

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Yü Shouzhi: from positional authority to personal influence in the Chinese diaspora, 1937–1971

Xuening Kong 

History, Purdue University, USA
Email: kong58@purdue.edu

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Abstract

Scholarship on overseas Chinese and modern Chinese diplomacy often centers on nationally recognized leaders and officials with prominent global roles. However, a fuller understanding of the diaspora requires examining lesser-known diplomats and local leaders who often had a greater impact on their communities than distant official policies. The transnational life and evolving identity of Yü Shouzhi (1907–1999) – a grassroots Chinese diplomat, community organizer, and small business owner in Mexico – exemplifies this dynamic. Initially trained and appointed by the Chinese Nationalist government, Yü’s diplomatic work extended beyond official channels to foster transethnic, transnational, and intergenerational networks within the Chinese-Mexican community. His transition from formal diplomacy to community leadership and commerce reflected how individual migrants successfully navigated transnational and national politics, community relationships, kinship, and transethnic relations and gained social power. In the process, Yü adjusted his sense of belonging and developed diasporic nationalism, transforming from a representative of the Nationalist government to a deeply rooted Chinese-Mexican community member. This article argues that Yü’s ability to adapt his role as a Chinese diplomat and cultivate a Chinese-Mexican identity was shaped by the interplay of formal state affiliations, grassroots networks, transnational and cross-ethnic relationships, and his personal initiative.

Keywords: Chinese diaspora; Chinese Mexican; Chinese Nationalist government; grassroots diplomacy; overseas Chinese affairs; quasi-diplomat

In 1961, Yü Shouzhi (余受之 1910–?), a *waijianglao* (外江佬 non-Cantonese born outside of the Pearl River Basin) and small business owner, was selected as the president of La Asociación China in Mexicali, the most influential overseas Chinese community group in the city with the highest concentration of overseas Chinese in northern Mexico.¹ This was an unusual achievement in the first half of the twentieth century, when leadership positions in Chinese diaspora communities in the Americas were typically held by Cantonese men from established and well-resourced families. These leaders often maintained their influence by overseeing powerful surname associations and aligning themselves both with Chinese governments and Mexican political elites. Without elite lineage or established migration networks, Yü instead carved out his path through institutional affiliations and grassroots engagement. This article will explore how he harnessed his pre-Second-Sino-Japanese-War training with the Nationalist government’s Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission (OCAC) along with his early stationing in Mexico to become an influential leader and activist for overseas Chinese in Northern Mexico.

¹“waijianglao” is how Yü described himself in his autobiographies. See Yü 1999d, p. 41, and Yü 1999f, p. 102.

Tracing his progression from OCAC trainee to Chinese school administrator, Nationalist diplomat, and eventually local community leader, this study explores how Yü's adaptive trajectory enabled him to sustain influence even after formally distancing himself from the Nationalist Party and the Nationalist government. By cataloging his post-government career as a small business owner and Chinese association president, this paper investigates how he transitioned from an official diplomat to a "quasi-diplomat," which refers to someone doing diplomacy without a formal diplomatic appointment by any nation's authorities. His trajectory reveals a more fluid and contingent form of diaspora leadership, shaped not by inherited privilege but by negotiation, adaptation, and strategic positioning at the margins of state power.

Scholarship on Chinese migrants and international politics focuses on the more officially documented national leaders and officials who claimed the global stage. However, the diaspora and migration cannot be fully understood unless scholars examine the lesser-known diplomats and community leaders who influenced the public and their communities to greater degrees than far-away policy declarations. Only one book, Fredy González's *Paisanos Chinos*, explores Yü's legacy in detail, focusing on Yü as a wartime mobilizer and community leader dedicated to strengthening the relationship between overseas Chinese in Mexico and their native country through fundraising events, directing Cantonese operas, and translating and writing newspaper articles.² González's account also sheds light on Yü's political talent, including his role in easing the tensions between the Chinese Nationalist Party and the fraternal association Chee Kung Tong. However, a gap remains in the literature regarding Yü's pre-Mexico life, especially his journey to becoming a Chinese diplomat and the transformation of his career. More importantly, beyond his efforts on wartime mobilization, it is worth expanding the discussion on how Yü navigated different powers within the Chinese-Mexican community as a non-Cantonese migrant and overcame racial barriers as a Chinese migrant in Mexico.

This article examines the distinctive case of Yü Shouzhi, spotlighting his journey to gain and maintain influence as a non-Cantonese member of the Chinese diaspora in Mexico. Unlike his Cantonese contemporaries, who often relied on established migration networks for support, Yü actively built up social networks and worked closely with Chinese Nationalists, various Chinese-Mexican communities, kinship groups, and local Mexicans.³ These social networks helped Yü participate in the political circles of the Chinese-Mexican community during the Second World War and continue to use the social relations he established to support his small businesses – a restaurant followed by a grocery store – as a Chinese-Mexican civilian in the postwar era. Through these efforts, Yü demonstrated diverse strategies underrepresented migrants employed to assert agency and became a Chinese Mexican with multiple successful careers.

Yü's career as a grassroots diplomat further contributes to the literature on Chinese diplomats representing the Republic of China, in which the history of Chinese diplomacy has long focused on professional diplomats and their contributions to nation building.⁴ Unlike most of the Chinese diplomats during his time, Yü was not born into a prominent family, nor did he have a college-level education in international law or diplomacy. Even as he began his government career, he received a lower-level position that allowed few opportunities to meet with state governors or presidents at international conventions. As a result of this, he took a grassroots approach to his position as a diplomat and engaged with overseas Chinese in everyday practice. His journey continued to defy norms when, in a move unlike any other diplomats recorded, Yü left his reliable and prestigious career in Mexico following his disappointment with the Nationalist government and his reflections upon both his opinions and roles in the world, turning to forging new pathways for impact and influence.

²González 2017, Chapter 3.

³Lai (2004) discusses the role of surname associations in helping Cantonese Chinese settle in the Americas. On migration networks in Mexico, see González 2017, Delgado 2012, and Schiavone-Camacho 2012.

⁴See Strauss 1998, Chapter 6, and Craft, 2004. Recently, Shi Xia's (2024) article on Madame Wellington Koo gives a different story and emphasizes that the study of modern Chinese diplomatic history should move beyond the lens of male professional elites and the institutionalization of diplomatic personnel.

In focusing on Yü's experiences as an extraordinary overseas Chinese diplomat, this article examines how Yü deftly navigated multiple power structures and gained social and financial power. Tracing Yü's life through his autobiographies, essays, and local gazettes, this article highlights Yü's agency in developing diplomatic careers, working with overseas Chinese people, and engaging with Chinese migrants in Mexico in both national and transnational contexts. In this process, Yü adjusted his sense of belonging and developed diasporic nationalism. In contrast to the inherent Chinese identity, diasporic nationalism, which contains personal and communal self-perceptions, "transformed under the interaction between Chinese people and local society, as well as ideas and sentiments carried by intellectuals and officials from China who were sensitive to wider global power relations and conceptions of peoplehood."⁵ I argue that the combination of official diplomatic ties, local social networks, transnational and trans-ethnic connections, and individual effort made it possible for Yü to adjust his Chinese diplomatic role and develop his Chinese Mexican identity in different environments.

Yü Shouzhi, the diplomat (1937–1946)

Unlike higher-ranking envoys or ambassadors who came from a prestigious family with global experiences, Yü was born into an ordinary, average-income family in Yibin in Sichuan Province, an inland province in Southwest China. Despite his socioeconomic situation, he had the goal of pursuing a Western education and a prosperous future outside of his hometown. His father, a small business owner running a bakery, was the sole provider for six children. Though poverty during his childhood prevented him from going to school, Yü's father worked hard to support his family and urged all his children to learn classical Chinese literature because he believed that a classical education would enable the social growth of his children necessary to enter the upper classes.⁶ However, the traditional schooling for which his father worked so hard bored Yü. He thought that classical literature – highlighting patriarchy, feudal ethics, and arranged marriages – was obsolete and impractical in a modern global world. Drawn instead to *New Youth* magazine and writings from the New Culture Movement, Yü immersed himself in ideas of individual freedom, iconoclasm, and resistance to patriarchal authority. These progressive influences fueled his rejection of his father's expectations and ignited his desire to forge a radically different path beyond the confines of his hometown and inherited worldview.

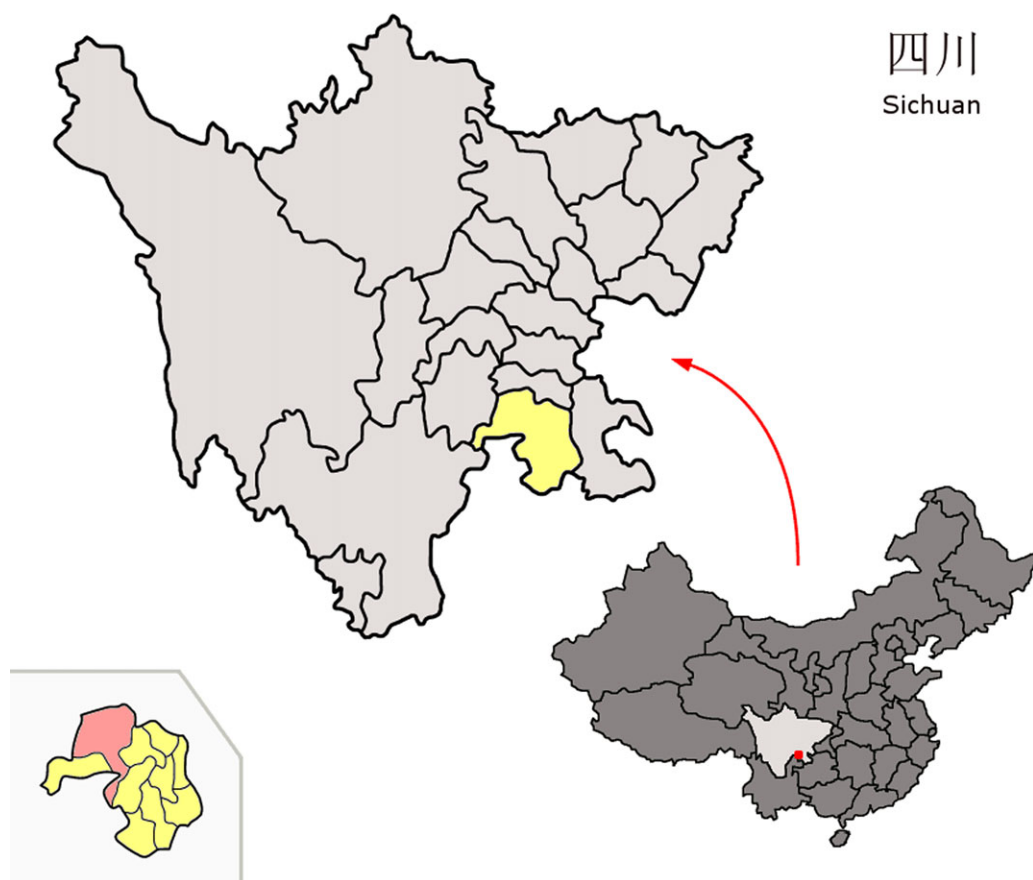
Anti-imperialist revolutions and protests in big cities on the East Coast also drew Yü's attention and deepened his desire to pursue political influence. The year 1925 witnessed the death of Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), the Father of the Chinese Republic and the Nationalist Party, as well as the rise of Chiang Kai-shek's leadership within the Nationalist Party (GMD). Within the next year, the army of the Nationalists began to march north from Canton with the goal of unifying China. The news of revolutions in Beijing and Shanghai spread to Sichuan quickly. Students' anti-imperialist activism of the May Thirtieth Movement in Shanghai and the Nationalist-led reunification campaign North Expedition stirred Yü's longing to join the currents of revolution and pursue more educational opportunities in big cities.⁷ Reflecting on these historical events, he wrote, "I am a teen. Why did not I catch up with the trend of other radical students who did not obey their parents' words?"⁸ With the

⁵McKeown 2001, p. 87.

⁶Yü 1999a, p. 2.

⁷The May Thirteenth Movement was an anti-imperialist movement in 1925, including a nationwide series of strikes and demonstrations led by the Nationalists and Communists. In early 1925, there was a serious conflict after a Chinese strike at a Japanese-owned factory in Shanghai, causing deaths and injuries. However, the warlord-led Beiyang government did not punish the factory owner but arrested several of the workers for disturbing the police, which caused a nationwide series of anti-imperialist and anti-warlord strikes and demonstrations led by the Nationalists and Communists. The Northern Expedition refers to a military campaign launched by the Nationalists against the Beiyang government and other regional warlords in 1926. The result was that the Nationalists toppled the Beiyang government and put the whole of China under the leadership of the Nationalist regime, with Nanjing as the capital city.

⁸Yü 1999b, p. 8.



goal in mind, Yü decided to leave his hometown behind. Yü registered in 1928 for a Western-styled middle school in Chengdu under a pseudonym without informing his family.⁹

Nevertheless, Yü could not continue his schooling due to economic difficulties and his lack of familial sponsorship. After Yü finished his middle school studies, he had no financial support to pursue college studies, so he went to Chongqing to look for a job. Working for Minsheng Industrial in order to stay in Shanghai, Yü secretly moonlighted at a bank for a better salary because he wanted the benefit of two jobs to improve his standard of living. This ran afoul of Minsheng's rules, as they expected Yü to work as a full-time, exclusive employee. After only a short period of double employment, Minsheng found out about his moonlighting and forced Yü to resign from the bank job to keep his employment with them. Believing that the decision of Minsheng was unjust, Yü indignantly resigned from Minsheng and relocated to Nanjing for other job opportunities in 1934. Once there, Yü heard about a one-year state-sponsored program training diplomatic personnel members recruiting students. Knowing that this training program covered students' living expenses in Nanjing and offered them job opportunities to work overseas after graduation, Yü saw this program as an ideal fit, allowing him to pursue his social advancement without needing to seek external financial support.¹⁰ This marked the official starting point of Yü's diplomatic career.

⁹Yü 1999b, pp. 8–9; and Yü 1999c, p. 21.

¹⁰Yü 1999a, p. 2; and Yü 1999c, p. 21.

Yü's trajectory from an inland hometown to a provincial capital and then to the national capital, Nanjing, to find job opportunities was not unusual in early twentieth-century China. During this period, provincial radicals sought to escape the constraints of patriarchal family structures and conservative social norms by migrating to urban centers, where they aspired to participate in building a new social and political order.¹¹ Those provincial youth, such as Yü and his contemporaries Yun Daiying (惲代英 1895–1931) and Shi Cuntong (施存統 1899–1970), actively got acquainted with forward-thinking persons and developed networks with a range of social groups, including those from prestigious familial and educational backgrounds.¹² In those eastern Chinese metropolises, relocated rural youths cut across conventional lines of social division, sought job opportunities, built a dense network of relationships, and interacted with each other in multiple capacities that were unavailable in their rural hometowns. As Toby Lincoln points out, industrialization and the commitment of Chinese governments to urban development led to an increase in job occupations and urban modernity, where people from different social backgrounds “were able to afford their piece of the urban dream.”¹³ While there was no guarantee of a comfortable life for anyone, the expanding networks and possibilities of life enabled newcomers like Yü to look for their economic needs.¹⁴

Yü seized the opportunity of the state-sponsored training program to make a living in Nanjing while the support of overseas Chinese increasingly drew attention to the Nanjing regime, and the Nationalists were increasingly dedicated to developing diplomatic personnel to engage with the overseas compatriots. Unlike its predecessor, the Nationalist regime actively sought to offer support, protection, and a unifying Chinese identity to the diaspora, positioning overseas Chinese as both participants in and beneficiaries of China's modernization project.¹⁵ The Nationalists saw this engagement as mutually beneficial: the Nationalists received crucial financial support – from wealthy merchants to laborers abroad – while the diaspora was granted symbolic inclusion in the national narrative. Sun Yat-sen lauded the importance of overseas Chinese contributions to revolutions. A widespread slogan, “overseas Chinese as the mother of revolution,” praised overseas Chinese who raised money to support revolutions and hosted exiled revolutionaries.¹⁶ Beyond the economic reasons, overseas Chinese loyalty to the Nanjing regime and their foreign connections were also important motivations for the Nationalists to feel compelled to develop solid connections with overseas Chinese.¹⁷ This purpose was increasingly urgent in the late 1930s when the Nanjing regime's need for external aid multiplied following the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937.

The training program that Yü enrolled in was founded by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission (OCAC), a government agency overseeing and managing affairs related to overseas Chinese. Its responsibilities included “the administration of entry and exit, encouragement of investment, and promotion of education for Overseas Chinese and their descendants, as well as propaganda efforts among communities abroad.”¹⁸ When the Nationalist government was established in April 1927, the OCAC was a branch of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The OCAC later became an executive branch in 1932, reporting to the Executive Yuan, which empowered the OCAC to negotiate overseas affairs with the Ministry of the Interior, Foreign Affairs, Finance, and four other ministries.¹⁹ The OCAC contained a central office, local bureaus, and overseas branches. There were three main divisions within the

¹¹Yeh 1996, p. 202.

¹²Rahav 2015; and Yeh 1996.

¹³Lincoln 2021, p. 163.

¹⁴Yeh 2007, pp. 30–31.

¹⁵Barabantseva 2010, p. 24. Wang Gungwu's early comments also discussed the important influences of overseas Chinese on China's modernization; see Wang 1991, pp. 8–10.

¹⁶Yi Meng Cheng's (2023, pp. 147–165) recent article explains how the slogan “overseas Chinese were the mother of revolution” became a political myth used by the Nationalist Party and overseas Chinese to keep connections with each other for decades.

¹⁷Ong 2021, p. 121.

¹⁸Szonyi 2005, p. 46.

¹⁹About the history of OCAC, see Ji 2013, pp. 94–101; and Chen 2010, pp. 64–73.

central office: the secretariat, the administrative office, and the office of overseas education. Yü received his training under the office of overseas education, which took charge of training personnel to provide education for overseas Chinese returning to China or living abroad.²⁰ The establishment of the OCAC and the cooperation of these branches significantly reinforced the connection between overseas Chinese and Nationalist China. Steve Phillips argues that the establishment of the OCAC “signaled an important shift in overseas Chinese policies. The Nationalists not only requested assistance in the name of patriotism, but also offered services in order to build legitimacy as a government – a reciprocal relationship that would become central to the War of Resistance and Cold War mobilization.”²¹

In his autobiography, Yü did not discuss the specific content of the training he attended or the textbooks he used, but it likely included practical lessons in terms of how to quickly integrate into overseas Chinese communities rather than the international laws or diplomatic protocol typical of high-ranking envoys. One such skill was learning the Cantonese language. Before departing for Mexico, Yü learned to speak Cantonese at the OCAC training program because the majority of Chinese overseas were Cantonese speakers.²² This linguistic ability proved crucial throughout his later life in Mexico. In his later life in Mexico, speaking Cantonese not only enabled Yü to converse with Chinese people in Mexico but also to compose songs and direct operas in Cantonese to foster patriotism within the overseas community.²³ The Cantonese language skill thus significantly contributed to Yü’s integration into the overseas Chinese community in Mexico. Moreover, the program hired previously overseas Chinese as instructors in order to familiarize its trainees with overseas affairs. Yü recalled one such instructor, Li Pusheng (李樸生 date unknown), a Southeast Asian-born overseas Chinese who served in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Li offered a memorable lesson in interpersonal protocol: “*feng ren jian sui, yu wu tian qian*” (逢人減歲, 遇物添錢 translated as “when encountering people, you should always shave a few years off people’s age; when someone shows you any purchases, you should always estimate the price higher”).²⁴ This aphorism captured a key element of interpersonal diplomacy among overseas Chinese: people like to look younger than their real age and want to have purchases that look high-value. The saying reflected a nuanced understanding of social interactions, particularly the emotional needs and status sensitivities that shaped everyday encounters within diasporic communities. For Yü, the OCAC training equipped him with the linguistic and cultural skills necessary to earn trust and build enduring ties with overseas Chinese.

The training that Yü received distinguished him from high-ranking diplomats with prestigious backgrounds, who were usually from treaty port families, had extensive foreign experiences, and often earned advanced degrees in fields such as international law.²⁵ The Nationalists expected those high-ranking officials to familiarize themselves with the tools of international law and precedents and be persistent and tenacious in diplomatic negotiations, as exemplified by the widely-recognized diplomat Wellington Koo (顧維鈞 1888–1985).²⁶ However, the Nationalists also needed a different kind of diplomatic personnel – pragmatic operatives who could cultivate relationships with overseas Chinese communities at the grassroots level. The pragmatic-oriented training that Yü attended was short and not able to equip him with the skills necessary to participate in high-level diplomatic negotiations, but it significantly taught Yü to adapt in foreign environments and build rapport with overseas Chinese people quickly. He was capable and eager to work for overseas Chinese following the one-year program training him as a pragmatic generalist who could integrate into overseas Chinese communities and conduct overseas affairs.

Recent scholarship has shed light on the Chinese Nationalists’ diplomatic efforts to cultivate support among non-elite overseas Chinese communities at regional and communal levels. For instance, the

²⁰Chen 2010, p. 66.

²¹Phillips 2013.

²²Yü 1999c, pp. 22–23 and Yü 1999e, pp. 47.

²³Yü 1999c, p. 24.

²⁴Yü 1999g, pp. 224–226.

²⁵Strauss 1998, p. 168.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 156. About Wellington Koo, see Craft 2004.

Nationalists in the 1920s actively courted progressive Chinese residents in Chicago by issuing membership cards to donors – an initiative that rewarded their contributions and encouraged sustained engagement with China’s political and socioeconomic affairs.²⁷ Additionally, regional party chapters took an active role in combating opium trafficking and other illicit activities that harmed the reputation of overseas Chinese communities and provoked racialized violence.²⁸ In the northern Mexican state of Sonora, Chinese Nationalists strived to curtail the regional socioeconomic influence of several Chinese fraternal associations, especially regarding the opium trade of the mid-1920s, thereby positioning themselves as moral reformers and defenders of the community’s public image in contrast to local organizations.²⁹

To supplement his practical training, Yü pursued self-study and focused on how to improve policies that impacted individuals of the diaspora. Following his completion of the training program in 1935, Yü discovered that there was no well-matched position for him available. As he awaited suitable employment opportunities, Yü worked as an editor for the official journal *Qiaowu Yuebao* (僑務月報 Monthly Affairs of Overseas Chinese) to support himself. This position gave him access to a wide range of reports on diplomatic practices and allowed him to reflect on the strengths and shortcomings of Chinese officials’ engagement with diaspora communities. It was during this “unemployment period” that Yü wrote articles expressing his insightful thoughts on the important roles of overseas Chinese in helping China withstand the imperialist invasion. In his article “The Development of National Economy and Overseas Chinese” (*Guomin Jingji Jianshe yu Huaqiao* 國民經濟建設與華僑), Yü highlighted how overseas Chinese, an indispensable element of the Chinese population, played an important role in disaster relief, investment in infrastructure, and advocating for China-made products.³⁰ He argued that cooperation between the Nationalist government and overseas Chinese – especially civilians – was essential for advancing national economic development and countering the threat posed by Japan.³¹ While overseas elites offered substantial financial support, overseas Chinese civilians also contributed to the national economy by promoting domestic products and participating in thrift campaigns to save money for remittances to China.³² Yü also subtly pointed out the inefficiencies in the state’s overseas Chinese administration. In another article, Yü noted that although the government had established separate departments for diplomacy, education, and investment, coordination among them remained inadequate.³³ In the same article, Yü further critiqued that in some cases, consulates lacked clear directives and operational guidelines from central authorities, limiting their effectiveness in serving overseas Chinese communities.³⁴

The experience of writing about overseas Chinese affairs allowed Yü to reflect on the complexities of diaspora-state relations and to envision how a pragmatically trained diplomat could serve Chinese communities abroad. Whereas elite diplomats such as Wellington Koo operated at the level of formal international relations – appealing to the League of Nations and major powers such as the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union – Yü approached diplomacy from the ground up.³⁵ Rather than focusing on abstract geopolitical negotiations, Yü concentrated on how international politics and the domestic policies of host countries directly affected the everyday lives of overseas Chinese. This grassroots orientation would continue to shape his perspective throughout his official diplomatic career and his quasi-diplomatic period.

²⁷Ling 2012, pp. 153–154.

²⁸The stereotype of Chinese residents as opium users led to racial prejudice and violence overseas; see Shah 2001, Chapter 3; and Arreola 2017, Chapter 4. As for the Nationalist anti-opium campaigns in the Americas, see Ma 1990, p. 126.

²⁹Romero 2011, Chapter 5.

³⁰Yü 1936, pp. 7–12.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 13.

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

³³Yü 1935, pp. 1–5.

³⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

³⁵Craft 2004, Chapters 4 and 5.

After Yü wrote on overseas Chinese affairs for a year, in 1937, the OCAC appointed him as the president of a new Chinese school in Mexico City, reflecting Nationalist China's larger initiative to mobilize overseas Chinese communities amid rising nationalism on the eve of the Second Sino-Japanese War. By that time, a dense network of institutions linked overseas Chinese communities in Mexico to Nationalist China. From the early to mid-twentieth century, the Nationalist government – through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – extended formal diplomatic authority via embassies, consulates, and vice-consulates to negotiate with the Mexican government over policies affecting Chinese residents. These offices reported to the Executive Yuan and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on matters such as petitions to visit China, investments, and civil disputes.³⁶ Meanwhile, the OCAC linked the homeland and diaspora through cultural programs, policy guidance, and coordination with local community leaders. Alongside these governmental institutions, the Nationalist Party developed its own network of local chapters that organized fraternal meetings (*kenqin hui* 懇親會), published newspapers, and raised funds for wartime relief, which fostered a sense of unity and political loyalty. The Party's Central Committee in Nanjing also dispatched delegates to provide provisions on overseas Chinese affairs at local party chapters, while party members of local chapters also attended the GMD National Congress, showing their loyalty to the Party.³⁷ In Mexico, these layers of authority converged: the ambassador and consular officials served as the state's representatives, while Nationalist chapters sustained community cohesion and Nationalist visibility. Together, this transnational network blurred the boundaries between diplomacy, commerce, and nationalism, embedding the Chinese diaspora in Mexico within the global reach of the Nationalist regime.

Education was a key part of these efforts to maintain overseas Chinese's cultural and political ties to China as their motherland. During his presidential term, Yü confronted the reality that many children of the Chinese residents could not read or write Chinese. To address this gap, he compiled bilingual textbooks to enhance students' Chinese literacy.³⁸ Scholarship on overseas Chinese during the Nationalist era (1927–1949) highlights that the Nationalists prioritized establishing and supporting Chinese-language education as a key part of its policy toward overseas Chinese communities.³⁹ As Isabelle Lausent-Herrera points out, the Nationalists intensified their propaganda and used Chinese education to strengthen the relations between the Party and the immigrants and their children in the 1930s.⁴⁰ The emphasis on Nationalist-led Chinese school education reflected their ambition to extend cultural and political influence over overseas Chinese communities beyond the *huiguans* (會館) and traditional fraternal associations.⁴¹

Nevertheless, the paucity of Nationalists' influence in Chinese Mexican communities made Yü's work difficult. Supported financially by local Cantonese merchants for their children's Chinese learning, the Chinese school was more like a prep school managed by local Chinese elites under limited administration of the Nationalist government.⁴² Moreover, the sociopolitical landscape of the Chinese-Mexican community posed significant challenges for Yü's grassroots diplomatic efforts. Within the first three months after his arrival in Mexico, Yü actively visited many overseas Chinese communities in Mexico City and quickly observed power struggles and divisions among the Chinese-Mexican community. Most notably, he observed an intense rivalry between the Nationalists and the long-established fraternal society Chee Kung Tong (CKT) 致公黨. The CKT originated in China and supported Sun Yat-sen's revolution to overturn the imperial government in 1912, but later distanced itself from the Nationalist regime under Chiang Kai-shek. By the time of Yü's arrival, the CKT had taken root in Chinese Mexican society much longer than the Nationalists and had more popular support and

³⁶He 1991, pp. 21–25.

³⁷Zhongguo guomindang zhongyangwei yuanhui di 3 zu, 1961, pp. 59–61.

³⁸Yü 1999c, pp. 23–24.

³⁹Peterson 2013, p. 123. Also see Lausent-Herrera 2015a and Lausent-Herrera 2015b.

⁴⁰Lausent-Herrera 2015b.

⁴¹Lausent-Herrera 2015a.

⁴²Yü 1999d, p. 32. The main goal of the prep school Yü worked for was Chinese language learning, rather than entering senior high schools or universities.

administrative power at the local level.⁴³ When Yü visited the Tong Hall of CKT, he noted that Nationalist China's national flag was taken down, demonstrating that the CKT did not acknowledge the legitimacy nor respect the leadership of the Nationalist regime.⁴⁴

Despite the Nationalist government's limited capacity to offer strong support, Yü actively worked to build alliances among Chinese Mexican groups and strengthen their ties with Nationalist China. For instance, with the coordination and communication facilitated by Yü, the Nationalists and the CKT, as well as nineteen other smaller Chinese associations, convened at the Chinese school and laid the groundwork for the Mexico City National Salvation Organization to Support the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance (*Mojing kangri jiuguo houyuanhui* 墨京華僑救國會), which was formally established the following month.⁴⁵ Yü served as the organization's secretary, a role that allowed him to continue cultivating collaborative relationships across ideological divides in service of a shared patriotic cause.⁴⁶ During the years of the Second Sino-Japanese War, Yü was dedicated to engaging with celebrities and advocates from China to increase awareness of anti-Japanese mobilization among the overseas Chinese community in Mexico. In Fall 1937, Yü hosted Tao Xingzhi (陶行知 1891–1946), a Chinese educator renowned for advocating mass education as a means to alleviate poverty and strengthen national resilience. As Japan's imperial expansion intensified, Tao toured overseas Chinese communities to promote national unity and grassroots support for China's resistance. Seeing Tao's visit as a valuable opportunity to galvanize patriotic sentiment among Chinese Mexicans, Yü organized a series of public events in Mexico City and served as Tao's simultaneous interpreter from Mandarin to Cantonese.⁴⁷ In one of his speeches, Tao used graphs and character analysis to underscore the importance of solidarity between overseas Chinese and the Chinese nation.⁴⁸ Tao deconstructed the Chinese character “春 (Spring)” into “人 (people),” “三 (three),” and “日 (sun, also symbolizing Japan),” noting that the three figures form “眾” (the masses) with “日” positioned beneath the united masses. In Tao's interpretation, the character “春” became a metaphor for national and diasporic cohesion: if people across all sectors of Chinese society – across class, region, and generation – could unite as one, then the collective strength of the people would be sufficient to crush Japanese imperialism.⁴⁹ Tao's message, transmitted through Yü's mediation, exemplified how linguistic creativity within Chinese literacy was mobilized to build transnational solidarity in the face of war.

In addition to Chinese and overseas Chinese elites, Yü actively engaged with civilian members of the overseas Chinese community in Mexico during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Like advocates in other overseas Chinese communities around the world, Yü raised money among Chinese residents in Mexico to garner support for their homeland.⁵⁰ However, Yü noted his belief that “... saving the nation requires not only donations but also the importance of transmitting information and spreading awareness.”⁵¹ To achieve this goal, Yü drew on his working experience as a periodical editor and turned his attention to accessible, public-facing publications as a means of political mobilization. Recognizing that most overseas Chinese in Mexico could not read English-language newspapers covering events in China and anti-Japanese resistance, Yü founded a local newspaper in both Chinese and Spanish, *Kangri Xinwen* (抗日新聞 News of the War of Resistance), with the help of several young Chinese-Mexican volunteers.⁵² As the editor-in-chief, Yü bought the latest newspapers published in San Francisco and New York City and then excerpted and translated news about China and overseas Chinese into Chinese and Spanish. In March 1938, Yü launched another overseas Chinese publication, *Qiaosheng Yuekan*

⁴³As for CKT in Mexico and its development in the 20th century, see González 2017.

⁴⁴Yü 1999c, p. 24.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 25, and also see González 2017, p. 79.

⁴⁶Huaqiao xiehui zonghui 1999, pp. 563; González 2017, p. 79.

⁴⁷As for Tao's visit in Mexico during the Second Sino-Japanese War, see Kong 2024, pp. 100–101.

⁴⁸Yü 1999h, pp. 226–227.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁵⁰Huaqiao xiehui zonghui 1999, pp. 562.

⁵¹Yü 1999c, p. 25.

⁵²*Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.

(僑聲月刊 Monthly Journal of the Overseas Chinese Voice). González points out that unlike *Kangri Xinwen*, *Qiaosheng Yuekan* concentrated more directly on the Chinese-Mexican community and its initiatives to support the Republic of China.⁵³ As two of the very few periodicals available to Chinese migrants in Mexico, the newspaper and journal played a critical role in fostering a collective identity and sustaining transnational consciousness during the Second Sino-Japanese War.

As Yü became more deeply embedded in the Chinese-Mexican community, his professional focus underwent a transition – from a formal representative of the Nationalist government to a community-oriented figure deeply engaged with the everyday lives of overseas Chinese civilians in Mexico. Initially tasked with promoting the political agenda of the Nationalist government, Yü gradually redirected his focus toward the needs and aspirations of Chinese migrants in Mexico and their descendants. This shift was not abrupt but rather a steady realignment shaped by his growing immersion in community life. Over the course of Yü's diplomatic service, he had only two brief visits to China. One was for his diplomatic duties, and the second was to get married and bring his new wife back to Mexico with him.⁵⁴ These rare visits highlight the waning connection he maintained with his homeland. In contrast, his commitments in Mexico grew steadily stronger. Through language instruction, organizing cultural events, and fostering community cohesion, Yü's diplomatic mission came to center on grassroots engagement. His work evolved from advancing the political interests of a distant state to nurturing trust, belonging, and solidarity within the diaspora.

Furthermore, the transformation of Yü's diplomatic role resulted in the development of diasporic nationalism and a reconfiguration of his Chinese identity. In the twentieth century, diasporic nationalism emerged in the context of colonialism and transnational displacement when dispersing populations reconceptualized their national belonging and redefined expressions of national identity.⁵⁵ Unlike ethno-nationalism, diasporic nationalism arose among individuals in diasporas who “appear[ed] to be bilingual cross-cultural negotiators moving regularly between different cultures and participating in exchanges across national borders.”⁵⁶ Yü exemplified this dynamic. Initially dispatched as a representative of the Chinese Nationalist government, his daily interactions with the Chinese-Mexican community gradually positioned him as a cultural mediator – interpreting cultural values and translating patriotic discourse. Yü's active role in organizing these collective activities strengthened his diasporic nationalism and helped him integrate into the Chinese-Mexican community as his new *home*. In this case, instead of the village where he was born, the *home* referred to “a much larger entity, a motherland, which included strangers who spoke unintelligible dialects and yet . . . were inalienably linked to each other by virtue of race, culture, history, and affection.”⁵⁷ As Yü gradually embedded himself in the Chinese-Mexican community, he transformed from a Nationalist delegate to a locally rooted participant in community life.

As Yü's diasporic nationalism deepened, his relationship with the Nationalist government became increasingly strained due to the lack of institutional support. Diplomats often received little guidance or timely responses from the central government on matters of foreign affairs, and their daily work regularly lacked coordination with broader foreign policy agendas. In his memoirs, Cheng Tiangu (程天固 1889–1974), China's ambassador to Mexico at the time, observed that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had few coherent diplomatic policies and lacked consistent principles for engaging with other nations.⁵⁸ He further lamented that the most common response to diplomatic inquiries from abroad was simply “handle according to the circumstances” (*zhuoliang banli* 酌量辦理).⁵⁹ This ambiguous directive reflected the government's unwillingness or inability to offer concrete direction. Furthermore, financial difficulties due to warfare in China, as scholarship on the fall of the Nationalist regime has

⁵³González 2017, p. 80.

⁵⁴Yü 1999e, p. 50.

⁵⁵For example, Korean migrants living in Japan during Japanese colonial and postcolonial eras, see Lie 2008.

⁵⁶Kim 2011, p. 136.

⁵⁷McKeown 2001, pp. 86–87.

⁵⁸Cheng 1993, p. 459.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 459.

pointed out, severely limited the government's ability to maintain effective oversight of its overseas branches.⁶⁰ This situation created a disconnect that undermined the cohesion between the central party and its local chapters abroad, leading to declining morale and weakened allegiance to the Nationalist cause. The lack of administration also meant that grassroots diplomats like Yü had little administrative backing and could not regularly receive stipends. Without a consistent stipend or material support, Yü described his party position as offering little more than a means to “merely able to survive (*hukou* 糊口) in the foreign land.”⁶¹ What Yü sought instead was an occupation that allowed him to *churen toudi* 出人頭地, literally translated as “stand out” but mainly referring to someone who makes a good living with distinguishable fame and/or amount of property.⁶²

Factional conflicts within the local Nationalist chapter that Yü worked at aggravated his disappointment with the Nationalists. In his autobiographies, Yü recorded a conflict with the ambassador Cheng Tiangu. When Cheng first assumed office in 1941, he raised capital by floating shares among Chinese people in Mexico for mine exploration in Guangxi Province. When someone reached out to Yü for advice, Yü voiced concern that Cheng's behavior was a corrupt abuse of his power and reported it as such. Yü's suggestions ended up causing problems for him. Three months later, Yü received a letter from the central office of the OCAC dismissing him from his secretary position.⁶³ While Yü appealed the decision and received other party members' assurance that he was not at fault, he did not receive any response. Having grown weary of dealing with office politics, Yü believed that there was seemingly no chance of promotion in the Nationalist system. In 1946, Yü decided to depart from the GMD and opened a Chinese restaurant in Mexico City called *Asia*.

Yü's decision demonstrates that political environments and individual decisions cooperatively changed the life trajectories of Chinese migrants. As Adam McKeown pointed out, “migrants . . . interacted with local environments, creating images and activities that facilitated their transnational interests in accordance with the possibilities and constraints of local concerns.”⁶⁴ Yü's diplomatic career began with official training offered by the Nationalist regime, but he continuously forged his own path, developed new identities, and adjusted his career in response to shifting sociopolitical circumstances in China and Mexico. Moreover, Yü's trajectory was not simply the result of top-down political forces. As Steve Miles argues, migration trajectories “resulted more from decisions of individual migrants and their families than from state initiatives.”⁶⁵ From a rural youth in Yibin to a grassroots diplomat in Mexico, Yü's own ambitions and values – ranging from pursuing promising careers and a comfortable life to his innovative approaches to overseas Chinese affairs and engagement – joined with the sociopolitical context to play a decisive role in shaping his transnational journey.

Yü Shouzhi, the small Chinese business owner and quasi-diplomat in Mexico (1946–1972)

The early days of Yü's restaurant business in Mexico City were challenging, but the social networks he had cultivated through prior political and community involvement laid the foundation for his new venture. When Yü lacked both experience and start-up capital, his previous colleague at the Nationalist chapter, Yü Aihe (余愛和 date unknown), leased him the restaurant and believed that he would pay off the principal later.⁶⁶ This act of trust and generosity led Yü Shouzhi to affectionately refer to him as “Uncle Aihe.”⁶⁷ It was important to note that the two men were not blood relatives – Yü Aihe hailed

⁶⁰For a recent discussion on the fiscal difficulty of the Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek, see Coble, 2023. As for a more comprehensive examination of the failure of the Nationalist regime during and after the Second World War, see Eastman, 1984; Lary, 2010; and van de Ven, 2018.

⁶¹Yü, 1999d, pp. 35–36.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁶³*Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.

⁶⁴McKeown 2001, p. 178.

⁶⁵Miles 2020, p. 3.

⁶⁶Yü 1999d, p. 36.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.



from Taishan, Guangdong, while Yü Shouzhi was from Yibin, Sichuan.⁶⁸ However, sharing the same surname created a crucial loose kinship social connection that Yü depended on to start a new career. As Elliott Young underscores, while clan and lineage ties in China were grounded in blood relations, kinship ties linked even distant relatives or those with no blood relation through shared family names in the Americas.⁶⁹ In Yü's case, this form of surname-based kinship, combined with connections formed through his prior political service, provided the social capital and credibility needed to launch his small business.

In addition to his social networks, Yü's personal hard work and perseverance played a significant role in running a successful business. In his memoirs, Yü recalled that observing his father manage a bakery during his youth made it easier for him to operate the *Asia* at the outset.⁷⁰ However, maintaining the business proved demanding. While hiring twelve Mexican employees, Yü and his wife had to work in the restaurant seven days a week with only three hours of sleep in order to pay off the restaurant debt.⁷¹ By the third year after he leased the restaurant, Yü earned a profit that exceeded his payments towards the loan principal. The small restaurant in Mexico City not only provided Yü with essential start-up capital but also valuable entrepreneurial experience, laying a solid foundation for his future business ventures.

Rather than remain satisfied with running a small restaurant through laborious efforts, Yü strived for more. After traveling to several Mexican states, he identified Mexicali as a promising site for his next business venture – a city where his earlier diplomatic service had made him a familiar and trusted figure among local Chinese residents.⁷² His prior collegueship also played a key role in facilitating new

⁶⁸Chen 1950, p. 565.

⁶⁹Young 2014, pp. 248.

⁷⁰Yü 1999e, p. 51.

⁷¹Yü 1999d, p. 36.

⁷²*Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.

connections in the city. Upon hearing of his plans to relocate, the Mexicali chapter of the Nationalist Party extended an invitation encouraging him to establish a business there.⁷³ Yü Gunrong (余滾榮, date unknown), a standing committee member of the local Nationalist chapter, offered him the first floor of the party building to rent for his business and invited him to assist with party affairs in return.⁷⁴ With the support of these overlapping political and personal networks, Yü successfully relocated to Mexicali in May 1952.⁷⁵ Yü's experience exemplifies how personal reputation and political engagement could work together to sustain diasporic livelihood.

When Yü moved to Mexicali, it was a burgeoning city on the U.S.-Mexico border attracting numerous immigrants. Located in Baja California, Mexicali was originally a sparsely populated desert town largely because of its extreme summer temperatures, which often exceeded 100 degrees Fahrenheit. However, in the early twentieth century, agricultural investments of U.S.-based companies operating on both sides of the border quickly developed Mexicali. Originally developed as a hub for livestock raising, Mexicali later implemented large-scale irrigation systems that transformed the region's agricultural potential and drew European and Asian immigrant laborers, both with and without contracts.⁷⁶ They organized cooperatives, invested in land development, and cultivated cotton as both planters and harvesters.⁷⁷ The construction of railroads further stimulated economic growth by integrating Mexicali into regional transportation and trade networks.⁷⁸ Furthermore, Prohibition in the U.S. between 1918–1933 brought an economic boom to the city with the expansion of tourist and entertainment industries – such as liquor, gambling, cabarets, and casinos – as American visitors crossed the border to access these domestically forbidden pleasures.⁷⁹ Even after Prohibition ended, Mexicali remained enticing to Mexican citizens through the Bracero Program (1942–1964), which granted legal authorization for Mexican men to work in the U.S. under short-term contracts, allowing numerous Mexican laborers to go across the border and work in the U.S.⁸⁰ According to statistics cited by Arreola and Curtis, Mexicali's population grew dramatically from just 462 in 1910 to 65,749 by 1950, reflecting Mexicali's rapid transformation to a dynamic and thriving border economy.⁸¹

In addition to its economic appeal, the sociopolitical environment of Mexicali was favorable for Chinese migrants in the mid-twentieth century. From the beginning of the twentieth century until the mid-1930s, Chinese migrants in northern Mexico were subjected to sustained anti-Chinese boycotts, legal mandates favoring the employment of Mexican laborers, and episodes of racial violence and expulsion.⁸² Even though anti-Chinese activities did not prosper and had limited repercussions in the Mexican Valley, Chinese laborers lost jobs and many of them left the region.⁸³ Those who remained gravitated toward Mexicali, where they found relative safety in numbers and support from local Chinese associations.⁸⁴ This concentration of Chinese migrants contributed to the rise of Chinese-owned businesses and greater community stability. Chinese Mexicans' living conditions further improved during the Second World War when Mexico joined China's wartime allies and officially condemned Japanese aggression.⁸⁵ Moreover, Chinese Mexicans' visible contributions to wartime efforts – such as organizing anti-Japanese boycotts – helped raise their profile in public life and fostered

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷⁶Castillo-Muñoz 2017, Chapters 1 and 2; and Hernández 2010, pp. 79–80.

⁷⁷Arreola and Curtis 1993, p. 21.

⁷⁸Arreola 2021, pp. 252–257.

⁷⁹Arreola 2021, p. 258.

⁸⁰Thurber *n.d.*

⁸¹Arreola and Curtis 1993, p. 24.

⁸²In the early twentieth century, the influx of Chinese immigrants for jobs in northern Mexico fostered local residents' anxiety about employment, which stimulated anti-Chinese activities. See Chang 2017, González, 2017, Delgado 2012, and Schiavone-Camacho 2012.

⁸³Sánchez Ogás 2021, pp. 114–123.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁸⁵Schiavone-Camacho 2012, p. 122.

greater social acceptance.⁸⁶ The anti-Chinese sentiment and activities in Mexico then generally waned. Chinese residents who remained in Mexicali continued to live their lives and advance the interests of the Chinese community in the region in the latter half of the twentieth century.⁸⁷

When Yü opened his grocery store in Mexicali in February 1954, he and his wife painstakingly developed trans-ethnic and transnational connections. They first hired one Mexican female clerk and gradually expanded their workforce to include five additional Mexican employees as the business grew. Along with her role as an employer, Yü's wife was very good at managing and communicating with their Mexican employees.⁸⁸ The employer-employee relationships, along with the couple's openness to engaging with the broader Mexican community, helped them develop what Grace Delgado describes as *kith and kin* networks, referring to "connections born of blood, friendship, and business contacts."⁸⁹ This kind of everyday interaction significantly contributed to Yü and his wife "establishing a sense of social belonging and residential permanency" in a foreign land.⁹⁰ Additionally, Yü and his wife took advantage of their residence in the borderlands to cross the U.S.-Mexico border frequently for business purposes. According to Yü, residents of Mexicali were eligible to obtain travel permits from the U.S. government that allowed unlimited border crossings for a six-month period.⁹¹ Taking advantage of this opportunity, Yü and his wife walked across the U.S.-Mexico border to get supplies and place orders for a better price after the business hours of their store.⁹² Through their efforts, sales increased from 500 pesos to more than a thousand per day.⁹³ One year after launching their grocery business, they had earned enough to purchase a car and expand the store, and finally owned the property itself in the seventh year of operation.⁹⁴ Through developing their professional and personal lives through transnational and transethnic connections, Yü and his wife established themselves as important members of the Mexicali Chinese community.

In addition to building a successful business, Yü remained actively engaged in political capital and social networks established during his prior diplomatic career and continued to get involved in local Chinese-Mexican community affairs. For example, his earlier initiatives – such as founding *Kangzhan Xinwen* and *Qiaosheng Yuekan* – had earned him recognition and trust within the local Chinese community by the time he settled in Mexicali.⁹⁵ By leveraging his prior political affiliations and community standing, Yü sustained his ongoing role in overseas Chinese affairs as a quasi-diplomatic figure, advocating for the interests of Chinese Mexicans. In 1952, Yü flew to Taiwan to participate in the National Congress of the Nationalist government as a public representative of overseas Chinese in Mexico. He proposed restoring the consulate of Mexicali because the dissolution of the original one – due to the lack of funds – caused significant difficulties for Chinese migrants in renewing passports and doing transnational businesses.⁹⁶ Three years later, when the foreign minister of the Republic of China Ye Gongchao (葉公超 1904–1981) attended the Commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the United Nations in San Francisco, Yü – together with Yü Gunrong and Chinese merchant Zhou Ruchao (周如超 date unknown) – met Ye and reiterated the importance of restoring the consulate.⁹⁷ Their efforts bore fruit. The Chinese consulate in Mexicali was reopened in 1958.⁹⁸ Yü's efforts in this achievement continued his influence and leadership in the overseas Chinese community and his ability to advocate effectively for institutional resources without formal diplomatic status.

⁸⁶González, 2017, Chapter 3.

⁸⁷Castillo-Muñoz 2017, p. 109.

⁸⁸Yü 1999d, p. 40.

⁸⁹Delgado 2012, p. 42.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁹¹Yü 1999d, pp. 40–41.

⁹²*Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁹³*Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 39; also see Yü 1999e, p. 53.

⁹⁷Zhongguo guomindang zhongyangwei yuanyhui di 3 zu, 1961, p. 95; and Yü 1999d, p. 41.

⁹⁸Zhongguo guomindang zhongyang weiyuanhui di 3 zu, 1961, pp. 96–97.

Yü's quasi-diplomatic activities kept his connections with the Nationalists, who remained attentive to fostering amicable relations with overseas Chinese in the postwar era. Despite its defeat in the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949), the Nationalist government in Taiwan was still the official representative of China on the global stage until 1972 and actively sought to secure the loyalty of Chinese communities abroad. As Meredith Oyen argues, the effective administration over the overseas Chinese population was essential for the Nationalists to assert their anti-communist credentials, claim international legitimacy, maintain favor with the United States, and tap into remittances as a key source of domestic revenue.⁹⁹ Taomo Zhou also emphasizes that overseas Chinese “were at the center of a global battle for hearts and minds fought between the Chinese Communists and Nationalists.”¹⁰⁰ This geopolitical competition shaped local politics in Mexico as well. According to the memoirs of Feng-Shan Ho (何鳳山 1901–1997), the Republic of China's ambassador to Mexico, upon his arrival in Mexico City in 1959, he strategically placed informants in government agencies, newspaper offices, and border checkpoints to monitor any potential communist activity.¹⁰¹ He also convened meetings with members of the overseas Chinese community to warn against interactions with representatives of the Chinese Communist Party.¹⁰² Positioned within this transnational campaign, Yü continued to cultivate his political connections and community reputation, sustaining his dual identity as both a community leader and a participant in the Nationalist government's global anti-communist initiative.

In addition to keeping connections with some Nationalist colleagues, Yü's shifting identity as a quasi-diplomat and community leader granted him greater autonomy to engage with the broader Chinese Mexican population, particularly younger and non-elite members who had historically been marginalized in overseas Chinese affairs. Drawing on his experiences of working with Chinese Mexican youth as the school president, Yü collaborated with the Chinese consulate in Mexicali to establish the Chinese Youth Association (*Zhonghua Qingnian Xiehui* 中華青年協會), organizing social and cultural events specifically geared toward Chinese Mexican young people rather than older overseas elites.¹⁰³ Moreover, Yü remained active in mass publication. He founded a new publication, *Huaqiao Tongbao* (華僑通報 Overseas Chinese Bulletin), for overseas Chinese in Baja California, which was more commercial than *Kangri Xinwen* or *Qiaosheng Yuekan*. The *Huaqiao Tongbao* was launched and maintained through shareholder investment, a funding strategy that enabled it to function independently while fostering a sense of ownership among overseas Chinese stakeholders. In addition to serving as editor, Yü also held the position of chairman of the board, which provided him with an additional source of income and influence beyond his grocery business.

Yü's public-oriented engagement with the overseas Chinese community in Mexico served the broader interests of the diasporic community in the 1950s and 1960s. The contestation between the Chinese Nationalist and Communist regimes over the support of overseas Chinese in Mexico created a division among the majority of Chinese Mexican elites. While most Chinese Mexican elites continued to support the Nationalists, a small minority aligned with the newly established Communist government.¹⁰⁴ Yü believed that the political tension fractured the Chinese diaspora in Mexico, driving them apart to disperse and settle in other countries or to withdraw from participation in local Chinese communities.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, the closure of mainland China under the Communist regime curtailed new migration, further contributing to the shrinking population of Chinese Mexicans. In response to these challenges, Yü believed it was necessary to shift the administrative focus of Chinese Mexicans from attracting elites' financial support to caring about civilians' everyday needs and well-being.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁹Oyen 2015, Chapters 4 and 5.

¹⁰⁰Zhou 2019, p. 12.

¹⁰¹Ho 1990, p. 349.

¹⁰²*Ibid.* p. 349.

¹⁰³Yü 1999d, pp. 41–42 and Yü 1999e, pp. 53–54.

¹⁰⁴González 2017, Chapters 4 and 5.

¹⁰⁵Yü 1954, pp. 28–29.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

Yü's long-term accumulation of social capital and community networks culminated in 1961 when he was elected president of La Asociación China in Mexicali by local Chinese Mexicans. This honor reflected not only his ability to navigate complex social and political relationships but also his capacity to bring together Chinese residents and their descendants across class and generational divides. His presidency symbolized recognition of his sustained commitment to both the welfare of the diaspora and his informal diplomatic role in maintaining ties with the Nationalist government in Taiwan. The survival and eventual prosperity of Yü's dual life – as a businessman and quasi-diplomat – demonstrates that individual agency was essential for Chinese migrants seeking to negotiate shifting local, national, and transnational power structures in the postwar era.

Conclusion

In 1971, Yü left for California to pursue better living conditions. However, he left an indelible mark on Chinese communities across Mexico. His legacy highlights the powerful role of individual agency within diasporic contexts, particularly as a non-Cantonese navigating spaces where regional identity often shaped opportunity. Rather than simply following the formal diplomatic pathways emerging from China's efforts to engage its diaspora, Yü actively reshaped the possibilities available to him. His unique positioning as a grassroots diplomat (civilian-oriented diplomat) enabled him to move fluidly between official and civilian spheres – taking on roles as a diplomat, community organizer, business owner, and association president. These were not positions handed to him through privilege or lineage, but ones he carved out through strategic adaptation, social navigation, and the cultivation of influence across local, national, and transnational networks. Yü's ability to leverage multiple identities and operate across boundaries of ethnicity, class, and nation demonstrates how diasporic actors assert agency not only to survive but to lead. His life challenges static ideas of power and belonging, showing instead that diasporic leadership is made through movement, negotiation, and purposeful engagement.

More broadly, Yü's story illuminates a wider dimension of diaspora studies: how grassroots diplomatic actors navigated geopolitical rupture and institutional uncertainty. In the moment when nation states are weakened, fragmented, or in transition, displaced diplomatic personnel and community leaders often are forced to reinvent the very nature of their diplomacy. They must negotiate recognition, legitimacy, and protection not merely through their embassies and consulates, but through community networks and everyday practices of representation. These actors adapt formal diplomatic protocols for a new sociopolitical landscape, blending official aims with local needs and forging complex forms of governance and advocacy.

Yü's trajectory thus exemplifies how diplomacy itself can be reconfigured from the ground up. It demonstrates that state outreach to diasporic communities is never a one-way process. It is continuously reshaped by the actions, reinterpretations, and innovations of individuals embedded in their new homes. His life invites further research to conceptualize diplomacy as a multi-sited and multi-scalar practice – one sustained not only by government institutions but also by the improvisation, resilience, and strategic agency of diasporic communities. By navigating shifting global conditions, such communities actively redefine what transnational belonging means and how political influence operates across borders.

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