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“The body overseas, but the heart remains in China”? – China’s diaspora politics and its implications

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Abstract

Migration studies mostly focus on processes of immigration. While integration, acculturation or incorporation are important fields of study, the role of the sending state is by and large neglected when it comes to analyzing these processes. Yet, large sending states such as China increasingly aim to reach out to and control “their” diaspora, thus demonstrating their ability to utilize the global economic system and transnational migration regimes for their own means. By incorporating Chinese living beyond the borders of the People’s Republic (PRC), Beijing seeks to strengthen China’s international image and to foster economic modernization.

Keywords: *China’s diaspora politics; Chinese migration; Austria.*

Introduction

Migration studies mostly focus on processes of *immigration*. While integration, acculturation or incorporation are important fields of study, the role of the sending state and its politics is to a large part neglected when it comes to analyzing these processes. Yet, large sending states such as China increasingly aim to reach out to and control “their” diaspora, thus demonstrating their ability to utilize the global economic system and transnational migration regimes for their own means. By incorporating Chinese living beyond the borders of the People’s Republic (PRC), Beijing seeks to strengthen China’s international image and to foster economic modernization.

By taking the example of Chinese migrants¹ in Austria, this article focusses on China’s recent policies towards overseas Chinese and its implications for both China and Chinese overseas. The mixed-method approach of this study is mainly based on a qualitative content analysis of Chinese migrants’ online and print media in Austria, including the news weeklies *Europe Weekly* (hereafter: EW), *Huaxinbao* (HXB), the website www.achina.at (AC) and the internet forum www.outuo.net (OT). The analysis focused mainly on articles and postings that addressed activities of Chinese migrant’s associations, media outlets and language schools, activities of the Chinese embassy in Vienna, meetings between Chinese migrants and Chinese state officials, and (self-) portrayals of overseas Chinese organizations in Austria. In addition, it includes content analyses of official Chinese documents, Chinese state media articles on overseas Chinese and diaspora politics (including articles by the *Renmin Ribao*, or *People’s Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party), speeches delivered by Chinese politicians in front of overseas Chinese

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¹ In the context of this paper the terms overseas Chinese / Chinese migrants are based on an ethnic definition and refers to both Chinese citizens living abroad and to foreign passport holders of Chinese origin.

audiences, teaching materials for Chinese cadres (Qiaoban, 2006), and official publications on China's diaspora politics, such as the *Blue Book of Overseas Chinese* (Qiu, 2011 and 2011). Furthermore, it comprises expert interviews with leading personal of overseas Chinese organizations in Austria.²

In the first two parts, the article looks at the official overseas Chinese discourse in the People's Republic and the political apparatus that deals with overseas Chinese. According to Beijing, *all* overseas Chinese – regardless of their citizenship – belong to China. Thus, since the early 1980s a number of political bodies have been created for the purpose to establish direct links to Chinese communities outside China. Especially the last ten years seem to mark a shift towards a more assertive strategy in dealing with overseas Chinese, which is mirrored both in an increasingly demanding rhetoric and an expanding bureaucratization of overseas Chinese politics. Afterwards, the article analyses political and juridical mechanisms for incorporating overseas Chinese associations, media and language schools into the Chinese state structure and for claiming the identity of “the sons and daughters of the Middle Kingdom”. Large parts of the existing literature tend to exclusively focus on this state centered perspective, understanding Beijing's diaspora politics as an attempt to expand its power beyond territorial borders. Elena Barabantseva (2005) or James To (2012) for example have examined how China seeks to embrace overseas Chinese and how the country extends the monopoly of power of the state to Chinese residing outside of its borders. In that line, Pal Nyiri even has stated that „we are likely to see [...] relations between the PRC and the overseas Chinese that might turn overseas Chinese organizations and businesses into representatives of PRC interests“ (Nyiri, 1999, p.272). In contrast to this (and, in fact, in line with some recent studies such as Hong Liu's and Els van Dongen's (2016) article on China's transnational governance), this article aims at capturing the inter-relational power dynamics and dependencies between nation-state actors and the diaspora in defining and using diaspora politics. In this sense, the article hopes to broaden the theoretical focus on diaspora politics by not only paying attention to state politics but by applying attention also to migrants as actors in their own right who challenge those very politics. Therefore, in the final section the paper discusses the implications of China's diaspora engagement policies: While in terms of economic development and soft power capacities Chinese migrants indeed can play a crucial role for China, the instrumentalization of migration by the Chinese nation state at the same time turns out to be a double-edged sword: Not only have overseas Chinese learned to use and exploit state discourses for own purposes that are not necessarily in line with those of the Chinese state, but the attempt to embrace emigrants also leads to growing suspicion against migrants within host societies.

The official overseas Chinese discourse in China

It is estimated that currently more than 50 million ethnic Chinese live outside China (Qiu, 2012). Not surprisingly, from China's perspective overseas Chinese promise massive intellectual, financial and political resources the Communist Party of China (CPC) wants to get hold of for the benefit of China's modernization. Consequently, overseas Chinese – “the treasury of the Chinese nation”, as former president Jiang Zeming has put it – have long come to be regarded as a matter of national interest.

Looking at Chinese state media, at speeches delivered by high ranking politicians or at official documents, one can identify two aspects fundamental for China's official attitude towards overseas

² This article is mainly based on finding of my dissertation project (Schäfer, 2018), which focused on Austrian Chinese incorporation practices and identity construction.



Chinese. First, the notion “overseas Chinese”, as understood in the PRC, includes both Chinese passport holders living abroad and ethnic Chinese with foreign citizenship (see also Barabantseva, 2005). While officially differentiating between Chinese passport holders (*huaqiao*) and ethnic Chinese with foreign citizenship (*huaren*), common linguistic usage indicates that Beijing’s diaspora politics embraces ethnic Chinese overseas regardless of their nationality. This becomes apparent not only in the fact that both classifications are interchanged frequently but also merged into one word – *huaqiaohuaren*. The separating line between both juridical expressions is further blurred by frequently used notions that emphasize blood line and descent, instead of citizenship, such as “descendants of the Fiery Emperors and the Yellow Emperor” (*yanhuang zisun*), “offspring of China” (*huaxia zisun*) or “50 million compatriots abroad” (*wuqianwan qiaobao*) (EW, 2014a). Second, Overseas Chinese are regarded as part of the “big family of the Chinese nation” (*zhonghua da jiating*) (Zhongguo Qiaowang 2014) grouped around the CPC. According to this notion of belonging, they are bound to China by ties of blood, lineage, and culture, as well as by sharing the state’s modernizing goal (Nyiri, 2001). In line with this, China’s president Xi Jinping had pointed out that overseas Chinese affiliations to China were based on “bloodline affection” (*血缘亲情*) (Xi, 2017). Thus, there is a deep-rooted assumption that overseas Chinese belong to China and not to their country of residence – regardless of their citizenship. They – according to one of China’s leading experts on overseas Chinese – „not only maintain their identity but also feel proud of being Chinese. Overseas Chinese have never forgotten their motherland ever since they left China” (Shen, 2006, p.220). Consequently, China’s diaspora politics is directed “not only towards Chinese citizens, but also towards ethnic Chinese with foreign passports“ (*qiaowu gongzuo duixiang shi huaqiao, waiji huaren*) (Qiaoban, 2006, p.2).

By means of such discourses, Beijing aims to retain its grasp on its emigrants. Even if elements of this discourse can be traced back to the late Qing dynasty (1644-1911), it is mainly connected to and shaped by Deng Xiaoping’s policy of “reform and opening up“ that started in 1978. By increasingly steering towards the country’s “most precious resource“ (*zui baogui de ziyuan*) (EW, 2014a), Beijing seeks to accumulate investments, import know-how and high-end technology and foster it’s international image (Qiu, 2011). In other words: Overseas Chinese, China’s „unique stroke of luck“ (*dute jiyu*), as Deng Xiaoping (2000, p.47) have put it, are included into China’s calculation of its potential human resources on hand for the benefit of the country’s modernization efforts.

The overseas Chinese policy apparatus

In accordance with the PRC’s official overseas Chinese discourse, between 1977 and the mid-1980s, a number of political bodies were created (or re-created, after they were suppressed during the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976) for dealing with overseas Chinese matters. The implementation of China’s overseas Chinese policy is basically in the hands of the Chinese embassies and the *Overseas Chinese Affairs Office* (OCAO), an administrative office under the State Council – the highest administrative authority in China – that was reinstalled in 1978. The latter is one of the five institutions of Chinese diaspora engagement politics that are often referred to as the “five diaspora systems” (*wuqiao*), that is to say five interrelated governmental and semi-governmental institutions that cooperate with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries to formulate and implement diaspora policies (Barabantseva 2005; Liu & van Dongen, 2016). Besides the OCAO these institutions are the *All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese* (ACFROC), the *Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee*, the *Zhigong Party*, and the *Hong Kong*,



Macau, Taiwan Compatriots and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee. The shared objective of this apparatus of overseas Chinese affairs is to establish direct links with the overseas Chinese all over the world and to guarantee the Chinese state's closeness to them. The OCAO's main tasks are "the coordination of policy formulations [...], as well as monitoring their implementation. In addition, it seeks to advance the protection of the rights and interests of the Chinese overseas" (Liu & van Dongen 2016, p.809). Furthermore, the OCAO is responsible for research and policy recommendations on promoting the unity between China and the Chinese overseas, on defining and exploiting soft power potentials of the diaspora and on attracting Chinese overseas capital and talent. Similar tasks are central also for the other bodies of overseas Chinese work. Furthermore, in recent years Beijing has begun to establish so called *Overseas Chinese Service Centers*, or *Chinese Civic Centers*, and thus added a new government agency to the already inflated bureaucratic apparatus of diaspora politics. These *Centers* aim at guaranteeing the safety of Chinese migrants and at supporting overseas Chinese in case of – not specifically defined – emergencies. Within only a few years, the country already has established 60 such facilities in currently 41 countries (Renmin Ribao, 2018).

Political measures: The case of Austria

This section will focus on the implementation of Chinese diaspora engagement policies by taking the example of Chinese migrants in Austria. The history of the Chinese in Austria is rather short. Numbers of Chinese immigrants started to rise only after the beginning of China's reform and opening policy in 1978, numbering from about 800 in the beginning of the 1980s to approximately 40,000 persons today (Kreissl, 1999; Mosleh & Schäfer 2015). In accordance with the growing number of Chinese migrants in Austria, in the last 15 years the Chinese nation state made great efforts to establish a tight relationship with the local Chinese community. By appealing to emotional ties to China, the diaspora apparatus is determined to obtain the loyalty and commitment of Chinese in Austria, to propagate policy guidelines, and to ensure China's influence in the local community. In the course of this, overseas Chinese associations, language schools and media – the so called "three pillars" of Chinese communities (Barabantseva, 2005) – serve as "matchmakers" that function as points of contact and facilitate regular interactions with PRC officials (Nyiri, 2007, p.120). In this context, PRC authorities have repeatedly encouraged local Chinese to form associations "to be better able to meet official PRC delegations" (the same holds true for other countries, see Thuno, 2001, p.925). In Austria, most newly founded overseas Chinese organizations in the last ten years were established with support or under supervision of Chinese authorities, including the *China Councils for Promoting Peaceful Reunification*, the *Chinese Students Association* or the *Association for Promoting Scientific Cooperation* (see Schäfer, 2018). Second, Chinese authorities have fostered cooperation between Chinese state media and overseas Chinese media, as a result of which both former independent Chinese language weeklies in Austria are now to a large part produced in China. The content of the *Europe Weekly* is mostly drawn from the Shanghai based *Xinmin Wanbao*, while the *Huaxinbao* is partly produced by the *People's Daily*, the mouthpiece of the CPC and most important newspaper in China. As a result, both newspapers treat its readers as members of the Chinese nation rather than as migrants in Austria. Finally, the PRC supports cooperation between state institutions and local Chinese language schools run by Chinese migrants (Thuno, 2001). In 2015, all seven Chinese language schools in Austria were connected to the Chinese state bureaucracy. In line with this, strengthening Chinese roots and patriotism are the main objectives of the schools in Tyrol and Vorarlberg (EW, 2009). The *Chinese*



School Vienna (Chinese Schule Wien) in turn is linked to partner schools in China and to the *Confucius Institute* in Vienna; its teachers have received training in the PRC and teaching materials are compiled by the OCAO.

The short outline demonstrates the cluster of links and channels between Chinese state authorities and overseas Chinese organizations in Austria. China uses these channels for its extensive propaganda work. In this context, the main efforts of diaspora politics are pursued under the guiding theme of “going out and inviting in” (*zou chuqu, qing jinlai*) (see Thuno, 2001; Barabantseva, 2005; To, 2012). Correspondingly, China frequently sends out official delegations to meet with Chinese migrants in Austria. From June 2011 to October 2013, Chinese authorities paid at least 14 visits to Vienna (seven by the OCAO alone), leading to contact with 30 out of 55 overseas Chinese associations, language schools and media outlets. In speeches delivered by Chinese officials and overseas Chinese representatives during these meetings, participants propagate role model images that work to bolster nationalistic ties between Chinese inside and outside the PRC. Speakers frequently emphasize the migrants’ obligation to participate in China’s economy and to uphold patriotism (AC, 2012b); especially students are invited “to return to the homeland and contribute to China’s economic upswing” (*hui dao zuguo [...] jingji jianshe zuochu nimen de gongxian*) (EW, 2011a). Pleas like these are a part of a policy that aims at attracting overseas Chinese “talents”. In 2013, Xi Jinping encouraged Chinese students abroad to “uphold their patriotic spirit” (*jianshou aiguo zhuyi jingshen*) by “serving the country from abroad” (*liu zai haiwai [...] wei guo fuwu*) (Xinhua, 2013), therewith broadening the former strategy of simply fostering return.

In a broadly defined sense, regular meetings between embassy staff and migrant organizations also belong in the context of “sending out”. Apart from frequently inviting Chinese migrants to gala dinners in celebration of welcoming new embassy personal, the government agency also organizes official anniversary celebrations such as anniversaries remembering China’s victory in the Sino-Japanese War (AC, 2010b) or the founding of the *People’s Liberation Army* (AC, 2010a) as well as traditional Chinese holidays such as the Spring Festival or the Mid-Autumn Festival (EW, 2011c). The former aims not only at creating a shared collective memory, but, sometimes, also at propagating distinct Chinese political ideologies contrastive to “Western” concepts. During a meeting in celebration of the Xinhai-Revolution³ in Vienna, a Chinese state media journalist for instance openly criticized “the hypocrisy of Western democracy” (*xifang minzhu de xuweixing*), while stressing that “China’s democracy corresponds with the particular characteristics of the Chinese nation” (*zhongguoshi de minzhu shi fuhe zhongguo guoqing*) (AC 2011a). Of the same tenor are traditional festivities hosted by the embassy, which feature not only songs and dances, but also targeted identity politics. On such occasions, essentialist identity ascriptions are promoted by slogans according to which “Chinese cultural roots cannot be cut off” (*zhonghua wenhua gen duanbuliao*) (Renmin Ribao, 2008); in the same vain official narratives propagate that “descendants of China never give up their love for the homeland” (*huaxia zisun yongyuan geshe bu kai de*). Furthermore, authorities use such gatherings to give political instructions, claiming that overseas Chinese, as “unofficial ambassadors” (*minjian dashi*), should support and assistance China’s national interests – even if such instructions usually remain quite unspecific in nature and revolve around constantly recurring paroles such as “make greater contribution to China’s economic development”, “promote the peaceful reunification of China” or “help revitalize the Chinese nation” (Western Returned Scholars Association, 2018).

³ The Xinhai-Revolution refers to a series of revolts and uprisings between October 1911 and February 1912 that overthrew China’s Qing dynasty and established the Republic of China (1912-1949).



Another central element of Beijing's "inviting in"-policy are frequently held "conferences" that bring together Chinese state authorities and Chinese overseas to discuss a wide range of political "hot topics". During such gatherings participants not only export official government standpoints to the Chinese community in Austria, but also assign certain expectations to overseas Chinese and define ways of how they can be beneficial to the CPC. Activities along this line can be divided into two categories: On the one hand, conferences focus on China-related topics that are also of great interest to the Austrian public – such as the Tibet question (AC, 2012a), the conflict about the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands or *Falun Gong* (Xinhua, 2001). In June 2012, for example, overseas Chinese held a workshop on the Tibetan history that was attended by embassy staff and a delegation of Tibet experts from China. In contrast to narratives predominant in the Austrian public, the workshop claimed that "since ancient times Tibet is an inseparable part of China" (Xizang zigu shi zhongguo lingtu bu ke fenhai de yi bufen) and was "peacefully liberated" (heping jiefang) by the Communist Party in 1950. Contrary to the "one-sided propaganda of the Dalai Lama" (dalai de pianmian xuanchuan), Tibetans were described as "happy" (xingfu) people. On the other hand, conferences correlate with the introduction of official political guidelines or with political mega events in China. In recent years, conferences were held on occasion of the National People's Congress (EW, 2014b) or the 19th National Congress of the CPC (Qingtian Wang, 2018). During the latter, overseas Chinese were called upon to propagate Chinese culture and to help bolster China's image in the world. Standpoints propagated on such occasions are sometimes diametrically opposed to "Western" values – for example when participants demean the "so called Western democracy" (suowei de minzhu) while eulogizing "the correctness, suitability, and superiority of the Chinese democracy" (AC, 2013c), or when orators appeal to Chinese overseas "to follow Chairman Xi" (xianying xi zhuxi; AC, 2013b). As usual during such gatherings, overseas Chinese around the globe are described as a unity intrinsically linked to the motherland (AC, 2013a).

Apart from the "going out"-strategy, the policy of liaising with Chinese migrants is mirrored in the slogan "inviting in". In this context, Austrian Chinese organizations are frequently invited and received by local authorities in the PRC with efforts to contribute to China's reform and opening-up, to spur patriotism, or to win overseas Chinese to help to publicize Chinese culture, and to enhance the understanding between China and other countries. In China, during the last years Austrian Chinese were received by the OCAO and the ACFROC (EW, 2011d) or attended the National Day in Beijing (EW, 2011b) and, as nonvoting delegates, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (AC, 2013c). In addition, Chinese authorities have established mechanisms through which specially selected overseas Chinese are "invited to make policy recommendations and give feedback on policies towards Chinese overseas" (Liu & van Dongen 2016, p.811). The head of the *Union of Chinese in Austria* (Verband der Chinesen in Österreich) for example also functions as an advisor in the so called "Overseas Committee" of the ACFROC where he, among other things, called upon introducing Green Cards for ethnic Chinese with foreign citizenship (Henan Provincial Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, 2018).

As a part of Beijing's "inviting in"-policy, starting in the 1990s, so called root-seeking summer camps for foreign born Chinese youth were set in China. In Austria, the *Chinese School Vienna* participates in this program that works to "bolster ethnic ties to home localities and to Chinese culture" (Thuno, 2001, p.924). Chinese authorities also maintain extensive contacts with overseas Chinese by creating a legal framework that offers special treatment for overseas Chinese – such as tax benefits or the permission to purchase land in China –, in order to attract remittances, donations and foreign direct investments (Bolt, 1996). Elena Barabantseva (2005, p.10) noted, that "in the



period from 1979 to 2000, the development of the overseas Chinese policy resulted in the adoption of more than 360 relevant laws and regulations by the C[hinese]P[ople's]C[ongress] and more than 800 by the S[tate]C[ouncil].” Even if many regulations changed over time or were suspended completely, the idea of treating ethnic Chinese with foreign citizenship and other foreigners different, remains powerful to this day. According to the *Report on China's Regional International Talents Competitiveness* (Wang 2017), almost 4 million of the current 50 million overseas Chinese in the world are professionals, who are mainly employed in the fields of science, education and finance. In order to get hold of these “talents”, starting from February 1 2018, foreigners of Chinese descent are able to apply for a multiple-entry visa that allows them to stay in China for up to five years. These measures extend the previous policy under which individuals with Chinese heritage could receive a one-year visa, and a residency permit spanning only three years. The Ministry of Public Security said that the policy aims “to streamline the process for overseas Chinese to ‘return home’ and to make it easy for them to visit families, conduct business and cultural exchanges and run personal errands in China” (China Daily, 2018). The adoption of such regulations and laws indicates that the PRC aims at a new form of flexible and trans-local citizenship that creates favorable conditions for the incorporation of overseas Chinese into the Chinese nation state.

The endeavors to establish contacts abroad also include the organization of large-scale global conferences where people of Chinese origin from around the globe come together under the banner of the PRC. Chinese migrants from Austria and their associations frequently attend such gatherings. The 7th *Forum on the Global Chinese Media* for instance was held in Qingdao on September 2013; the two-day meeting was attended by 450 overseas representatives from 58 countries and regions – including members of the Austrian *Europe Weekly* – and by 150 Chinese state officials and state media operators (EW, 2011e). During the meeting, Chinese authorities allotted the role of “good voices of China” to overseas Chinese media. Other conferences with Austrian Chinese involvement are organized and held in a similar fashion. The 7th *Conference for Friendship of Overseas Chinese Associations* in Beijing for instance brought together 500 overseas Chinese from 119 countries with high ranking Chinese politicians such as president Xi Jinping (EW, 2014c). In his speech, Xi urged overseas Chinese to not forget “the Chinese blood running through their veins” (bu wang shenshang liutang de zhonghua minzu xueye) and called upon overseas Chinese to make new contributions “to the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation” (shixian zhonghua minzu da fuxing) (Zhongguo Qiaowang, 2014).

To sum up, the previous section have demonstrated that the PRC’s authorities make considerable efforts to connect with overseas Chinese and to win their loyalty for the sake of China’s rise as a world power: Reaching out to Chinese overseas has become an essential part of China’s modernity project. As a result of China’s overseas Chinese politics, currently 30 out of 55 overseas Chinese organizations in Austria are linked to the Chinese nation state. As noted by Elena Barabantseva (2005, p.27), such politics imply that China re-conceptualizes the notion of the Chinese state and “that China goes beyond and even negates the very basis of the idea of a modern nation-state – its territorial limitation”: By reaching outside its national territory, China transforms itself into a network state that defines national belonging on the basis of blood and descent instead of legal categories. Thus, the CPC implicitly extends the monopoly of power of the state to subjects located not only outside its territorial borders, but de jure outside its jurisdiction.



Implications: Beijing's double-edged sword

Beijing's "most precious" resource?

Contributions of the overseas Chinese have indeed been key to China's economic development since the 1980s. Especially in the early years overseas Chinese have served as bridges in China's efforts to open to the outside world and as a prime force in invigorating economic reform. In the 1980s, diaspora investors "were more persistent than their foreign competitors in China, relying on cultural and ancestral ties to offset political risk" (Lee, 2016). Family networks, language skills and cultural knowledge often made it easier to overcome shortcoming in the political and legal system that held back Westerners (Smith & Hsu 2004, p.550). It is estimated that diaspora Chinese have contributed for 67% of the total amount of foreign direct investments from 1978 to 2005 (Mingpao Daily, 2015). Furthermore, China has received approximately 5.5 billion RMB in remittances only between 1979 and 1989. In 2017, China still remains one of the world's top remittance recipients, second only after India. The same holds true for large sums of donations contributed by Chinese immigrants overseas. In 2013, overseas Chinese donations to China totaled 7.17 billion RMB, money that mainly benefits infrastructure and construction projects in overseas Chinese hometowns (China Daily, 2015). Overseas Chinese also serve China through the process of 'brain circulation'. Especially in the last decade, more and more Chinese students and scholars abroad returned to China; these returned academics are playing a leading role in introducing advanced technologies as well as management and administration skills to China. This is not only mirrored in the fact that today 81% of members in Chinese academy of sciences as well as 60% of Chinese university presidents have studied abroad. Since 2000, the Chinese government also have started to build industrial and science development parks to attract diasporic Chinese. As a result, the "investors and technopreneurs have disproportionately been new Chinese immigrants from [...] advanced Western countries" (Liu & van Dongen, 2016, p.816). The short outline makes clear that human, intellectual and financial resources of the diaspora have significantly increased the capabilities of the Chinese state's modernization project (Center for China and Globalization, 2016, p.4; Lin 2000).

It may have been such economic contributions – which have been interpreted in official China as manifestations of the diaspora's "friendship towards the motherland" (*dui zuguo de qingyi*) (Qiu, 2011, p.80) instead of expressions of rational choices by individuals with personal financial interests –, that have led to a development in which political dimensions became increasingly prominent in diaspora engagement policies. The Chinese diaspora has increasingly come to be regarded as an important medium for China's international image campaign. With the help of overseas Chinese, Beijing intends to communicate China's ideas to the outside world and spread its propaganda messages. Along these lines, in speeches delivered by Chinese authorities, overseas Chinese in Vienna have been repeatedly urged to play an active role in promoting ties between China and Austria. In this regard, some events in the last years seem, at least at first glance, to indicate, that China's strategy works out: Small groups of Chinese migrants did not only organize rallies to welcome then-president Hu Jintao on his state visit to Austria in May 2012 or to protest against the Dalai Lama during his stay in Vienna the same year. Even more spectacular were protests during the so called 2008 Tibet unrest⁴: In the face of massive anti-China demonstrations by Exile Tibetans and of widespread allegations against Beijing's human rights violations by Western media, huge

⁴ The 2008 Tibet unrest refers to a series of Tibetan demonstrations and riots against Han-Chinese in several provinces in China in March 2008, that soon were stamped down by the Chinese military.



crowds of overseas Chinese took to the streets in cities around the globe in April 2008 to support China's Tibet policy. In Vienna, the Chinese embassy was involved in the staging of a demonstration of approximately 500 ethnic Chinese on April 19. In cooperation with the *Chinese Students Association*, the embassy had not only defined the topics and slogans of the protest, but also gave exact instructions and behavior rules for demonstrators, which included for example a ban on speaking to Austrian media representatives (OT, 2008c). At the same time, the *Students Association* stood in close contact to its counterparts in other countries, as a result of which on the same day Chinese demonstrations were held in many other cities around the world such as Berlin, Amsterdam, London, Budapest, Washington or Tokyo – everywhere with the very same slogans and themes and with the aim to bolster China's international image as a peace-loving country.

Against such backgrounds, James To (2014, p.280) has called overseas Chinese a “highly coordinated ethno-nationalist force with transnational loyalties”, which “serve as a [...] ready supply of soft power to advance or support Beijing's outreach throughout the world.” Such notions also persist in media discourses in the West. The attempt of the Chinese government to embrace emigrants as well as the diaspora's contribution to China's success time and again lead to suspicion against migrants within host societies. In 2006, *Der Spiegel*, Germany's most important weekly news magazine, published an article about overseas Chinese “yellow spies”, accusing Chinese migrants to be a potential extension of the CPC stealing German technology; an article in *German Manager Magazin* took the same line, claiming that overseas Chinese, in contrast to other diaspora groups, “never cut their connections to the homeland” and always “maintain their love towards the motherland”. Going even further, the Australian author Clive Hamilton (2018) claimed in his book *Silent Invasion* that Chinese migrants would secretly support the PRC in taking over Australia. Such notions refer not only to the myth of the yellow peril, but also to the myth of an overseas Chinese exceptionalism, according to which overseas Chinese never assimilate into their host country, but – as the China expert Martin Jacques (2012, p.331) puts it – always “feel a powerful sense of attachment to the homeland”. Yet, by taking a closer look at events such as the 2008 demonstrations, we get a glimpse of the highly complex power relations between overseas Chinese grassroots movements and Chinese state politics. These complex interplays indicate that conclusions according to which overseas Chinese function as a “fifth column” for the CPC might be too premature.

“The spirits that I've cited my commands ignore”?

Even if the Chinese embassy had organized and orchestrated the April 19 protest in Vienna, the situation was much more complicated: Right after riots had broken out in Tibet and after politicians, human rights activists, and Exile Tibetans in Austria have begun to stage a series of protests against Beijing's harsh Tibet policy, Chinese students in Vienna used their own internet forum www.outuo.net not only to voice their anger against what they perceived as “biased” Western attitudes, but also to organize a demonstration in Vienna “to safeguard the motherland” (OT, 2008a). Yet, Chinese students online narratives turned out to be much more radical than Chinese state narratives: In an online environment coined by chauvinism and jingoism, outuo users constantly berated Austrians as “pigs” and “brainless” “enemies of China” and Tibetans as “ungrateful barbarians” (OT, 2008d). It is interesting to note that Chinese student's reactions to the events in March 2008 in countries such as the US were much less hostile towards members of the host society (Yang, 2010). Thus, one can assume that the harsh anti-Austrian narratives by Chinese in Vienna were influenced both by China's massive anti-Western propaganda during the crisis and by a constant feeling of discrimination at the hands of Austrians, which indeed has been one of the



recurring themes in the internet forum for years (see for example OT, 2010).⁵ Yet, these specific circumstances notwithstanding, Sheng Ding (2008, p.646) has pointed out, that such online libel and hate speech in the internet, which was omnipresent at outuo, can be damaging to the image of China and thus “could sabotage China’s [...] international reputation as a peaceful and responsible rising power”. Thus, even if the students understood their engagement as a “patriotic” performance of duties that were constantly demanded by Chinese authorities, the Chinese embassy stepped in and prohibited the already pronounced demonstration by the group of hyper-nationalistic Chinese students in Vienna in March 22 (OT, 2008a). As a consequence of the embassy’s intervention, the anger of the Chinese students turned against the embassy itself, which increasingly became the focus of criticism and was accused of betraying Chinese interests. Since the CPC’s legitimacy to a large extent is based on the claim of “liberating” China from imperialistic foreign powers, any questioning of the state’s nationalist standpoint is a highly dangerous attack on the CPC’s claim to political legitimacy (Hughes, 2000). When, a week later, Chinese students in other countries took to the streets and posted their activities on the internet, the Austrian Chinese student’s anger against their embassy grew even larger; even repeated interventions by the *Students Association* in online discussions that claimed Austrians to be “friends” and Tibetans to be “fellow countrymen” and that tried to defend the embassy’s attitude remained ineffective in reshaping the outuo-discourses (OT, 2008b). Against this mounting pressure by a growing number of self-declared “patriotic” students, the embassy finally gave in and organized (under the name of the *Students Association*) a demonstration it had successfully obstructed for weeks; it is a twist of irony that the same institution that had tried to prevent an autonomous demonstrations by Chinese students, in the end had to align itself with the out-of-control nationalistic outbursts and had to go along with populist demands while at the same time trying to keep it in line by orchestrating the outcome of the protest.

The example of the Tibet unrest demonstrates that the exposition of Chinese patriotisms is not merely a manifestation of obedience to state politics, but sometimes rather a manifestation of political agendas that are directed *against* the party state. This becomes also apparent in the following example: While Beijing has been trying hard to attract overseas Chinese investments and donations, overseas Chinese likewise call upon Beijing for financial support. The activities of the Germany based *Association of Chinese Retirees in Europe* offers a telling example of this phenomenon (OT 2014). By referring to official state narratives, according to which China would always offer a “save haven” for Chinese overseas against unjust treatments by foreigners, the Association demanded in an open letter to the Chinese government in June 2014 a pension payment to those Chinese migrants who “have devoted their precious youth to the motherland” (ba baogui de qingchun nianhua gongxian gei le zuguo). In the letter, the association makes reference not only to the Chinese constitution that guarantees both the right for pension in general and to “protect the legitimate interest of all overseas Chinese” in particular; it also skillfully and shrewdly plays with elements of the official overseas Chinese discourse: As “descendants of China” (zuguo de ernü), overseas Chinese “always strived for protecting the reputation of the motherland” (yizhi wei weihu zuguo de mingyu he shengwang er nuli) and have “contributed to the homeland’s construction and development” (wei zuguo de jianshe he fazhan zuochu le gongxian). Thus, China “should show concern and care for its patriotic overseas compatriots” (yinggai tiliang he guanai zhexie [...] haiwai chizi); it should “let them feel the love and warmth of the motherland” (ganshou dao zuguo de qinqing he wennuan). When calling the current standpoint of official China, i. e. the refusal of any

⁵ In line with this, the 2015 Report of the *European Commission against Racism and Intolerance* has defined racism and xenophobia as severe problems in Austria.



payments, a “social injustice that seriously harms the image of the Chinese government” (shehui bu gong, yanzhong sunhai le zhongguo zhengfu de xingxiang), the association basically accuses the government of not fulfilling its promises and even counteracting on its own propaganda. Claims such as these demonstrate that both diaspora politics and the diaspora itself can be a double-edged sword: In the same way Beijing tries to safeguard its interests by embracing Chinese migrants, diaspora groups use state classifications as a tool for postulating their own interests. Here, diaspora politics do not lead on to Chinese migrants “serving the country”, but conversely force China to secure the material needs of people whose center of life is clearly Europe. In other words, the public display of patriotism in this context is motivated by personal goals defined by a complex transnational lifeworld; it is not related to Chinese state interests. Chinese migrants’ long since have learned to make use of identity categories and social roles ascribed by the Chinese nation state and to act on them for the sake of agendas that are not necessarily in line with those of the Communist Party.

The two cases show that state narratives and expectations sometimes creatively and even furiously are exploited and used for own reasons and purposes by different groups of Chinese migrants, meaning that official discourses about overseas Chinese constantly generating their own dynamics not controllable by the Chinese party state. Yet, even if the above mentioned cases demonstrate that individual motivations and actions are much more fluid than categorizations such as “obedient” or “loyal overseas Chinese” let us believe, they still remain quite powerful in public debate. Since integration is a two sided process requiring a mutual openness by newcomers and long-time residents, such narratives run the risk of deepening gaps and misunderstandings between both sides instead of overcoming them.

Conclusion

Migration studies usually focus on processes of immigration, while the role of sending states is rarely taken into account when it comes to understanding these processes. China however – as many countries with a large diaspora (see Gzásó 2017) – takes great efforts to embrace overseas Chinese and to claim their identity. China’s response to emigration can be understood as an effort to extend power beyond its territorial borders, thereby creating a network state that aims to re-integrate emigrants into its modernization project.

Yet, in contrast to stereotypes implying that overseas Chinese act as a “fifth column” for China, this article shows that the Chinese government so far has not succeeded in gaining broad-based and unconditional acceptance by overseas Chinese. Cases such as the Tibet demonstration to a large degree disarm the cliché that overseas Chinese are the extended arm of the totalitarian Communist Party and its global ambitions. Rather, Beijing’s turns out to be quite vulnerable at times when overseas Chinese make use of the very narratives ascribed to them. Thus, even if it seems that Beijing’s politics (and, sometimes, Western observers) fail at recognizing Chinese diasporas to be independent actors in their own rights, their behavior, attitudes and motives sometimes imply a decline in the power of the Chinese nation-state. Especially the internet is a useful platform for allowing different groups of overseas Chinese to express dissent and organize political actions, thereby re-tailoring state narratives in accordance to own needs and exerting great pressure on the very state that tries to embrace them. In such instances, Beijing has to realize it cannot expect overseas Chinese to simply align with predefined expectations while barring them from shaping the agenda of diaspora politics. While studies on state politics towards emigrants remain highly important, mere state centered perspectives fail to recognize the fact that the migrants addressed by



these politics are independent actors with own motivations even when interacting with the “diaspora” state. From a theoretical standpoint, these power relations have to be taken into account when analyzing state politics – not least because of the danger of projecting state narratives on migrants itself, which is always inherent to a state centered perspective.

Most certainly, imaginations of being Chinese are never fully under the control of the Chinese nation state but instead belong to everyone who claims to be Chinese regardless of his or her affiliation. Sometimes, this may foster democratic behavior, such as in the case of the claim by the *Association of Chinese Retirees in Europe*; yet, some other time it strengthens illiberalism and hyper-nationalism which brings along new challenges not only for China, but for host countries as well. What remains clear is: We won't be able to fully understand incorporation and identity processes of Chinese migrants without taking into account diaspora politics as well as the power relations inscribed in these policies.

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