhang*'s ability to comprehend and reproduce the "ritualistic manners" through which the state would like its diaspora engagements to be carried out (Xiang, 2011). They go all the way down to minute details like seating orders at the dinner table and wording choices to address certain visiting officials.

Given the demanding nature of the tasks that PRC counts on its *hui-zhang* to shoulder, the everyday corruption of its diaspora governance on the ground is not only predictable but also productive (Zhu & Zhang, 2017). It is, after all, utopian to expect some ideologically indoctrinated OC individuals to contribute pertinent labor out of patriotic sentiments alone. The state, in actuality, pays *hui-zhang* by leaving room for them to exploit resources made available in and through performing these duties. The mechanism of buying collaboration from a selected cohort of OC actors to govern their communities contain ramifications that dispute the state's intention for diaspora engagement, as well as its overarching developmental agenda.

³ Interview taken in Vientiane in October 2017.

This mode of power, while effectively deepening the reach of the sending state power into the lives of extraterritorial population, catalyzes more divides and ruptures than solidarity among local Chinese. For one, competitions to grab the PRC's resources for diaspora outreach has resulted in outright conflicts between and within different factions of *hui-zhang*. This messy situation is well illustrated by the frequency of *coup d'état* in the associational world. An insider of the LCCC once recounted to me how rapid regime shifts took place in one of its branch institutions: "None of the head *hui-zhang* made it longer than two years since the association's establishment in 2012. Each one of them were ostracized by other founding members."⁴ He cited the uneven distributions of resources as the primary instigator for successive power disruptions. In extreme cases, the conflict further escalated into blood shedding events. The violent power struggles reached their apogee in a shocking murder case occurred on August 12th, 2018, when the then *hui-zhang* of the LHCC was stabbed to death at home by killers on behalf of a fellow village man who also was once active in the organization (Tencent News, 2018). As it turned out, besides business disputes, the crime was also fueled by the perpetrator's jealousy amounted over the victim's successful associational career.

Despite the chaotic micro-politics amongst *hui-zhang*, and the dubious business practices enabled and sustained through the dynamics, these individuals continue to be cheered by the Chinese state with honor and recognition in the public. The sharp discrepancy alone works to demoralize the PRC's diaspora outreach in the eyes of the local Chinese. Their nuanced, critical sentiments towards the regime made an unexpected revelation once over an informal exchange I had with a few contacts from the community. Speaking of potential to run a new logistic route between Laos and Cambodia, one joked, "We need to avoid meddling with all the *hui-zhang* there at any cost when expanding business into Cambodia." Others laughed and added, "Especially those who have appeared in CCTV. I bet they are the most dangerous."⁵ These casual jokes demonstrate a consolidated opinion that the PRC has worked to muddy the water of the OC world. In this regard, the authoritarian regime's diaspora strategy has failed to fulfill its arguably most important mission since the Tiananmen Incident—ruling out OC dissidences towards the party state (To, 2014).

Given that diaspora engagements have always been integral to the sending state's overarching developmental agenda, these policies' efficacies should be evaluated beyond the narrow realm of community building. In the context of the BRI, the PRC has further articulated what it intends to instrumentalize Chinese in countries like Laos for. In the dense volume of policy documents, "the over 40 million OC in countries and regions hosting BRI" are honed as multi-tasked brokers of global China (Zhang, 2019). Materially, they can utilize transnational networks and knowledge to facilitate Chinese investment in host contexts ^{ibid}. Discursively, they are designated to be "good tellers of Chinese stories", who help nurture a global rhetoric environment that is less hostile to PRC's rapid ascendance (Liu & Van Dongen, 2016, 818). In Beijing's ideal, OC are therefore patriotic constituencies contributing to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Ferdinand, 2016).

However, the day-to-day lives of *hui-zhang* as I observed, show that OC has not been playing neatly according to Beijing's written script. Their role as investment intermediaries indeed, has greatly sped up the penetration of Chinese capital into Laos. Yet by mediating processes encapsulated in the "grounding" of incoming capital into specific local outlets with a strong self-interest, *hui-zhang* ended up assembling many projects with poor prospects of profitability from its inception (Oliveira, 2019). Taking Zhou's urban property scam documented in the previous section as an example, the fraudulent component in this scheme far exceeds the outrageous price inflation incongruent with market trend.

The narrative of the Lao land sector as a safe investment arena for foreigners was in itself a cloak full of holes. As the country forbids non-citizens from owning property, the Chinese investors who inject their money into this outlet generally end up registering land titles under some local's name. The practice gives them little *de facto* control over the properties involved, a reality that many would gradually figure out after encountering difficulties during the next round of liquidation. It amounts to a peculiar phenomenon noted by Lu and Schönweger (2019), in which a significant number of Chinese investors have suffered from loss for land-based investments in Laos in recent years. Contrary to their delusional experiences, local co-ethnics like Zhou, who spared no efforts to drum up myths about the country's lucrative properties have achieved visible class ascendance. The contemporary globalization of Chinese capital thus contains a strong component of wealth redistribution, in which earlier generations of business transmigrants are enriched at the expense of the current wave of outgoing investors.

Regarding the PRC's goal to enlist OC for public diplomacy, *hui-zhang*'s activities also defy clear conformity. Admittedly, their organizational works on the ground provide infrastructure for the state to closely monitor the Chinese community in Laos, and to some extent, discipline dynamics that would tarnish its ideal self-representation. This has been the case for information censorship relating to the Beijing-sponsored BRI railway in Laos. Since entering the implementation stage in 2016, the project has occasionally seen eruptions of labor protests due to wage disputes. Grieving Chinese construction workers circulated their messages through WeChat groups and alarmed the PRC embassy and consular offices in the country. During such moments, officials stationed in these outposts were quick to intervene to conceal the events and stop the spreading of information, so to guard the image of BRI (Chen, 2020). As such, the global public today is left to learn and speculate about the actual existing BRI on the ground mostly through materials supplied through the PRC's official channels.

The associational careers of *hui-zhang*, while contributing to reduce the further deterioration of the BRI's reputation, simultaneously stirred up other imaginaries of "China's threat and predation on a global scale" (Lee, 2017, p. 1). Their cautious displays of patriotism towards the PRC in public are once again seeding serious popular concerns about OC's loyalty, an issue that was nothing alien to the history of politics in Southeast Asia (Hearn, 2012; Zheng et al., 2010). Back in the Cold War era, suspicions of the population being Beijing's tool to engender communist regime shifts in host societies once stranded PRC's diplomatic relation with Indonesia (Zhou, 2019). The rise of China today, with a popularly perceived neo-colonial appeal, is bringing back questions about the OC's implications to the sovereignty of settlement states. Upon learning the basics of my research, a Vientiane-based diplomat from China's geopolitical rival country immediately uttered, "Why are there so many (Chinese associations) in town?"⁶ The reaction clearly gave away his long-harbored suspicions about local Chinese' seemingly close relation with the PRC. And he showed great interest to learn from me that they were far from puppet acting by the demand and will of Beijing. In a rather ironic twist, the group of *hui-zhang* in Vientiane inadvertently amplified negative perceptions about China through the augmented, institutionalized appearance of OC they have created to propel personal material accumulation.

5. Conclusion

The intellectual field of diaspora strategies, while mature, still sees a dearth of scholarship that grounds the policy initiatives in the mundane lives of extraterritorial populations (Dickinson, 2017; Ho, 2011; Hyndman, 2004; Williams, 2019). This paper fills the gap by examining how a specific mode of diaspora engagement adopted by the PRC, which focuses on interpersonal network building between government officials

⁴ Interview taken in Vientiane in September 2017.

⁵ These personal exchanges took place during participant observation in March 2018.

⁶ Interview taken in Vientiane in January 2018.

and situated civil leaders from OC communities, plays out in reality. In particular, my analysis centers on the ways by which street-level bureaucracies involved in identifying legible subject for this way of engagement are exploited by diasporic actors for practical interests.

The pragmatic improvisations are contextualized in Laos, where a group of Chinese business transmigrants strive to attain eligibility for the PRC's targeted courtships. For this purpose, they mobilized to procure *hui-zhang* credentials through making diaspora associations and leveraged the institutional platforms created to govern OC communities in accordance with the Chinese government's interests. By performing these quotidian labors, they are able to access the PRC's important resources for diaspora outreaches, hence appropriating them for self-serving accumulations of symbolic and social capital. Both forms of capital can effectively facilitate these individuals' wealth amassment in their private endeavors as investment intermediaries brokering Chinese investors' ongoing ventures into Laos.

The case-specific evidence illuminates two theoretical messages. First, it reveals that bureaucratic informalities at work in the membering of diaspora is an important, yet under recognized force that draws emigrants into collaborative relations with the sending state in community-based governance (Iskander, 2012, p. 2102679; Chen, 2021). The PRC essentially secures commitment from *hui-zhang* to control and manage the OC populations through its opaque and arbitrary practices undertaken for diaspora engagement, which leaves ample room for everyday corruptions. Reading against these findings, transnational state power is disseminated and enacted through the prosaic improvisations of diasporic actors (Jeffery, 2012; Painter, 2006).

Lastly, the paper makes empirical contributions by bringing to light the simultaneous convergence and divergence of interests between the PRC and the OC. The manifold implications of *hui-zhang*'s associational and business careers reveal that they at once helped to deepen the reach of the sending state into the emigrant communities and also enhance Chinese capital's penetration into Laos. However, their paralleled practices of performing patriotism whilst brokering investments also seeded new ruptures among the OC populations, plagued global China with frauds, and augmented its neo-colonial appearances. All of these outcomes contradict Beijing's intended outcomes for diaspora engagement. The contour and content of Chinese capitalism overseas are reshaped as the sending state and the OC looking to co-opt each other in moments and spaces of encounter.

Declaration of competing interest

The author is not aware of any conflict of interests for this paper.

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