

# Harden the Hardline, Soften the Softline: Unravelling China's *Qiaoling*-centred Diaspora Governance in Laos

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## Abstract

Since the 1990s, the Chinese government has intensified efforts to control the political life of the diaspora by recruiting proxies, or *qiaoling* 侨领, from the extraterritorial population for community-based governance. This paper examines the efficacy of this co-optive strategy by investigating its ramifications in Lao Chinese business communities. Following a group of *qiaoling* in Vientiane through qualitative fieldwork, I reveal how these individuals are self-motivated to perform patriotism by the desire to earn symbolic recognition. Their fame and prestige as *qiaoling* are critical for their material accumulation in the often-fraudulent business of intermediation for Chinese bureaucrats and investors. As such, while contributing to realigning the political allegiance of the diaspora, *qiaoling* simultaneously reshape the ongoing expansion of Chinese capitalism in ways that diverge from Beijing's developmental agenda. This finding complicates the long-held imaginary of an autonomous state–diaspora synergy in post-socialist China.

**Keywords:** diaspora governance; new migrant; extraterritorial authoritarianism; patron-clientelism; global China; Laos

Scholars of Chinese emigration in the post-reform era have long noted a distinct category of actors who have emerged and proliferated within the “new migrant”<sup>1</sup> population in recent decades.<sup>2</sup> They preside over newly established diaspora associations that lack active membership and liaise closely with the People's Republic of China's (PRC) government officials. The few who rise to prominence frequently appear in state-orchestrated, diaspora-themed events and pose as the face of their representative communities in the Chinese state media.<sup>3</sup> Branded as *qiaoling* 侨领 in the PRC's official discourse, these individuals embody the

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1 The term “new migrant” (*xin yimin*) first appeared in the PRC official discourse to refer to people who departed from China after the market reform, then found its way into academic literature. Nyiri (2001) provides an overview of the term regarding its origin and popularization.

2 Nyiri 1999; 2001; Xiang 2003; To 2014.

3 Nyiri 1999; Xiang 2003; To 2014.

state's ambition to govern the Chinese diaspora through transnational co-optation.

Like other authoritarian regimes, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) state has been faced with the challenge of balancing the risks and opportunities brought by heightened mobility over the course of neoliberal globalization.<sup>4</sup> While loosened control over transnational migration is increasingly a precondition for economic development, it also exposes the political order of a non-democratic state to more contestations. With access to alternative information and means of subversion, the diaspora becomes the breeding ground for anti-regime activism that threatens the grip on power of the home country government.<sup>5</sup> This trend is exemplified by overseas Chinese participation in pro-democracy movements that shook the CCP reign towards the end of the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> Since then, Beijing has embarked on an aggressive scheme to nurture and recruit proxies from the new migrant population in a deliberate move to contain and suppress diasporic dissidence.<sup>7</sup> The intervention has brought about an expanding cohort of *qiaoling*, whom the state depends on for controlling the political lives of overseas Chinese at the community level.<sup>8</sup>

Despite a broad literature examining the PRC's *qiaoling*-centred diaspora governance through policy and institutional analyses, its efficacy remains presumed rather than concretely evaluated.<sup>9</sup> Filling this gap, this paper presents a fieldwork-based account that addresses the grounded ramifications of this co-optive governing approach. Deviating from a state-centric lens, I follow a group of *qiaoling* from the Chinese business communities in Laos and grasp the implications of their everyday practices for the PRC government. Central to my findings are how these individuals voluntarily performed patriotism to earn symbolic recognition, which can be swiftly converted into material wealth in their private careers as middlemen of global China. In this process, they often leverage the aura of their *qiaoling* status in fraudulent ways to maximize profit extraction when brokering Chinese bureaucrats' and investors' journeys into Laos. By detailing such hidden dynamics, I highlight these actors' contradictory relations with the Chinese state. While contributing to the political allegiance of overseas Chinese to the CCP, *qiaoling* simultaneously derail the Party's long-term developmental interests, hence chipping away at the economic base of the post-socialist party-state's dominance.

This paper lays out the argument as follows. In the following section, I situate the PRC's *qiaoling*-centred diaspora governance into the theoretical debate on extraterritorial authoritarianism. The next section introduces the context and methodology underpinning the empirical analysis presented in

4 Glasius 2018; Tsourapas 2021.

5 Glasius 2018.

6 Thuno 2001.

7 Barabantseva 2005; Liu 2005.

8 To 2014.

9 Brady 2018; Walker 2018.

the paper. I then articulate how a group of *qiaoling* in Laos engage in a public demonstration of patriotism to facilitate their pragmatic search for wealth against the backdrop of global China in the final section. The conclusion highlights the contradictory outcomes produced by the CCP's strategy to control overseas Chinese through targeted co-optation, as it trades off the party-state's long-term developmental interests for immediate appeals of political compliance.

### Sustaining Authoritarianism through Transnational Co-optation

Over the past four decades, most authoritarian regimes have joined the global trend of relaxing restrictions on mobility. Departure and return are depoliticized.<sup>10</sup> Some forms of sojourning, such as studying abroad and labour migration, are often further promoted.<sup>11</sup> For these governments, the expanding extraterritorial population poses both opportunities and risks. While the diaspora can supply developmental resources like remittance, investment and technology, they may also inoculate anti-regime ideas and engender political mobilizations against home country governments.<sup>12</sup> Critical observers enthused by the “third wave of democratization”<sup>13</sup> once believed that heightened mobilities would eventually help put an end to authoritarianism. However, as the unfolding realities of neoliberal globalization have shown, non-democratic rule is generally perpetuated rather than disrupted by mass migration. Such regimes have adapted to the contemporary volume and velocity of population flows by extending what Gerschewski termed the “three pillars of authoritarian stability”<sup>14</sup> beyond the border: repression, legitimation and co-optation. Such dynamics remained significantly under-studied until recently in the literature concerning migration and state–diaspora relations.

Scholars who have examined the range of practices authoritarian regimes adopt to sustain themselves in a world of heightened mobility generally focus on the extraterritorial reach of despotic state power. Notably, efforts are devoted to unpacking tactics and strategies deployed by nation-states for transnational repression.<sup>15</sup> These range from traditional means such as assassination, extradition and coercion-by-proxy, to digitally enabled instruments to identify, track and harass dissidents overseas.<sup>16</sup> They are generally applied in combination with legitimation measures that manipulate nationalistic sentiments and unleash symbolic violence against critics and opponents by labelling them traitors.<sup>17</sup> Together, these offensive approaches constitute an important dimension of

10 Nyíri 2001; Xiang 2003.

11 Leung 2015; Ho and Boyle 2015; Del Sordi 2018.

12 Glasius 2018.

13 Huntington 1993.

14 Gerschewski 2013, 14.

15 Moss 2016; Öztürk 2020; Schenkkkan et al. 2020.

16 Conversi 2012; Moss 2016; Schenkkkan et al. 2020.

17 Collyer and King 2015; Glasius 2018.

authoritarian states' long-standing ability to directly punish and indirectly deter the anti-regime diaspora.

Despite such insights, scholarship on extraterritorial authoritarianism has yet to thoroughly investigate pertinent regimes' reliance on co-optation for diaspora governance. This lacuna is unfortunate, given how compliance induced through the state's provision of life and career resources has always been central to authoritarian resilience.<sup>18</sup> Illuminating concepts like “infrastructural state power”<sup>19</sup> and “bargained authoritarianism”<sup>20</sup> have highlighted the endurance of non-democratic rule through the continuous regeneration of patron-clientelist relations between state and society in domestic settings. China's extraterritorial authoritarianism perpetuates these patron-clientelist qualities. Evidence abounds showing how political regimes manage populations abroad through co-optive means, such as binding academic sojourners through scholarship provisions to guarantee a return and enrolling diasporic civilians for intelligence collection.<sup>21</sup> In these scenarios, the state projects power onto the overseas population by “tying strategically relevant actors to its ruling elites.”<sup>22</sup>

The PRC government has been identified among the authoritarian regimes most active in pursuing diaspora governance through transnational co-optation since the early 1990s.<sup>23</sup> As observers of Chinese politics have long noted, the regime significantly increased efforts to foster proxies from overseas Chinese communities in the immediate aftermath of the Tiananmen movement to cope with rising diasporic pro-democracy activism. Its initial attempts mainly targeted students and professionals sojourning in the Global North, given their heavy involvement in political mobilizations against the CCP.<sup>24</sup> Taking a “divide and conquer”<sup>25</sup> strategy, the party-state recruited individuals from within these groups and sponsored the formation of civil associations through them. By leveraging these early *qiaoling* and their institutional platforms, the PRC government aimed to not only monitor dissidents closely, but also reconfigure the formal space of diaspora politics. As civil associations sponsored by the Chinese state claim symbolic representation for their situated communities, they can work to undermine the legitimacies of their opponents' claim-making while also shifting the discursive formation in a direction favourable to the PRC.<sup>26</sup>

The party-state's efforts to nurture and absorb *qiaoling* into diaspora governance have persisted and increased since the turn of 1990. This trend is manifested through the range of PRC-liased civil institutions that have sprung up within the

18 Walder 1988.

19 Mann 1984.

20 Lee and Zhang 2013.

21 Leung 2015; Del Sordi 2018; Walker 2018.

22 Gerschewski 2013.

23 Thunø 2001; Barabantseva 2005; Liu 2005.

24 Nyíri 1999; 2001.

25 To 2014.

26 Ibid.

new migrant communities worldwide.<sup>27</sup> Organized along the lines of hometown associations, chambers of commerce and professional groups, among others, these associations and their nested *qiaoling* have been actively involved in containing and obstructing diasporic anti-regime mobilizations in recent decades.<sup>28</sup> For instance, *qiaoling* were identified as a critical group of actors inflaming and amplifying the counter-protests against collective demonstrations by exiled Tibetans during the 2008 Beijing Olympics torch relay and the 2014 Umbrella movement and subsequent social movements in Hong Kong.<sup>29</sup> As the ways in which *qiaoling* discipline the political lives of overseas Chinese in their host societies come under increasing public scrutiny, they are now commonly cited as the embodiment of global China's corrosive power.<sup>30</sup>

While the CCP initially co-opted *qiaoling* for reinstating authoritarian rule among overseas Chinese, it has also been tasking these actors with augmenting the party-state's developmental agenda. In the range of PRC-sponsored diaspora events devoted to investment promotion and talent recruitment, *qiaoling* are constantly paraded alongside PRC officials to showcase the perks one can obtain by participating in China's booming economy.<sup>31</sup> However, as Xiang has aptly pointed out, these forums and conventions generally fail to yield satisfactory outcomes if measured by their practical goals, like the number of returnees secured. Instead, their deliberate economism bears a hidden governing rationality.<sup>32</sup> By using apolitical language, these events assimilate elite overseas Chinese likely to harbour critical opinions of the CCP into its established political order and condition them to further self-censorship.<sup>33</sup> Following this line of reasoning, regardless of how *qiaoling* participation in the PRC's diaspora affairs is rhetorically framed, their primary contribution is to the realignment of overseas Chinese with the regime's authoritarian stance. Given that China's economic success since the market reform alone serves as a structural condition sufficient to engender a voluntary "developmental diaspora,"<sup>34</sup> the party-state needs not rely heavily on *qiaoling* to achieve this goal.

While *qiaoling*'s rise to prominence and nuanced positioning in the PRC's extraterritorial power projection has been thoroughly unpacked by scholars, their subjective experiences in these institutional processes have rarely been addressed. By taking an overwhelmingly aerial view to examine diaspora governance in the Chinese context, existing works reduce *qiaoling* to ready clients of the party-state, implementing its agenda in exchange for rewards such as symbolic endowment and career opportunities. The critical question of how particular

27 Nyíri 2001; Zhou and Lee 2013; Setijadi 2016.

28 Culpepper 2012; Zhao 2021.

29 Li 2021; Cheng 2020.

30 Brady 2018; Walker 2018.

31 Xiang 2011; Li 2012.

32 Xiang 2011.

33 Ibid.

34 Ye 2014.

diasporic actors emerge as *qiaoling* and harness patronage from the Chinese state for their use remains largely ignored. As highlighted by the few accounts documenting street-level bureaucracies involved in the PRC's diaspora governance, the *qiaoling* are often self-mobilized individuals keen to cash in on their public identity to fulfil personal ambitions.<sup>35</sup> Their agencies shape how the power of the homeland state is lived and experienced by overseas Chinese in often unexpected ways. As such, the politics in the mundane world of *qiaoling* hold the key to deciphering the de facto efficacy of the PRC's diaspora governance strategy, which is not to be confused with its policy expectations.

### **Making *Qiaoling* in Laos: Governing Diaspora in the Age of Global China**

This paper grasps the PRC's *qiaoling*-centred approach to diaspora governance through empiric data from Chinese communities in Laos. Though bordering China to the south-west, Laos historically hosts a small Chinese population due to its landlocked geography and relative isolation in the global economy.<sup>36</sup> During the French and American colonial periods, which lasted in Laos until the mid-1970s, Chinese merchants formed vibrant communities in the country's urban centres.<sup>37</sup> However, most of these early migrants fled the country when the Lao People's Revolutionary Party came to power in 1975. While the Marxist-Leninist state it established shared ideological and political similarities with the PRC, the relationship between the two countries was bumpy initially. In 1979, Laos cut ties with China in a sharp move to support Vietnam during the Sino-Vietnamese War. In the decade of bilateral antagonism that followed, the Chinese population in Laos further diminished due to political persecution.<sup>38</sup> The geopolitical tension did not resolve until the turn of the 1990, when the Lao state, dealing with challenges during its market reform in the late Cold War context, offered an olive branch to the CCP, then struggling with international isolation following the Tiananmen movement.<sup>39</sup> As bilateral diplomatic relations normalized, a new wave of Chinese began arriving in Laos. Like most migrants pioneering into less developed regions during this historical period, they were mainly traders (and would-be traders) who thrived by peddling cheap Chinese merchandise.<sup>40</sup> Many became semi-settled or settled over time, reinvigorating the Chinese presence in major cities in Laos.

The burgeoning communities of petty Chinese entrepreneurs in Laos were largely ignored by the PRC throughout the 1990s. The state's initial lack of interest in engaging with this diaspora group stemmed from its perceived apolitical and unresourceful character, which neither posed threats nor presented

35 Nyiri 1999; Chen 2021.

36 Tan 2012.

37 Evans 2018.

38 Baird 2018.

39 Evans 2018.

40 Haugen and Carling 2005; Tan 2012.

opportunities for the Chinese government. The situation took a turn in the early 2000s, when Laos started accruing geo-economic importance in the eyes of Beijing after the launch of the “going out” policy campaign, which encouraged domestic enterprises to seek opportunities in strategic sectors abroad.<sup>41</sup> The country emerged as an ideal site to offload China’s overcapacity in the construction sector and feed its demand for mineral resources and agricultural products.<sup>42</sup> The PRC’s desire to integrate its neighbour into a China-centred regional economy culminated in the blueprint of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which featured a railway linking South-West China to Singapore through northern Laos.<sup>43</sup> The state’s policy pivot towards Laos stimulated the flow of Chinese capital into this historically unappreciated destination. By 2019, the volume of Chinese outbound investment to Laos had grown from virtually nothing two decades ago to US\$8.25 billion, making Laos the 17th largest recipient of Chinese outbound investment worldwide.<sup>44</sup> In the meantime, the country also ascended to become one of China’s desired geopolitical partners in the region. Given its status as a South-East Asian country, Laos’s support is important for the CCP to strengthen the legitimacy of its territorial claim in the South China Sea.<sup>45</sup>

Laos’s growing strategic significance prompted the Chinese government to expand influence operations among its diaspora in the country. The trend was signified by the creation of the Laos–China Chamber of Commerce in 2005 – the first new migrant association established by the PRC embassy in Vientiane to nurture *qiaoling*.<sup>46</sup> Today, the number of such diaspora associations has exploded to several dozen, most of which have set up headquarters or branch offices in Vientiane for the convenience of networking with Chinese government officials. They each claim representation over different segments of the local overseas Chinese population, on the basis of shared home place, profession and so on. These civil institutions grew to be increasingly overlapping and redundant, given the limited size of the population that they claimed to represent. By 2020, the conservative estimation from the PRC’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimated the number of overseas Chinese in the country to be a mere 70,000.<sup>47</sup>

Chen elucidated the intricate processes that gave rise to the overcrowded world of Chinese diaspora associations in Laos. Her findings revealed that while the production of early organizations, like the Laos–China Chamber of Commerce, saw the heavy involvement of the PRC government from the outset, later institutions were mainly set up and operated by opportunistic local Chinese who aspired to become *qiaoling* for the perceived benefits accompanying this

41 Kurlantzick 2007.

42 Lu and Schönweger 2019.

43 Chen 2020.

44 Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China 2019.

45 Stuart-Fox 2009.

46 Nyiri 2011.

47 “Laowo guojia gaikuang” (Laos: country survey), PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq\\_676201/gj\\_676203/yz\\_676205/1206\\_676644/1206x0\\_676646/](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676644/1206x0_676646/).

public identity.<sup>48</sup> Such dynamics echo Nyíri's classic accounts of self-motivated overseas Chinese in the Eastern European context, who engaged in bottom-up institutionalization to compete for patronage from the PRC government.

The group of *qiaoling* clustered around Vientiane constitutes the subject of inquiry in this paper. I examined how the PRC's co-optive approach to diaspora governance unfolded in reality by following these individuals' everyday practices through their institutional platforms over 14 months of qualitative fieldwork (July 2016 to August 2016, June 2017 to June 2018). The core data presented in the paper were collected via long-term participant observation in two diaspora associations in Vientiane. I obtained consent from the *qiaoling* there to work as their informal assistant for research.<sup>49</sup> In order to anonymize these actors' personal and institutional identities, I created a composite association, "X," to represent the site where the ethnographic accounts take place. Data from participant observation are supplemented by in-depth interviews with *qiaoling* from other local institutions, as well as informants from Vientiane's Chinese community and PRC officials involved in diaspora governance in Laos. Archival materials, including information released by diaspora associations and the PRC's news coverage regarding Chinese in Laos, also contribute to my analysis.

Throughout the fieldwork, my positionality as a female Chinese researcher was a double-edged sword. On one hand, I struggled through gendered micro-aggressions in a male-dominated research environment. On the other hand, I was often conceived to be non-threatening, an important first impression that desensitized my research subjects and made them comfortable to be observed and interviewed by me.<sup>50</sup> Given that informality is already the norm of life in the Global South, many of my informants became open to going beyond official lines and revealing more clandestine aspects of their practices to me as our relationship strengthened over time. As the following analysis shows, these nuanced insiders' views are critical in understanding the ramifications of the Chinese state's transnational co-optation of the overseas Chinese.

## **Between the Political and the Developmental: Grounding Extraterritorial Authoritarian Power through *Qiaoling***

### *Staging patriotism*

It was an evening in early November 2017 when Yu stopped by X's office to drop off some documents. A man in his forties who ran a fruit-trading business, Yu

48 Chen 2021.

49 Diaspora associations are sites for social networking that see frequent visitors. To mitigate ethical tension during the fieldwork, I introduced myself as a graduate student who worked in these organizations as a form of data collection and obtained oral consent from visitors before observing their encounters with *qiaoling*. The research practice has been approved by the institutional review board of my host academic institution.

50 Researchers who share the intersectionality of my identity have often reported similar experiences in the field, as exemplified in Hanson and Richards (2019).

was among the handful of active members directing the everyday work of the association. In a rather jubilant mood, he waved me over to check out his latest achievement, a receipt with Lao words that I could not decipher. It appeared from my glimpse to be recording a transaction worth US\$500. “Guess what, I just bought a whole page on the 13 November issue of the *Lao Times!*” said Yu.<sup>51</sup>

At the time that I had this casual exchange with Yu, Vientiane had just been informed of an event scheduled for the date he mentioned, a state visit by China’s President Xi Jinping. This information was first shared with some members from the local overseas Chinese communities before being released to the public, among whom were *qiaoling* like Yu. Approximately a month prior to the state visit, they were called upon by the Chinese embassy in Vientiane to help assemble a cheerful crowd for the diplomatic occasion. Given the heightened sense of national pride the event instilled among the local overseas Chinese, there was no shortage of volunteers to celebrate Xi upon his arrival. What concerned the PRC officials orchestrating the state visit, though, was the possibility of dissidents finding their way into the crowd and using the opportunity to express their criticisms towards Beijing. While Laos has not been a hotbed for diasporic anti-CCP movements, the country’s overseas Chinese communities had increasingly fomented a different type of activism that also threatened to disrupt the smooth flow of Xi’s tour. This often involved sporadic and collective protests undertaken by migrants to petition for protection from the PRC government, as they become aggrieved with persistent experiences of marginalization abroad.

As has been well noted, contemporary Chinese journeys into the Global South are shadowed by lingering risk and insecurity.<sup>52</sup> Misfortune is particularly common among impromptu migrants who do not acquire mobility through state-sanctioned expatriation. Petty traders, for instance, are known to be victims of targeted theft and extortion.<sup>53</sup> As more working-class migrants pick up employment opportunities in Global South contexts, incidents of labour disputes have also become prevalent.<sup>54</sup> Hence, for the vast majority of the overseas Chinese in Laos, predicaments stemming from exclusion and inequality are an everyday reality. This situation leads to cries for help from the home country government, occasionally in the form of public demonstrations to pressure the Chinese state into action. Though such activism falls into O’Brien’s categorization of “rightful resistance”<sup>55</sup> that does not directly challenge the political order of the CCP, it tarnishes the image of unanimous diasporic support that the regime hopes to present to the foreign public. To rule out the potential for such disruptive occurrences, Vientiane-based PRC officials mandated *qiaoling* to conduct careful

51 The *Lao Times* is a pseudonym for the actual newspaper mentioned by Yu.

52 Schmitz 2014.

53 Ibid.

54 Chen 2020.

55 O’Brien 1996.

background screenings when selecting and admitting people into the audience. However, they did not provide concrete guidelines on how to organize other public aspects of the state visit.

The void was quickly filled by enterprising *qiaoling* who scrambled to outperform one another in staging patriotism on Xi's arrival day. They rushed to print welcome posters and banners to decorate Vientiane and purchased uniforms and Chinese national flags to ensure the visibility of their squads in the cheering crowd. My brief exchange with Yu revealed yet another race that had just been gaining momentum amongst *qiaoling* only days before the event – a competition to grab space in the 13 November issue of the *Lao Times*, a popular English-language newspaper in the country, to make dedications to the diplomatic occasion.

While *qiaoling* shared a genuine sentiment of patriotism with most overseas Chinese throughout the event, it would be a gross mischaracterization to attribute their displays of affection towards Beijing to affect alone. Upon closer inspection, their efforts were underscored by a calculative intention to accumulate symbolic capital. Given the state visit's publicity in the PRC media, it presented a rare opportunity for *qiaoling* to market themselves as prominent diasporic figures to broader Chinese audiences. A few succeeded in seizing major news coverage. Among them were Yu, whose life trajectory, business undertakings, and public work were featured in a nearly four-minute video aired on the PRC state-run television network CCTV. The entry point to his story was the *Lao Times* dedication page he had cleverly invested in.

*Qiaoling's* improvisations for symbolic accumulation extended beyond their efforts to capture the spotlight of major PRC media. They also embarked on aggressive self-promotion through social media accounts and websites registered in the name of their representative diaspora associations during the state visit. Content produced and distributed by these grassroots portals engulfed every possible corner of the Mandarin-language digital space, like WeChat and Weibo. Yu, for one, had me extract and repost his CCTV-watermarked video clip across these social media outlets. In short, *qiaoling* spared no effort to leverage a rare moment when the Chinese public's attention was drawn to Laos to propagate their desired self-representations. Much to the delight of the PRC officials overseeing the state visit, the ways in which *qiaoling* made use of it to reinforce their own stardom helped to engender an unprecedented level of fanfare when Xi arrived in town.

These dynamics crystalized the mutual dependency between *qiaoling* and the Chinese state regarding their image projection. This interrelation surfaces in particular when the CCP craves political allegiance. In addition to diplomatic occasions like state visits, such moments also occur when the regime faces global backlash for its authoritarian governance and expansionist ambition. For instance, during recent controversies regarding Beijing's policies towards its Uighur population and Hong Kong, Lao *qiaoling's* open endorsements of state policy were swiftly picked up by the Chinese official media to reinforce its

prevailing narratives.<sup>56</sup> In the process, these individuals were also further honed into influential and trustworthy civil leaders abroad for audiences trapped within the PRC's information bubble.

One may wonder whether *qiaoling* were concerned about potential criticisms from the host society as they openly exhibit loyalty towards Beijing. In today's geopolitical climate, with growing hostilities towards the PRC, overseas Chinese proxies of the regime have indeed been singled out and labelled as "Trojan horses" across many advanced liberal democracies.<sup>57</sup> In some cases, the repercussions have led to tightened immigration policies against Chinese in the name of national security.<sup>58</sup> However, in Laos, an authoritarian country on friendly terms with the CCP, *qiaoling* have yet to experience significant political consequences for their association with the Chinese government. In censored local media, these individuals are rarely targeted. Their celebration of Chinese nationalism is detailed and circulated in Mandarin-language news coverage only, which is inaccessible to most non-Chinese audiences. This dearth of information helps keep the everyday practices of *qiaoling* out of public scrutiny in Laos.

Moreover, some *qiaoling* have been able to equip themselves with additional protection in Lao society by cultivating ties with local elites. They secure patrons from the Lao People's Revolutionary Party government, forging alliances with officials interested in cashing out their political power amidst the influx of Chinese investments. Their embeddedness within high social circles not only enables them to eschew many marginalizing experiences encountered by ordinary Chinese in the country, but also allows privileged access to information and other valuable resources.

From the outset, the relationship between *qiaoling* and the Lao elites seems to echo a familiar pattern in colonial and post-independent Southeast Asia, where ethnic Chinese merchants served as the medium for the ruling class to access economic wealth. Yet, upon a closer look, today's *qiaoling* possess another path to enter the upper echelons Lao society compared to the wealthy Chinese in colonial Southeast Asia, who generally found their way in through business acumen and marital ties. This was revealed to me in an exchange I had with Yu in August 2017, during which he recounted how another X-based *qiaoling*, Zhao, made his initial breakthrough into the local elite circle:

Zhao and I were both invited to a small banquet organized by the Chinese embassy around 2011. It was there that he made the first effective contact with this Lao official who later became his primary patron. The occasion mattered – while Zhao is an exceptional networker, he would not be taken seriously by the official had they met in some casual circumstances instead of such a formal event.

56 An example of Lao *qiaoling* receiving media spotlight for endorsing the Hong Kong National Security Law can be found here: <http://www.chinaql.org/BIG5/n1/2020/0527/c431598-31726083.html>.

57 Brady 2018; Walker 2018.

58 "Chinese students face increased scrutiny at US airports," *BBC News*, 5 September 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54016278>.

Just as Yu implied, most *qiaoling* were, like average Chinese in Laos, petty businessmen upon starting their public careers. When X was registered in the early 2010s, Yu made a living by sourcing fresh produce for restaurants in the Vientiane area, while Zhao ran a shop selling cheap Chinese electronics to the local population. It was their purposeful liaison with the PRC government that lubricated their networking with the Lao elites. Yet for these individuals, the *qiaoling* identity can lead to gains other than social capital in the host society; it also unlocks new paths to material wealth as Laos develops into an expansionist frontier of global China.

### *The economy of intermediation*

*Qiaoling*'s vested efforts in self-promotion unfold against the backdrop of unprecedented economic integration between China and Laos. The primary motivation underlying their practices manifest in such a context, which sees bureaucrats and investors from the PRC entering Laos en masse daily. Unlike previous generations of Chinese migrants, these new arrivals come with the money and ambition ready at hand to tap opportunities in the foreign land. However, they lack the knowledge needed to achieve their goals. From minor issues like obtaining travel documents and setting up bank accounts to critical questions about what types of projects to pursue, the Chinese who parachute into Laos today with aspirations for fortune and career advancement rely heavily on middlemen to guide their transnational journeys step by step. In this process, many are lured into entrusting *qiaoling* for brokerage services, enabling these local co-ethnics to capture a windfall in the opaque economy of intermediation.

The intricate dynamic is epitomized in *qiaoling*'s semi-institutionalized status as the local mediators of the PRC's extraterritorial policy campaign, which refers to an ensemble of propagandist activities undertaken by Chinese public institutions in the country. Given Beijing's strategic tilt towards Laos, an increasing number of PRC state bureaus, government-led NGOs and universities have been joining the trend of sending small delegations to the country. Their short trips are explicitly dedicated to bolstering pertinent policy lines from the central state, a mission often achieved by throwing lavish forums and conventions to bring local stakeholders together for dialogue. In recent years, the conference venues in the handful of luxurious hotels in Vientiane have been occupied by these events. The phenomenon reflects the extraversion of China's domestic politics, in which lower-level cadres are motivated to endorse policy gestures from Beijing in vying for centrally distributed resources.

Unlike high-profile state visits arranged through the Chinese embassy and consular offices in Laos, envoys dispatched by less prominent PRC public institutions have routinely had their trips planned by thematically matching local Chinese associations. During my time at X the association brokered the journeys of expatriates from various public institutions based in the Chinese geographical region X claimed representation over. Some of these visitors came to promote

cultural, environmental and public health policies irrelevant to X's commercial focus. Nevertheless, they enlisted the association as the primary local broker for their Laos missions, despite the existence of other diaspora organizations that were nominally better aligned with their specific agendas.

The disproportionate flow of Chinese bureaucrats through X was conditioned by the perceived legitimacy of the association's *qiaoling* in the Mandarin-language political culture. As early volunteers who offered to service the PRC in governing its Laos-based diaspora, Yu and his co-founders of X have surpassed other fellow *qiaoling* in the country in terms of symbolic status. Their prestige can be delicately measured by their possession of rare titles like that of Lao advisor for the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese and the access to highly exclusive diaspora events like the World Chinese Entrepreneurial Convention. Individual *qiaoling*'s cumulative prestige endowed and certified by the PRC government are afforded significant weight in the minds of today's official visitors when looking for local partners to coordinate their trips.

Opportunities afforded to *qiaoling* to mediate China's policy propaganda in Laos have resulted in handsome material gains for them. Many have profitable side-lines connected to delegation visits by colluding with local service providers to inflate the price of essential expenditure items and pocket the difference. The scope and scale of these micro-corruptions sometimes alarm their clients. An uncomfortable moment in which such furtive practices were uncovered occurred once when I was working with Yu to coordinate a policy forum. Upon seeing the buffet, which should have been lavish considering that it was budgeted at an astonishing US\$100 per person, filled with cheap local delicacies such as larb, sausages, and sticky rice, the clients griped about the abnormal pricing among themselves. Nevertheless, they did not to confront Yu to avoid having their trip disrupted by a potential fallout. Like most other expatriates facing similar situations, they rationalized and tolerated *qiaoling*'s informal kickbacks as reasonable corruption.

As such, symbolic capital effectively facilitates *qiaoling*'s material accumulation in their private career as middlemen for global China. These lucrative prospects are increasingly what motivates them into sustaining and enhancing their public image by performing patriotism. Among the fortunes accrued in the brokerage business, the money they siphon out in planning trips for PRC bureaucrats, as documented above, is only the tip of the iceberg. Boundless wealth can be amassed by *qiaoling* when they serve as commercial intermediaries for another group of clients from PRC – the investors looking for profitable outlets in Laos.

When acting as the primary broker of a business deal, an individual *qiaoling* is often paid a commission proportional to the size of the specific investment project. In mammoth infrastructural projects, such as in hydropower, a common pursuit for Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in Laos, intermediaries can expect a multi-million-dollar package of rewards composed of cash, shares and

construction contracts. A friend of Yu, a *qiaoling* specialized in brokering hydro-power deals, admitted that an estimated 5 to 7 per cent of the total investment in this sector is spent on or through leading brokers, who are typically responsible for handling corporate relations with the local government.<sup>59</sup> Given the sheer size of the commissions, individuals who lack the de facto resources and skills to strike specific deals often overstate their capacities in an attempt to secure potential clients.

Hence, *qiaoling* are far from a “beautiful bridge”<sup>60</sup> that pave the way for China’s integration into the global economy. Instead, these diasporic subjects often “create entanglements and undermine market order”<sup>61</sup> as they meld unrestrained appetite for commissions into the opaque business of intermediation, as is illustrated by the following SOE manager’s complaints:

My team initially relied on A [a *qiaoling*] to obtain documents for the project from different Lao ministries. As it turned out, A did a poor job balancing the interests of these state factions. He screwed up in navigating the approval procedure. I found out about it only when a key bureau involved refused to sign off our deal and became unusually unresponsive to my team’s repeated approaches. The project was stuck in back-and-forth negotiations without much progress until we switched from A to another broker.<sup>62</sup>

In this case, A’s involvement merely interrupted the smooth completion of an investment project. In other cases, however, *qiaoling* have resorted to outright deceptions to scam inexperienced investor clients. Such practices culminated in a massive fraud involving the Savannakhet–Lao Bao Railway, an infrastructure project envisioned by the Vietnamese and Laos governments in the late 2000s that never came close to breaking ground. In 2012, major English news agencies, citing information first released from Lao outlets, announced that a little-known Malaysian company, Giant Consolidated Ltd. (hereafter GCL), was commissioned by the Lao government to design and build the railway.<sup>63</sup> The face of GCL, a self-claimed investment fund and asset management organization, was a Chinese bearing the family name of the Manchu emperors, Aisin Gioro.<sup>64</sup> He was among the first *qiaoling* in Laos who gained publicity in the Chinese state media: reports featuring this moustached man with alleged ancient lineage ties appeared on the PRC’s official diaspora-themed news coverage as early as 2006.<sup>65</sup>

In reality, all the publicized information about Aisin Gioro and GCL was integral to a carefully choreographed show directed by a crime syndicate specialized in scamming pan-Chinese business elites.<sup>66</sup> They devised a classic advanced

59 This estimated figure is provided by a *qiaoling* in an interview taken in Vientiane in November 2017.

60 Setijadi 2016.

61 Haugen 2018, 1295.

62 Interview taken in March 2018, Vientiane.

63 “Malaysian company in a US\$5 billion railway deal in Laos,” *Reuters*, 5 November 2012.

64 Detailed information about GCL and its Savannakhet–Lao Bao Railway deal is available at its official website: <http://grcl.asia/>.

65 The first report on Aisin Gioro in the Chinese state media, released on 23 July 2006, can be found here: <http://www.chinaqw.com/news/2006/0623/68/33686.shtml>.

66 Multiple sources of information confirmed Aisin Gioro and GCL’s long-term engagement in economic

payment fee scheme for the Savannakhet–Lao Bao Railway, which targeted Chinese construction firms eager to leave the overcrowded domestic market for abroad. Companies lured by the fabricated project were awarded non-existent railway construction contracts upon submitting a security deposit to GCL. Given that the advance payment is a standard arrangement in the construction sector, many unsuspectingly walked into the trap, some of whom lost millions in this process.

While Aisin Gioro's fraudulent endeavour was atypical in its scale and profile, many other *qiaoling* have devised similar schemes to hustle their clients for quick money. The illicit practices plaguing the economy of intermediation have left indelible imprints on the emergent landscape of Chinese capitalism in Laos. Notably, investment projects with poor profitability proliferated, leading the curious locals to suspect their connections with transnational money laundering. The bizarre situation is mainly caused by the chaos in the intermediating processes of global China, during which investors of all kinds have had their entrepreneurial adventures derailed or stranded by the predatory diasporic brokers hiding behind the honourable label of *qiaoling*. The situation has alarmed the PRC government and triggered its response, given that many of the victims are SOEs central to the political economic interests of the Chinese state. For instance, the state has quietly severed patron–client ties with Aisin Gioro and moved on to celebrate others as the poster children of the Lao Chinese diaspora. Such action to gradually reduce his symbolic presence was taken to prevent PRC enterprises from falling for his frauds in the future. This largely defensive response not only leaves the already committed business crimes of *qiaoling* unpunished, but also allows their virtuous public image to remain for the time being, considering no official denouncements of their misbehaviours are made. Consequently, investors unable to access the informal gossip about these *qiaoling* continue to succumb to their scams.

Given the PRC government's recent history of extraditing economic criminals, one may wonder why it has refrained from taking a more active approach to disciplining *qiaoling*'s business practices. In reality, the state often finds its hands tied when it comes to prominent diasporic figures like Aisin Gioro. There is, to begin with, a practical challenge in holding these individuals accountable due to their ties with the Lao elites, local citizenship and other informal protections shielding them from PRC law. They embody the classic “flexible citizens”<sup>67</sup> who master the art of harnessing resources from multiple nation-states at once for personal benefits. Additionally, the Chinese state's heavy reliance on *qiaoling* to

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footnote continued

fraud. These include news reports (e.g. <https://today.line.me/tw/v2/article/v6J7xm>) and academic literature (e.g. Huang 2019). These accounts were further confirmed by a substantial number of informants that I encountered during fieldwork.

67 Ong 1999.

strengthen its authoritarian rule also places it in a compromising stance regarding their fraudulent behaviours. After all, an open falling out with the individuals it once celebrated as diasporic patriots would create ruptures in the state's official narratives and dilute its legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese public. To borrow Lee's illuminating phrase, what the regime looks to achieve from the globalization of Chinese capital has always been an "encompassing accumulation"<sup>68</sup> that is not measured by the economic success of any single PRC enterprise alone. Hence, it is unsurprising to see the state sacrificing the interests of some Chinese investors, including SOEs, to sustain a working relation with *qiaoling* for immediate political allegiance.

## Conclusion

Over the past three decades, the Chinese state has intensified efforts to control the political lives of its ever-expanding extraterritorial population through targeted co-optation. By nurturing and recruiting clients from within the new migrants, it aims to actualize indirect governance at the diaspora grassroots. The policy intervention gave rise to the *qiaoling*, who have been widely noted for their role in influencing the official allegiances of their representative communities.

This paper offers a comprehensive assessment of the PRC's co-optive diaspora governance by examining the day-to-day practices of *qiaoling* from the Lao Chinese communities. Detailing how these individuals created and augmented the appeal of diasporic support for CCP, I highlight the highly voluntary nature of their political performance. What incentivized them to stage patriotism was primarily a practical desire to earn symbolic recognition from the Chinese government. Such practices bring about fame and reputation that can be swiftly converted into material wealth in a business arena the Lao *qiaoling* have excelled in within the context of global China. That is, brokering PRC bureaucrats' and investors' adventures into Laos for commissions and kickbacks. In the opaque economy of intermediation, it has become the norm for *qiaoling* to leverage their public identity for securing and profiting off clients in often fraudulent manners and shielding themselves from the disciplinary power of the Chinese state afterward.

By elucidating the relationship between *qiaoling*'s political performance under the spotlight and dubious business practices behind the scenes, I reveal the contradictory relationship between these individuals and the Chinese state. While contributing to amplifying the immediate support for the PRC's authoritarian policies, they simultaneously erode the base of the party-state's longevity since the market reform, i.e. economic conditions that enable the majority of its people and enterprises to survive and thrive. As the middleman of global China, the Lao *qiaoling* have reworked Beijing's plan to circumvent domestic

68 Lee 2018.

accumulation bottlenecks through spatial fix into a process of wealth redistribution from the PRC public and individuals to the elite overseas Chinese.

This paper also bears limitations. The case-specific evidence presented above cannot reflect situations in Chinese communities across other geographical contexts. The insight should not be overgeneralized beyond a particular segment of overseas Chinese, i.e. the new migrants in the Global South. Additionally, my positionality is hardwired into the process of ethnographic data collection, resulting in an empirical emphasis on the clandestine aspects of state–diaspora interaction. Despite its limitations, the paper as a whole still brings to light the hidden tensions and struggles the PRC government experiences in diaspora governance. In particular, the findings destabilize the long-held imaginaries of autonomous synergy between the Chinese state and its business diaspora since the market reform. After all, even the seemingly most loyal members of the latter group, like the Lao *qiaoling*, deviate from the developmental agenda of the PRC government. Given such complexities, analytical efforts that account for the multi-faceted agencies of transnationality in understanding state–diaspora relations in contemporary China are much needed.

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### Biographical note

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## Conflicts of interest

None.

**摘要:** 自 1990 年以来, 中国对海外移民的政治生活干预力度升级, 开始通过在移民群体中培植侨领来实现社区层面的管控。本文旨在探讨这种以侨领为核心的治理模式所带来的后果。通过对老挝的中国商务移民群体的田野调查, 作者发现这个社区中的侨领多为机会主义的个体。他们把获取侨领身份作为得到中国政府认同, 从而提升自身象征资本的捷径。国家光环的加持, 能够极大助力他们在个人商业活动中的财富积累, 尤其促成他们作为中国政治经济对外扩张的商务中介的佣金攫取。正是这些物质利益驱动他们配合中国政府进行高调的政治表演, 投射出一个心向北京的海外移民群体的幻影。依托侨领的治理政策在为移民个体所利用的过程中, 尽管从表面上催生出了中国政府所期望的政治结果, 但在背后给予了非正规中介活动充足的空间从走出去的中国资本流中获利, 导致一些中国对外投资项目偏离政府设定的轨道。通过阐述这些田野发现, 本文提出中国政府与海外移民的关系并非协同性的, 而是既相互成就, 又相互背离的复杂互动。

**关键字:** 移民治理; 新移民; 威权政治的域外延伸; 恩庇侍从关系; 环球中国; 老挝

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