

# Home Away From Home: The Social and Political Roles of Contemporary Chinese Associations in Zambia

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## Abstract

This article examines the social and political roles of contemporary Chinese associations in Africa with case studies from Zambia. These associations help Chinese migrants better integrate and promote China's image in Zambian society. More importantly, they proactively engage in bilateral political relations, working with the embassy and state apparatus, defending China's overseas interests, and providing public goods to the Chinese community. We argue that, because of the associations, Chinese migrants in Zambia are politicised beyond the fact of their living in economic enclaves. Contemporary Chinese associations should thus be recognised as a significant actor and an indispensable intermediary in the rapid evolution of China–Africa relations.

## Keywords

Chinese associations, Chinese migrants, Africa, Zambia, China–Africa

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## Introduction

The expansion of China's economic and political interests in Africa in recent years has resulted in an increasing number of Chinese migrants settling in new societies (Mohan and Tan-Mullins, 2009; Park, 2009). New migrants are joining the mainland Chinese community in Africa, which used to consist solely of diplomats and aid experts. These new migrants are regular business people and traders, as well as workers and technicians working for Chinese companies. Some amongst the earliest groups of diplomats and aid experts chose to stay behind in host societies when their duties ended and became community leaders. Approximately one million Chinese migrants are now living and working in Africa, of which onethird are people affiliated to Chinese construction companies; at least half are independent migrants usually involved in the private business sectors, and the remainder are other professionals including diplomats, doctors, and students (Park, 2016).

The demographic change inherent to Chinese migration to Africa has caused some problems. On the one hand, Chinese traders are branded invaders into local markets and accused of snatching working opportunities and wealth from the impoverished local people (Esteban, 2010; McNamee, 2012; Zhao, 2014). On the other hand, those working for Chinese infrastructure companies are believed by local people to have chosen a self-segregated life, hiding implicit agendas and avoiding direct contact with their host societies (Fessehaie and Morris, 2013). These misconceptions of new Chinese migrants in Africa have been challenged by empirical and ethnographic studies focussing on the personal lives of Chinese traders and corporate behaviours of Chinese companies (Warmerdam and van Dijk, 2016; Yan et al., 2018).

In this article, we debunk the myth of a problematic wave of new Chinese migrants in Africa via the lens of collective actions and associations. We believe that on the whole Chinese people in Africa are connected to and often interact with local societies in associational ways. These are neither disorganised nor self-segregated, as associations connect their personal lives with the bigger, collective life around them. Whilst members, either individuals or companies, continue pursuing their own interests under the shelter of these associations, their collective, associational actions contribute to the emergence of a united Chinese identity and Chinese political field, advocating proactively in the given host societies for their rights and against violence and discrimination. We focus particularly on associations founded by or consisting of new Chinese migrants in sub-Saharan African countries, which have organisational characteristics distinct from the traditional overseas Chinese associations that can be found in metropolitan Chinatowns (Park, 2010; Xu, 2017; Zhou, 1992). We define the new migrants as those having been in Africa less than a decade, in comparison to the Cantonese-dominated traditional Chinese community and to the older, sporadic mainland migrants who arrived between the 1980s and early 2000s. There is, however, no sharp divide between the older and newer migrants from mainland China, and being new usually connotes a contemporaneity, even a correlation, between their arrival and the re-emergence of China–Africa relations in the new century.

Likewise, we define the associations established by this new wave of migrants to be contemporary, fitting in the wider scope of China's ongoing engagement on the continent. Our fieldwork finds that, beyond the realm of state actors (Chinese state-owned enterprises, diplomatic corps, and technical aid missions) and non-state actors (long-term migrants, travelling business people, and students), a realm of associations exists that encompassed Chinese companies and self-supporting migrants in Africa. These associations include not only legally registered groups of people with a common interest in civic affairs, business, or professionalism but also occasional, thematic, and associational political mobilisation at the embassy level (an informal, ad hoc mechanism). Interweaving their personal and commercial interests with these associations, new Chinese migrants and companies are living a more institutionalised and politicised life than those from other countries.

Our focus here is on the Chinese community in Zambia. The resource-rich country has hosted various types of Chinese migrants in recent years, ranging from small traders to miners to construction workers. Aid relations between China and Zambia date back to the 1960s, the era of Mao and Kaunda. The tie is solid, yet the anti-Chinese sentiment in Zambian society is equally pronounced. The multifaceted bilateral relationship has laid the groundwork for a diversified community of Chinese people living and sojourning in Zambia, mirroring the experiences of new Chinese migrants across the continent.

The broader goal of this article is to unveil the institutionalised way of life of new Chinese migrants in Africa and the political complexity demonstrated by contemporary Chinese associations in the era of globalisation. We seek to explore how these associations have politicised themselves, and whether politicisation has had a unique impact on the Chinese community and host society in light of the rapid evolution of China–Africa relations. We argue that associations offer institutional support for Chinese individuals and companies in Africa, based on which collective Chinese actions with social and political purposes are made possible.

This research is methodologically designed as a descriptive analysis, primarily relying on qualitative and interview data. We carried out participant observation and individual interviews with semi-structured questions, and collected data from Zambia where the presence of Chinese migrants has been politicised and is of special importance to policymakers on both African and Chinese sides. We conducted 50 semi-structured interviews of people with various capacities from 20 Chinese associations in Zambia. One of the authors worked in Zambia as a researcher and journalist between 2014 and 2017, having extensive connections amongst the Chinese migrants, the Chinese diplomatic corps, and local political and academic communities in Zambia. Some follow-up interviews and informal conversations were conducted via WeChat during the writing process in late 2018, as well as in person in April and May 2019.

In addition, we participated in many internal conferences, cultural events, and other activities organised by different Chinese associations in Zambia, which helped us accumulate extra data and observe the everyday life of Chinese migrants in Zambia. We monitored media articles published by *Africa Oriental Newspaper* (非洲华侨周报,

*feizhou huaqiao zhoubao*), an Africa-based Chinese-language newspaper with a branch in Zambia, which frequently publishes reports on Chinese associations' activities in Zambia. In addition, we consulted experts on migration, and on China–Zambia relations as well as officials from the Chinese embassy in Lusaka and compared the data from Zambia with those from other African countries.

## Literature Review

The study of overseas Chinese associations is a subtopic of the broader study of Chinese migrant communities. Interestingly, within the literature on Chinese migrants in Africa and their interactions with host societies (Li, 2010; Park, 2010, 2016; Tremann, 2013; Yang, 2016), few of studies are dedicated to the structure and roles of migrant associations; the rest have regarded these associations as no more than a proxy agent in the face of other, more ethnographic subjects being discussed (Lam, 2015; Mohan and Tan-Mullins, 2009; Yan et al., 2018). We can, however, try to unearth the roles of contemporary Chinese associations by looking at the nature and functions of Chinese associations operating in other countries and continents, and by probing into the structure of Chinese communities in Africa.

### *The Nature of Overseas Chinese Associations*

It is not uncommon for Chinese migrants, traditional or new, to associate with one another in foreign societies for survival, economic, and political purposes. Western and Southeast Asian societies have been hosting Chinese communities and Chinatowns for centuries. Subsequent academic research on these people and organisations is copious. Amongst them, Li (1999) offers the most comprehensive study on the associational life of Chinese migrants in the Netherlands. Not only does she classify a large number of Chinese associations but she also provides an analytical framework for the relationship between migrants, associations, and their origins in China. She argues that “association credit” gives Chinese migrants commercial advantages both in the Netherlands and in China, and associations act as a bridge connecting the two worlds.

Philip Kuhn (2008) extends Li's analysis to Southeast Asia and North America. He delineates the evolution of China's policy towards emigrants and describes how emigrants of different generations and origins take advantage of policy reorientations. He finds that when Beijing's policy changed and new migrants flooded into the old structure of earlier migrants, overseas Chinese associations experienced a radical transformation from old-style guilds, where patron–client relationships dominated, into transnational organisations that succeeded in gaining recognition from governments of both sides. It is worth mentioning that Skinner (1957) conducted pioneering research on the (secret) Chinese societies in Thailand. His insight into power relations within traditional overseas Chinese societies is useful for the analysis of power structures in the fast developing Chinese associations in Africa, particularly those based on hometown identity and kinship.

There are other studies regarding the taxonomy and individual case studies of the organisational life of Chinese migrants in Europe and Southeast Asia (Huang and Liu, 2011; Li, 2015; Peng, 2015; Wang, 2010). Some are published in the Chinese language. However, as Xiang (2016) observes, the existing literature tends to be trapped in the dichotomy of methodological nationalism and epistemological behaviouralism either viewing Chinese migrants as living in an isolated enclave economy, or arguing that the social organisation of migrants is strongly influenced by their history. In fact, we have discovered a political–economic spectrum in the labelling of overseas Chinese associations when they are referred to in academic works—that is, from “ethnic enclave economy” (Light et al., 1994) at one extreme to “deterritorialised nation-state” (Basch et al., 2005) at the other. An ethnic enclave economy is “a partially autonomous enclave economic structure constituting a distinct labour market” (Zhou, 1992: 4), known for its traditional, guild-like, ethnically based patron–client relationships. These enclaves (and the associations dependent on them) still exist in some labour-intensive industries where Chinese migrants have traditionally excelled—for example, family restaurants. The nature of the formulation of a deterritorialised nation-state, however, is highly political and transnational, and overseas migrants are inevitably incorporated floatingly into the nation-building of their homeland (van Dongen, 2017).

### *The Functions of Overseas Chinese Associations*

Based on an investigation into the associational lives of foreigners mostly from Asia, Africa, and Latin America in early twentieth-century Europe, Jose Moya (2005) categorises migrant associations into six different groups: secret societies, credit associations, mutual benefit societies, religious groups, hometown associations, and political groups. His main focus is on the sociability between migrants and their associations rather than their interactions with host countries. A more recent report on the social roles of Chinese associations (Houston et al., 2013) looks at religious, educational, political, cultural, and socio-economic associations amongst long-term Chinese migrants in a South African city. Their major findings are inward-looking—that is to say, they report on the functions and benefits that associations can offer to their members, including social networking, employment, sense of belonging, and traditional education.

Traditional Chinese associations used to have only limited communications with the Beijing government (except during war time) and were used to engaging more in local rather than homeland politics (Leong, 1979; Li, 2017; Wang, 2010). For some older migrants, their associations can be even more exclusive. Wang (2010) notices that the Chinese associations in the Netherlands founded by old Zhejiang migrants are run in a village culture where the rules and customs of the original villages matter, findings is echoed by Li’s (2017) observations of the Mauritian Chinese community in the past. However, these associations are increasingly supplying public goods beyond the borders of clan and village, expanding to the broader Chinese communities in host countries. They offer new migrants necessary social support as they attempt to localise in host societies (Zhou, 2005). As Li (2017) discovers, traditional Chinese associations have transformed themselves from ethnic subgroups into more inclusive ones, more willing to

provide service for the entire Chinese community. In general, culture, education, and social functions are what the Chinese diaspora expect from Chinese social organisations abroad (Charney et al., 2003).

### *The Structure of Chinese Communities in Africa*

Traditional Chinese migrants in Africa, like their compatriots in other countries, live within host societies in ethnic enclaves based on kinship or village identity (Kuhn, 2008). The arrival of new Chinese migrants as a result of growing China–Africa relations has introduced new social structures into the Chinese communities in African countries, ones based on economic ties and political calculations. Liu (2018) provides a review of the burgeoning Chinese associations in four African countries. Illustrating his argument with case studies in Tanzania, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Ghana on how contemporary Chinese associations in these countries contribute to the economic life of Chinese migrants, Liu finds that these associations utilise their social capital as a lubricant between migrants, local governments and local societies, and further concludes that it is the transnational contemporary Chinese associations that help transform the “imagined community” of Chinese with varied origins into a virtual yet concrete community, united under a “pan-Chinese” identity. Liu also reveals another distinct feature of the new overseas Chinese associations in Africa: namely that they tend to compete over who can better represent of the Chinese community and be a better partner for the given host country. Similar social structures can be found in Li’s (2017) research on the new Chinese migrants in South Africa, Mozambique, Mauritius, and Réunion.

Contrary to Liu’s and Li’s observations, Lam (2015) and Ho (2008) both find that the Chinese community in Ghana is fragmented, evincing weak solidarity and substantial internal competition. The main reason each came to this conclusion is that they both overlooked the existence of an extensive network of Chinese associations and their roles as intermediaries in preventing conflicts and schisms between individual Chinese migrants, local society, and the Chinese embassy. In conclusion, the existing literature recognises the positive functions of overseas Chinese associations as shelters, connectors, and providers. This lays the very foundation for our perspectives on contemporary Chinese associations in Zambia.

### **A Classification of Contemporary Chinese Associations in Zambia<sup>1</sup>**

In general, we categorise contemporary Chinese associations founded by new Chinese migrants in Africa into three main groups, dependent on their closeness with Chinese domestic politics, the vision of their leadership, and the nature of their business: some of them are civic and self-governing, some are semi-official and subject to the supervision of the Chinese embassy, and some are distinctly as the extended arm of the Chinese state apparatus. The popular participation in local and Chinese politics makes all three types of associations potential players in the China–Africa arena, as intermediaries, defenders

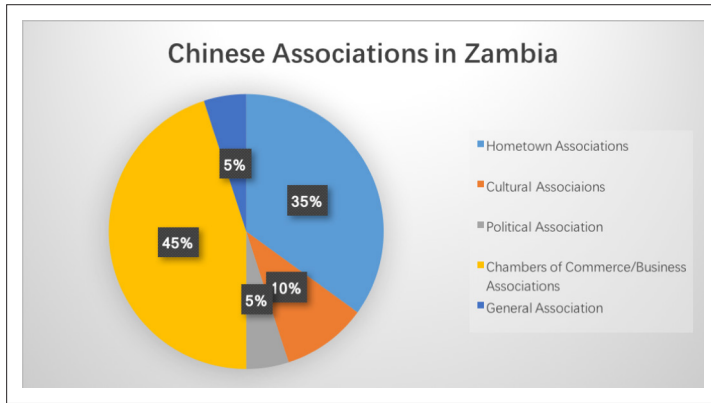
of China's image, or implementers of China's foreign policy. Amongst them, the civic and self-governing associations are usually organised on the basis of identity, such as clan associations where members come from the same extended family or share the same family name, or hometown associations, where members come from the same province, municipality, or county. The semi-official associations are mostly commercial, such as chambers of commerce whose membership overlaps, to some extent, with that of the hometown associations; industry associations consisting of locally operating Chinese SOEs (state-owned enterprises), large international corporations, and SMEs (small and medium enterprises, and associations focussing on other semi-official issues (women, Taiwan, cultural promotion). The semi-official associations maintain a close relationship with embassies and are more or less involved in China's domestic political economy.

Both civic and semi-official associations are answerable to the respective Chinese embassies for special political mobilisation and business regulation, for example in areas such as promoting peaceful national "reunification" of China, exercising discipline vis-à-vis unhealthy commercial competition among member companies, and installing safety monitoring systems for Chinese migrants. As intermediary platforms, associations not only bind overseas Chinese to the Chinese state, contributing their allegiance whilst benefitting from the public goods—a rarity when abroad—provided by the network, but also act as a proxy of collective Chinese interests in host societies.

We contextualise our classification of Chinese associations in the southern African country of Zambia for the following reasons. Amongst African countries, Zambia and China's diplomatic and business ties with one another are long-standing, starting with the TAZARA railway project in the 1960s. The increasing economic importance of Zambia has attracted a larger Chinese migrant population, from more than 3,000 people in the 1990s to nearly 20,000 in 2017 (Postel, 2017). Most are new, having been in Zambia no more than ten years. Beyond the official propaganda, Chinese in Zambia, especially in the Copperbelt region, has always been a sensitive issue. Anti-Chinese riots have broken out multiple times—recently in November 2018, in this case spurred by a widespread rumour that Zambia's state-owned enterprise, Zambia Forestry and Forest Industries Corporation Limited (ZAFFICO), had been sold to China. Looking back, the populist Michael Sata who played the anti-Chinese card won the presidential election in 2011.

On the ground, the relationship between China and Zambia is far more complicated than the current academic debate suggests. We can find different types of Chinese, rich and poor, urban and rural, making lives for themselves in Zambia's varied economic sectors, from agriculture, to infrastructure, to trading to mining. At a continental level, the Chinese community in Zambia mirrors the Chinese community in Africa as a whole, evincing an identical demographic composition and facing the same challenges. What is more intriguing in the case of Zambia is that the Chinese migrants are more inclined to connect their personal life to the collective community life via various associations. Compared to migrants in neighbouring countries—such as South Africa, where century-old traditional Chinese organisations can be found, or Tanzania, which has attracted Chinese investment a similarly long period of time the Chinese migrants living in





**Figure 1.** Classification of Chinese Associations in Zambia. *Source:* Authors' own compilation.

Zambia have established, out of the complexity of China–Africa relations, a more highly developed, faster-growing network of associations in terms of quantities and functions.

Chinese associations in Zambia are relatively contemporary, mostly founded after 2014. Around twenty Chinese associations are legally registered as non-profit organisations in Zambia with original purposes of preserving identities and culture, supporting the everyday life of Chinese migrants and promoting social and economic opportunities. There are five main categories of associations according to different functions, which include hometown associations, chambers of commerce, cultural associations, political associations, and one general association.

As shown in Figure 1, the largest group of associations in Zambia are chambers of commerce/business associations, which aligns with the fact that Zambia attracts Chinese migrants mainly for economic reasons. According to a recent McKinsey report (Sun et al., 2017), there are approximately 861 Chinese companies in Zambia, of which 90 per cent are privately owned and the remaining 10 per cent are state-owned.

The most influential Chinese business association in Zambia is the Association of Chinese Corporations (ACC), which aims to promote interaction and communication between Chinese and Zambian companies. It is a semi-official association under the direct leadership of the Chinese Economic and Commercial Counsellor's Office in Zambia and is responsible for assisting the Chinese government in expanding economic and trade cooperation between the two countries. It maintains close contact with Chinese companies in the country, giving them support and safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies. Its other responsibilities include guiding and coordinating the legitimate business and fair competition of Chinese companies, solving major business problems through consultation, and acting as a middleman between different companies, especially when there are conflicts of interest between Chinese state-owned enterprises.



Amongst the twenty Chinese associations, the Zambia Chinese Association (ZCA) plays the most important civic role in the Chinese community. It works closely with the Chinese embassy to protect the interests of Chinese migrants, particularly as criminal attacks on the Chinese community have risen in Zambia. Two main achievements of the ZCA are the establishment of both the Emergency Medical Assistance Team and the Chinese Security-Defending Union (治安联防, *zhi'an lianfang*). The Zambia Chinese Association founded the medical team partly with the support of the Chinese government, which coordinates medical resources to provide effective aid for Chinese nationals in case of emergency and accident. The security-defending union manages several neighbourhood teams with Chinese vigilantes in selected areas of Lusaka and Kitwe where Chinese-looking people have become the major targets of local criminals.

## The Social Roles of Contemporary Chinese Associations in Zambia

Often neglected in the current academic debate, Chinese associations represent one of the active actors and independent participants in China–Africa relations and in China's foreign policy. They are the bridge connecting individual Chinese, the Chinese embassy, and the local society. These associations are indispensable in assisting Chinese migrants to better integrate with local society, functioning as cultural and philanthropic intermediaries by frequently organising cultural and charity activities with the purpose of spreading Chinese culture and bettering the image of Chinese.

Chinese associations, especially hometown associations, create a home away from home for Chinese migrants in Zambia, where they can find intimacy and solace within a familiar environment. Such intimacy and solace can, in return, influence members' perception of Zambia, how to do business in the country, and how to work with locals. Many Chinese migrants in Zambia depend on kinship and geographical relationships, resulting in the formation of different and highly cohesive hometown associations. Wu (2014) and Shi and Hoebink (2020) find the policy of province–country twinning assistance (对口支援, *duikou zhiyuan*) has aided the demographic spread of Chinese migrants in Zambia. In 1978 the first Chinese medical aid team from Henan Province arrived in Zambia and started their journey of providing healthcare service to Zambians. Up to present, Henan Province has sent twenty medical teams to Zambia; some of the doctors remained in the country after finishing their service.

The same applies in the construction sector. In the 1980s state-owned construction companies from Jiangxi Province were sent to Zambia for aid projects. Some senior workers started their own business in the country after their duty ended, where they were able to further hire workers from their hometown. As a result, many Chinese migrants in Zambia came from Henan and Jiangxi Provinces, which refer to each other as *Henan bang* and *Jiangxi bang*. According to the vice-chairperson of the Jiangxi Hometown Association, in Zambia there are more than 4,000 migrants from Jiangxi makes up the largest proportion of Chinese migrants in Zambia. Approximately 100 companies in Zambia are owned by migrants from Jiangxi including richest Chinese in the country.

Against this backdrop, the Jiangxi Hometown Association was established in 2012, followed closely thereafter by the Henan one. The former is regarded as the first Chinese hometown association in Zambia. Apart from these two, there are a number of migrants from Fujian, Chuan-Yu (Sichuan and Chongqing) and the Northeast, whose corresponding hometown associations were established in recent years as well.

For many Chinese migrants in Zambia, hometown associations are of great help in their life. When newly arrived migrants need consultation on local immigration laws, taxation, and even culture shock, they tend to rely heavily on hometown associations, where they can seek guidance from their “old brothers and sisters” (大哥大姐, *dage dajie*) and “old Zambians” (老赞比亚, *lao zambiya*, referring to those having more experience in Zambia). Newcomers’ initial knowledge about Zambia, and how to do business and live there are often learned from these more experienced association members. As one member of the Jiangxi Hometown Association explained to us:

My first dinner in Zambia was at a Chinese restaurant in Lusaka, with some older brothers and sisters from my hometown association. They are more experienced than I am and have been living in Zambia for more than a decade; I listened to their suggestions very carefully, especially how to do business here and how to keep myself safe. (Anonymous 1, 2017)

Connect new members to manifest their institution and culture in the local society. Zambians, especially those living in the capital city of Lusaka, have got quite accustomed to Chinese festivals in recent years due to the frequent open cultural activities organised by Chinese associations. Locals have been able to engage in Chinese cultural events that they hear about through advertisements on local radio stations and in local newspapers, or more directly at open stages near important city landmarks, such as the Lusaka Levy Junction Mall, Mulungushi Conference Centre, or near Victoria Falls in Livingstone. Some of the events have also been broadcast via the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation. Zambians have participated in Chinese cultural events not only as audience members but also as performers. The Chinese Spring Festival Temple Fair with a gala show and exhibitions of Chinese cuisine and companies, for example, has been organised yearly by the ZCA and supported by other Chinese associations, attracting thousands of local people joining in the celebration of the Chinese New Year. Chinese and local performers together presented dragon and lion dances, waist drums, and martial arts. Zambia’s first president, Kaunda, was even one of the regular performers of the Temple Fair, as he usually presented and danced with the audience when performers sang “Tiyende Pamodzi,” a song he had written. Such events can also be regarded as collective actions aiming to promote Chinese soft power in the host country via the joint efforts of various Chinese associations and the embassy.

Through all kinds of events and meetings, Chinese associations liaison not only with politicians but also with other Zambian institutions, particularly in the sectors of business, education, and culture. It has become a routine activity for Chinese associations in Zambia to visit orphanages, donate teaching equipment and books to schools, and provide scholarships. They are trying to convince the local Zambians that they are

concerned with the country too and are willing to contribute. As a representative from the Sino-Zambia Golf Association explained:

It is noteworthy that many activities organised by Chinese associations are not only exclusive to Chinese, but also open to local Zambians. For example, the Sino-Zambia Golf Association regularly organises golf competition activities. We invite Zambian golf players to join us. In fact, many of the Zambian golf players are intellectuals, successful entrepreneurs and policy-makers. By interacting with them through various activities, we can also have a better understanding of each other. (Anonymous 2, 2019)

## **The Politicisation of Contemporary Chinese Associations in Zambia**

Our main argument in this article is that many contemporary Chinese associations serve as a vital extension of Beijing's diplomacy in Africa. For this purpose, all twenty Chinese associations in Zambia we studied have, (un)wittingly, undergone a certain degree of politicisation. Their politicisation and mobilisation led to the emergence of a Chinese political field in Zambia, where political rather than economic considerations govern, and where associations are increasingly and proactively interacting with Zambian politics and the Zambian media.

Although overseas Chinese migrants have their own agendas (Chatelard, 2011), political outreach from Beijing vis-à-vis the new Chinese migrations (in particular those from mainland China) has been growing in recent years. In Zambia, this political influence is realised mostly via the intermediary Chinese associations. Economic success has boosted Chinese migrants' ambitions to access the political arena. Representatives of these associations are often seen at the embassy, attending political mobilisations organised at the embassy level. Some of them seek to raise their social status by using Chinese associations as platforms to enter the political stage, with titles such as president or chairperson as potential sources for political capital. According to an interview with some senior leaders from the Chinese associations in Zambia, one of the reasons they spend time managing these associations is that they value the opportunity to engage with the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the chance to be members of the overseas Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference member.

Aside from our findings on political participation, we are also able to delineate the pyramid of power that exists within the Chinese association system in Zambia. This goes from the embassy at the top, via the associations, to the bottom of individual Chinese and companies. Some of the associations may even take orders directly from homeland governments (provincial or municipal) and promote subnational and party policies within the Chinese community in Zambia. For example, the Zambian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification of China, though it is registered as an NGO in Zambia, is incorporated as part of the overseas united front of the party.

## Connecting with the Embassy and Homeland State Apparatus

Chinese associations in Zambia maintain a close relationship with the embassy and are more or less involved in China's international and domestic political economy. The Chinese ambassador in Zambia frequently holds meetings with *qiaoling* (侨领, leaders from various associations) and gives them the latest guidelines and suggestions. For example, in August 2019, the current Chinese ambassador Li Jie and political counsellor Lai Bo paid a visit to the ZCA, encouraging Chinese community leaders to actively participate in the Belt and Road Initiative and take advantage of the associations' platforms. Most events organised by Chinese associations will invite at least one representative from the embassy. Apart from receiving guidelines, some of the association leaders serve as "unofficial employees" of the embassy. They closely work with the embassy staff, who, for instance, are responsible for party-building. This is especially pronounced in the case of the Association of Chinese Corporations in Zambia, which is mainly composed of Chinese SOEs.

Most associations carry out duties of constraining and disciplining their members, either individuals or companies, in accordance with the embassy's requirements of good behaviour, of abiding by local and Chinese laws, and of maintaining state secrecy. This particular disciplinary process is sometimes more discernible when party branches are found in certain associated Chinese companies and technical teams, where by individual party members are placed under the dual leadership of their corresponding party secretary and the political officer from the embassy. In an annual conference organised by the ZCA, its leader emphasised the importance of the leadership of the Chinese embassy in Zambia and the Chinese government. According to him, the ZCA should strengthen its connection with relevant domestic agencies, promote party-building, and establish party organisation in the association where party members should strive to play pioneering and exemplary roles for other members (Anonymous 5, 2019).

Many associations have further established and maintained connections with state agencies in China that go beyond the embassy. These association leaders are eager to demonstrate their loyalty to the party and to seek recognition directly from the Chinese authorities. The latter includes, but is not limited to, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of State Security, and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council. Local and provincial government departments, such as the Provincial Party Committee Propaganda Department and Provincial Department of Commerce, might also have an influence on the associations to a certain degree, especially on hometown associations. Even though these associations are meant to be operating independently in their day-to-day operation, many leaders receive direction from China. A number of hometown association leaders confirmed with us that they have close links with provincial government leaders and they are members of provincial-level Overseas Exchange Associations. Their associations consequently became channels for government departments in China to obtain both a better understanding of the Chinese migrants and country information on Zambia. As a leading member of a hometown association who has frequently invited government officials from his hometown to visit Zambia said:

Every time I go back to my hometown, I will pay a visit to the provincial leaders, who are in charge of work related to overseas investment and overseas Chinese affairs (侨务, *qiaowu*). They are always happy to meet me, and are keen to have more information about investment opportunities in Africa and grasp the situation of people from Jiangsu in Zambia. (Anonymous 3, 2017)

What is more, Chinese associations can be instrumental diplomatically during high Chinese officials' visits to Zambia. For example, when former Chinese president Hu Jintao and former chairperson of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, Zhang Dejiang visited Zambia, it was the Chinese associations that, commissioned by the embassy, organised welcoming groups and signs at the airport and hotel.

### *Engaging in Local Politics*

Among the associations Chinese have created in Zambia are a hobby-oriented one (Sino-Zambia Golf Association) and a gender-oriented one (Chinese Ladies' Union in Zambia). Though these two groups may seem apolitical and independent of government the Chinese Ladies, Union in Zambia is more a semi-official association with the Chinese ambassador's wife being the honorary president. The union's mission is to act as a bridge between Chinese and Zambian women to strengthen their communication, understanding, and friendship. However, because of the conspicuous role of the Chinese ambassador's wife (who is also a diplomat) in the association, the activities organised by this association are more at the top level than claimed, usually involving Zambia's top female officials--and even the first lady.

The Sino-Zambia Golf Association, along with the Chinese Ladies, Union in Zambia and certain Chinese state-owned companies, initiated the Zambia First Lady Golf Charity Competition in 2017. Through the golf competition, the Sino-Zambia Golf Association, the Chinese Ladies Union in Zambia, and two other Chinese companies together donated ZMW 300,000 (approximately USD 23,000) to the Esther Lungu Foundation, a non-profit organisation named after Zambia's first lady.

According to an interviewee from the Sino-Zambia Golf Association, the idea of donating to the first lady's foundation evinced a "top-down" approach:

The wife of the Chinese ambassador is close to Esther Lungu and she would love to contribute to the first lady's foundation. The first lady is of course happy to receive funding from no matter who, as she wants to make a difference. The Chinese embassy does not have funding for this, especially after President Xi Jinping launched an anti-corruption campaign. The wife of the Chinese ambassador, who is also a veteran diplomat, then started to consult with members of the golf association and the Chinese Ladies, Union in Zambia. When she gave us a hint, we then knew what we should do next. (Anonymous 2, 2019)

Although the donation--made by Chinese associations and companies--seemed non governmental, it was viewed as an official move by local outlets. The donations also came under criticism from Zambia's opposition-party leader:

The money was handed over by the Ambassador's wife. There is everything wrong. Mr Xi Jinping can never receive money in that manner. It is never allowed in other countries by international conventions. We shall not allow any foreign company or mission to come and interfere in the internal affairs of this country by financing one political party against the other. We won't allow this mischievousness. We shall unearth the truth about this matter. (Wynter Kabimba, Rainbow Party, *Lusaka Times*, 7 April 2017)

### *Fighting Anti-Chinese Sentiment and Shaping Public Opinion*

Chinese migrants in Zambia have been severely impacted by the continuous anti-Chinese agitation in Zambia. Consequently, their associations have been fighting the (potential) anti-Chinese sentiment by interacting with Zambian elites and carrying out interventions in traditional and social media. During the 2006 election, the then opposition presidential candidate Michael Sata failed to win after campaigning on anti-Chinese rhetoric. In the following election in 2011, he again campaigned against Chinese investors by criticising the Chinese migrants who he claimed had "taken over" Zambia. Although Michael Sata's rhetoric changed immediately after he was elected, the fear of being kicked out of the country had a strong psychological effect on the small Chinese community and was one impetus for the formation of an institutional structure amongst the Chinese migrants. Many Chinese association leaders we spoke to were worried there might be another round of anti-Chinese sentiment or xenophobic attacks on Chinese nationals in the future and they believed associations could be meaningful in building a relatively harmonious environment between Chinese and Zambians. Against such a backdrop a WeChat online discussion group --"Fighting Media Crisis",-- was created, which comprised officials from the Chinese embassy, association leaders, and Zambia-based Chinese journalists. They hope to find effective ways to deal with negative stories relating to China and Chinese people, especially when a PR crisis erupts.

Wang Xin, the vice-president of the ZCA and president of the Zambia-Chinese Copperbelt Chapter, gave us an example of how associations in Zambia had worked closely with the Chinese embassy to tackle negative reports that might damage the image of Chinese. In July 2018 Zambia's government-owned newspaper *The Times* published an article 'Flirty' Chinese Attacked," which provocatively accused three Chinese men (who were, allegedly assaulted by five Zambian men in the Chambishi area) of flirting with the assaulters' wives. Wang and other association leaders believed it was another example of media hype regarding Chinese people in Zambia and that the story was not likely based on truth, saying:

The report might have a negative influence on Chinese people in Zambia. As the vice-president of the ZCA, president of the ZCA Copperbelt Chapter and appointed consular protection liaison officer of the Chinese embassy, I immediately reported to the leaders of the Chinese embassy in Zambia. Following the instruction from the Chinese embassy, I and other association leaders decided to investigate this story. (Interview with Wang Xin, 2019)

After the collective efforts by multiple association leaders, the newspaper finally published another article, explaining that the Chinese men were not suspected of flirting with the Zambian women. The Chinese association leaders believe that they are winning the public opinion war against prejudiced Zambian media. As the vice president of the Zambia Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification of China commented:

One of the important goals for Chinese associations here in Zambia is to prevent the occurrence of any anti-Chinese incident. We Chinese don't want to be used as a "political card" for opposition leaders during their presidential campaign. We don't want to repeat the memory of 2006 and 2011. By organising multiple activities and events, I believe the various Chinese associations can perform a functional role in shaping and rebranding China's image in the country. (Anonymous 4, 2017)

Sata's criticism, however, was more about Chinese investors, a topic that has sparked increasing discussions in Zambian media and the parliament recent years, with particular reference to China's debt-trap diplomacy and the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. The association leaders we spoke to tended to see the criticism as a product of fear and envy of China's quick rise, agitated the Western media and opposition leaders. Although most association leaders have been living abroad for a long time, they remain nationalistic and pro-Chinese government, and have created a Facebook page in an attempt to refute false claims about Chinese people and to display a positive image of Chinese people in Zambia. One interviewed leader responded to this situation in quite a passionate tone:

We can no longer be silent. We cannot continue to let other people splash dirty water on China. Implementing the Belt and Road Initiative is also a political game; associations can be regarded as the bud of a public opinion war. We association leaders have accordingly built a WeChat platform, discussing how we can best respond when there is negative news in the local media. We hope we can also take the initiative to guide public opinion in the future. (Anonymous 5, 2019)

### *Providing Public Goods to Chinese Migrants*

Another political role often overlooked by the previous studies is the public goods provision from Chinese associations, which encompasses not only security support as we stated earlier but also the efforts associations have made to set up a platform of information-sharing for Chinese migrants in Zambia. Several Chinese associations have their own official online media platforms – in the form of an official WeChat account, on which these Chinese associations publish news, announcements, foreign exchange rates, and job postings on a daily basis. For example, the ZCA has been working on an initiative that translates local laws into Chinese and helps Chinese investors to understand local regulations. This kind of initiative is particularly helpful for those who cannot read English, as most information published is related to Zambia's political, economic, and



social news. With support from the Chinese government, the ZCA has further established an Emergency Medical Assistance Team with the aim of providing emergency medical aid exclusively to Chinese (including those from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan), since such service is still quite rare in Zambia.

One of the functions of Chinese embassies is to provide consular protection and assistance for Chinese nationals. With more and more Chinese migrants working and living in Zambia, the workload of consular protection has increased, whilst the number of staff member in charge of consular protection remains the same. For example, there is only one staff in charge of consular protection at the Chinese embassy to Zambia, and this person has other duties too. Small companies, families, and individual traders are amongst the most vulnerable, and are not able to receive official protection from the embassy. The gap is now being filled by associations and the Chinese Security-Defending Union, which have sufficient local resources and *guanxi*. In 2017 thirty-one Chinese nationals who had been held for illegal mining in Zambia, including a pregnant woman and two people suffering from malaria, were released after being detained for more than seventy-two hours in the Copperbelt town of Chingola. Chinese associations in Zambia led by the ZCA and ACC mobilised local resources to pressure for the release of these individuals. By the time we were finalising this article around September 2019, a confrontation between Nigeria and South Africa broke out over the xenophobic attacks against Nigerians and other black Africans in South Africa. This is a situation Chinese migrants in Zambia want to avoid as they will be to some extent more vulnerable than any other non-indigenous groups should similar xenophobia surge again.

The provision of security as a public good is a sovereign affair. The appearance in Zambians' daily lives of Chinese faces controlling an organisation of legal violence can be controversial. Some Chinese association leaders have gone further than establishing a security-defending union: In 2017, the president of the ZCA donated two vehicles to the Zambia Police Service. At the donation ceremony, Inspector General of Police Kakoma Kanganja nominated eight Chinese nationals, leaders of the ZCA and other Chinese associations in Zambia, as police reservists. It was the first time that the Chinese tried to protect themselves by becoming local police officials (though unarmed). However, Zambians who held prejudiced views against the Chinese regarded this nomination as an invasion in to the public security sphere. They fear that the Chinese are buying influence and using the national police at the expense of Zambians' public interest. The nomination was soon cancelled following the public outcry.

The cooperation between Chinese and the Zambian police force continued despite the failed nomination. More than ten senior Zambian police officers attended a joint annual defence session between the Zambia Police Service and Chinese Security-Defending Union organised by the ZCA later in 2017. According to the conference notes we obtained, the main purpose of this annual session was to strengthen the cooperation between the ZCA and the Zambian police in order to provide a safer working and living environment for Chinese migrants in Zambia. The Zambia Chinese Association delivered ZMK 20,000 ZMK (about USD 1,670) to the Zambian police to encourage them to swiftly resolve a case of shooting in which a Chinese migrant was a victim.

Our study finds that leaders of Chinese associations are the decisive factor behind the quality of service provided to the Chinese migrants in Zambia. These leaders always try to gain support from both the Chinese embassy and local elites. On one hand, their strong connections with the local elites have benefitted the development of the associations and have helped the entire Chinese community better integrate with local society. On the other hand, these connections with local elites can sometimes be controversial and might be potentially run counter to China's "non-interference policy." Some leaders of Chinese associations have been working and living in Zambia for more than twenty years, having developed a close relationship with senior Zambian officials, even with party leaders and the head of state. It is not unusual for leaders of the ZCA to pay a visit to State House on behalf of its members, where issues such as the business environment for Chinese in Zambia are discussed. For example, the representatives from the ZCA paid a visit to President Lungu in 2015, and soon afterwards, the Zambian police head-quarter publicly assured the Chinese community there would be increased security for their businesses. The president of the Zambia Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification of China told us that he used his own connection to persuade former president Michael Sata to meet the then-Chinese ambassador to Zambia right after Sata won the election in 2011. Further, added a president of a Chinese hometown association, "whenever the police trouble you in Zambia, just tell them my name and you will be fine" (Anonymous 1, 2017).

We should understand that these association leaders who contribute their time and efforts to managing Chinese associations and provide service for Chinese migrants are not philanthropists. They do it because of their deep financial, social, or emotional involvement in local society. The image of China and how local Zambians view Chinese is important to them as the sustainability of their own investment relies on the relationship between Chinese and locals. Below are two examples of such leaders.

Ms. L, who is in her mid-60s, has been very active in the associational life amongst of Chinese associations. Ms. L came to Zambia from Sichuan province with her husband more than two decades ago. She is not only the chairperson of the Chuan-Yu Hometown Association but also the vice-chairperson of Chinese Ladies Union in Zambia, and the manager of the Emergency Medical Assistance Team organised by the ZCA. As a Chinese who left her motherland a long time ago, one of her proudest accomplishments was her participation in the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China in 2009, where she got the chance to stand at the red carpet in Tian'anmen Square in Beijing as a Chinese community leader from Africa.

Mr. F came to Zambia as a manager of a state-owned construction company in 1994. After several years, he started his own business. In 2000 he married a Zambian and now has three children. As most Chinese are not open to interracial marriage, he then kept a distance from the Chinese community. However, he changed his mind and in recent years has become active as a Chinese community leader. The main reason for this change is that he realised that locals' view of the presence of Chinese would affect him and his family, no matter how hard he has been trying to localise himself. For his mixed-race children, the question about their origins has sometimes been a sensitive topic at school,

especially when negative media reports about China or Chinese came up. Mr. F therefore has devoted himself to helping improve the image of Chinese in Zambia, becoming an ardent member of Chinese associations in Zambia.

## Discussion

Contemporary Chinese associations are active actors in China–Africa relations. First of all, our findings support Liu’s (2018) argument that the Chinese state has domesticated and facilitated diasporic participation in China’s diplomacy. We have shown that Chinese associations perform a variety of functions in this respect. Second, the China–Africa relations and rhetoric are sparking unprecedented “transnationalism” (Vertovec, 2004; Zhou and Lee, 2013) amongst new Chinese migrants and their associations. The engagement of civilian migrants in bilateral relations is by nature political, meaning that associations and their leadership can reap huge political capital to the benefit of their own businesses and lives. As Kuhn (2008) concludes, being recognised by both governments translates to career success for Chinese migrants, and the official recognition allows them to benefit from both societies.

Economically, some Chinese associations have arranged for business delegations from China to visit Zambia (for instance, the Jilin and Jiangxi hometown associations invited leading companies from Jilin and Jiangxi), which results in direct investment. In some cases, through the introduction of an association, some Chinese companies are able to find reliable go-betweens to facilitate trade with Zambian companies. Culturally, Chinese associations have organised a variety of activities to present Chinese culture to the mainstream society. By highlighting Chinese culture, they have helped the local Zambians gain insight into China and have improved the mutual understanding between Chinese and Zambians.

According to d’Hooghe (2015), in spite of the fact that China is a one-party state with a centralist authoritarian regime that has far-reaching control over public diplomacy instruments, its public diplomacy is no longer solely confined to a hierarchical state-centre format. Politically, Chinese associations as important non-state actors are carrying out an ever-growing role in China’s public diplomacy and in so-called people-to-people diplomacy in Africa. The former Chinese ambassador to Zambia Zhou Yuxiao admitted that Chinese overseas associations were indeed practitioners of Chinese public diplomacy. The Chinese embassy and migrants in Zambia have a common concern regarding promoting the image of Chinese companies and people in Zambia. In 2016 a Zambian tabloid published an article claiming that the Chinese use human meat to make corned beef and sell it to Africa. Due to the strong dismay shown by many Chinese in Zambia, especially as expressed in WeChat groups, the president of the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification in Zambia held an emergency meeting with leaders from different Chinese associations and requested the tabloid publish a letter of apology to the Chinese community in Zambia.

Apart from the Chinese community, Zambia is home to several other non-indigenous populations, the most notable of which are Indians, frequently mentioned by the Chinese

during our interviews. The longer-established Indian community plays a critical role in the Zambian economy. Different from the Chinese, the majority of the Indian community in Zambia hold Zambian citizenship. Their associations, such as the Association of the Indian Community in Zambia and the Lusaka Indian Ladies' Association, are thus more concerned with domestic development than bilateral politics, as the Indian Zambian citizens can find more institutionalised channels within the established system to express their needs and interests.

## Conclusion

Overseas Chinese all over the world have a strong tendency to organise themselves as part of associations or associational movements, regardless of their ideology or identity. These associations have occupied various functions and have been studied from different viewpoints. For centuries, associations, in particular those framed around kinship and dialectal compatriotism, have been essential for both legal and illegal new migrants by providing economic shelters for them (Kuhn, 2008). At the same time, political overseas associations have been a catalyst for the state formation and nation-building of modern China. Tongmenghui, the Chinese United League, which received organisational and financial support from Chinese migrants across the Asia-Pacific region, was the main force behind the establishment of the first Chinese Republic (Liu and Liu, 1996). Progressive Chinese students were sent to Europe to study between 1919 and 1920, where they founded the European branch of the CCP and started their revolutionary careers (Bailey, 1988; Wang, 1982). For Chinese migrants, patriotic associations were specially organised to provide support for the war against the Japanese invasion during World War II (Leong, 1979). Today, the need for to promote culture and business opportunities between China and migrants' host countries is spurring the creation new overseas Chinese associations in new frontiers such as Africa and helping transform the traditional associations in the old more established Chinese communities in other parts of the world as well.

In general, this article finds that contemporary Chinese associations with new Chinese migrant members in Zambia are vital to facilitating cultural, business and, in particular, political ties between China and Zambia. Associations institutionalise and politicise the life of Chinese individuals and companies in Africa, connecting them with the embassy and the homeland state apparatus, engaging in Zambia's local politics, fighting the anti-Chinese sentiment, and providing public goods. This process can be advantageous to both the businesses and personal lives of migrants. From an individual perspective, Chinese associations have supported many individuals when they encountered obstacles, such as robberies, illness, car accidents, and labour disputes. From a commercial perspective, Chinese associations, especially business associations, are instrumental in resource-sharing and information-sharing.

The impact of Chinese associations in Zambia needs, however, further observation and evaluation. We have seen Chinese people, Chinese culture, and Chinese values being exposed to the daily lives of Zambians on an unprecedented scale thanks to the proactive

approaches of Chinese associations attempting to promote and protect Chinese interests. Without the organisational and financial support of these associations, none of the open cultural activities, joint security forces, and charity events we witness on the streets and in venues Zambia all over would have been possible. In Zambia, no permanent Chinese space such as a Chinatown exists as a physical foundation for these activities and events. Thus, we argue that associations are functioning to some extent as Chinatowns do in other cities.

We must special attention to the fact that the associational, and mostly urban, life of the new Chinese migrants in Zambia is highly politicised and connected to the bigger picture of China–Africa relations. Politicisation can sometimes give the impression of grandeur in scale, of working with authorities, and of neglect of local civil society, which, as often emphasised in development studies, can be associated with problems in, for example, social inclusion or the welfare of the poor. Whereas it is true that Zambia, particularly Lusaka and the Copperbelt region, has benefitted from the presence of Chinese associations in terms of potential investment and charity, we are not yet certain about how ordinary people working for sustenance can gain from the development of Chinese associations in their lives.

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1. A more detailed classification and description of these associations can be found in Li and Shi (2018) *Zaifei huaqiao de jieshe: yi zanbiya huaqiao shetuan weili* [Chinese associations in Africa: a case study of Chinese associations in Zambia]. In: Li A (ed.), *Zhongguo feizhou yanjiu pinglun 2017* [*Chinese Review of African Studies* 2017]. Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe [Social Science Academic Press], pp. 137–154.

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