

**The Overseas Chinese:
Where They Are and the PRC's Vision**

Captain Alexander C. Pumerantz

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Abstract

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has placed an increasingly greater emphasis on engagement with the communities of Chinese citizens abroad and foreign citizens of Chinese descent, collectively known as the Overseas Chinese. In this paper, the location of the communities of Overseas Chinese will be identified along with what control the People's Republic of China has over them. The character and composition of the Overseas Chinese has gone through a significant shift from the establishment of the PRC to today. After conducting a review of the literature, a unique three step approach is used to plot the Overseas Chinese on a map. First, the percentages of people who speak Chinese in the home are plotted on a map of the United States. Second, they are compared with locations of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms to show that the two are positively correlated. Third, this model is applied to the world at large and plotted on a map. Analysis is then presented to examine the Communist Party of China (CPC) two approaches to influencing the Overseas Chinese. The first approach focuses on improving China's reputation abroad by controlling the narrative through Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms, Overseas Chinese students, media outlets, and the elimination of negative publicity. The second approach is leveraging the economic prosperity of the Overseas Chinese to support the Belt and Road Initiative. The paper concludes that the Overseas Chinese's role as a positive voice for the PRC has had much greater success than as facilitators for the Belt and Road Initiative.

Introduction

In March of 2018, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) announced that the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office was to be absorbed into the United Front Work Department. This reorganization brought international attention back on the concerted effort the People's Republic of China was making to connect with the populations of Overseas Chinese. The Overseas Chinese, also known as the Chinese diaspora, is an important group that has historically provided China with the means for economic growth and assisted in accelerating technological change. Despite this, the diaspora was often ignored by both academics and policymakers who doubted the influence these groups had. This is changing as states are beginning to realize the extent to which diasporas can affect both their country of origin and the country in which they have traveled to.

A diaspora is a population of people who live outside of, but still identify with, their historical homeland. China has one of the largest diasporas in the world with 10.7 million Chinese living overseas, increasing to at least 60 million if you include their descendants (Guotu 2022). If China can mobilize and control this population, it would give them the ability to effect change around the world. The PRC ascribes to a Gramscian view to hegemony, that being the process by which the leading group of society transforms its interests and values into the norm for the rest of society (Antoniades 2008, 4). Up to this point in history, the United States has been filling the role of ensuring that the world order follows western norms. China aims to change the world order by replacing American hegemony with a Chinese centric one. Through its soft power efforts, China plans to normalize Chinese ideals across international institutions. Through programs such as the Belt and Road Initiative, China plans to create an economic void that only it can fill. All these efforts to lead China to hegemony are built on pathways originally

paved by the Overseas Chinese. This paper aims to answer two questions: where is the Overseas Chinese located and what is the People's Republic of China's envisions using these Overseas Chinese communities?

The Changing Face of the Overseas Chinese

It is important to understand the makeup of the diaspora and how it has changed over time. There have been many periods of emigration in Chinese history that have placed people all over the world. The early 1300s were characterized by significant maritime trade and the establishment of Chinese merchant communities as sojourners would reside abroad temporarily for work before returning home. As their numbers increased, they began to form larger communities at the major ports, marry local women, and have children to whom they passed Chinese traditions (Tracy 1990, 405). This trend ended after the establishment of the Ming dynasty in 1368 because, for the first hundred years of their rule, they locked down private overseas trade. Those unable to return to China immediately or who wished to defy the bans, found themselves stuck overseas and settled into their new homes abroad (Tracy 1990, 406). Once the Ming dynasty relaxed trade policies again in 1567, there were established Overseas Chinese communities that were ready to facilitate local trade, mostly in Southeast Asia.

The fall of the Ming dynasty and subsequent invasion by the Manchus in 1644 marked the first mass migration event as people escaped the destruction and fled to the Chinese communities abroad (Ling 1912, 80). The Qing dynasty that followed would again shut down private trading in an attempt to limit outside influence down to a single port. Disputes with western powers led to the Opium Wars resulting in China being forced to open its markets to western powers and establishing the British colony of Hong Kong, which would prove to be the

single most important source of emigration in 19th century China (McKeown 1999, 313). This era marked the rise in the export of cheap Chinese labor to the rest of the world, especially to the United States which required laborers during the Gold Rush and for construction of the transcontinental railroads. Most of these laborers were poor and came from the southern Cantonese speaking regions looking to improve their economic standing through greater opportunities abroad.

The fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912, the rise of the Republic of China, the elimination of anti-emigration policies, and the subsequent civil war caused another large wave of emigration. Singapore and Malaysia took large numbers of these emigrants as people fled the violence of the civil war that severely disrupted Chinese families (Pike 2011). The establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) led to yet another emigration ban that lasted until the 1980s when China went through its economic reforms and began the Four Modernizations program. This program was meant to reform the agricultural, industrial, technological, and defense sectors that China had neglected during the Mao era of class struggle politics from 1949 to 1976 (Ebrey 2010). The decades of isolation of Chinese scientists led thousands of students to apply for and receive visas to study abroad in institutions at the leading edge of scientific research. In the early 2000s, the government further reduced restrictions on overseas studies and streamlined the process in the hope of accelerating Chinese economic growth on the mainland (Song 2019). This led to an exodus of students out of China.

The early 21st century provided one final change to the makeup of the Overseas Chinese, namely, the introduction of wealthy investors and tourists. The rapid expansion of the Chinese economy soon led to the creation of a wealthy upper class. These newly wealthy groups came from across the PRC and mostly spoke Mandarin as their primary language. This new wave of

migrants were mostly investor and entrepreneurial migrants who would maintain business operations in both the PRC as well as the host nation (Miles 2020, 233). The rapid accumulation of wealth also made international tourism possible for a wider Chinese audience. While the tourists themselves rarely remained in the countries they visited, they created a demand for a network that could support their tourism. Tour businesses were founded, local stores began hiring Chinese sales staff, and physical infrastructure was built to support their needs (Miles 2020, 242). This formed a self-supporting cycle as Chinese investors began to invest in local infrastructure to support Chinese tourism which led to more tourism in those areas.

These waves of migration have led to a bifurcation of the Overseas Chinese community. If the early period of Chinese emigration can be characterized by mostly poorly educated and low-skill laborers, the modern era has been dominated by the highly skilled and wealthy. “More than 80 percent of recent emigrants from China are highly educated, wealthy, or both” (Xiang 2016 as cited in Goodkind 2019, 3). Whereas the early period was characterized as mostly coming from southern China and speaking Cantonese, modern emigrants come from the wealthier northern regions speaking primarily Mandarin. As for their destinations, the destination of choice has shifted from the immediate developing nations in Southeast Asia to the modern industrialized nations (Suryadinata 2017, 10). These modern immigrants have spent a majority of their lives under the PRC and are more amenable to PRC propaganda in comparison to those migrants who arrived before the PRC was founded.

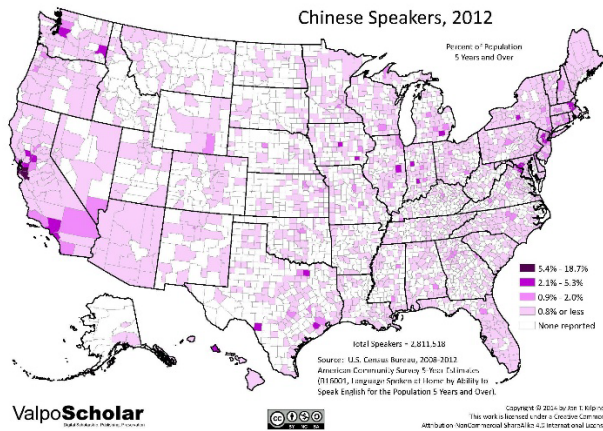
Geolocating the Overseas Chinese

Now that we have a general sense of the makeup of the Overseas Chinese and how it has changed, we can attempt to geolocate them. This is not an easy task as many countries around the world do not keep accurate census data. This can be overcome by looking at another point of data that can assist in making this determination, namely, the location of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms. Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms are programs, funded in part by the Chinese government, that provides public education and Chinese cultural promotion programs. Confucius Institutes are attached to Colleges and Universities and the Confucius Classrooms are attached to secondary schools. Both provide teachers and educational materials approved by Hanban. Hanban is the Chinese abbreviation for what was the Confucius Institute Headquarters, which as of July 2020 is now called the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC). The hypothesis we are going to test is whether the locations of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms will mirror the ethnic distribution of the Overseas Chinese communities. We expect this will hold true because one of the stated goals of CLEC is to portray the PRC in a positive light (Peterson, Yan & Oxnevad 2022, 19), therefore they would want to locate them where large groups of Overseas Chinese are living.

To test the hypothesis, we will first compare the locations of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms against demographic data in the United States to confirm that the pattern holds true before applying it to the rest of the world. The following dataset from the United States Census Bureau from 2008 – 2012 looks at the percent of the population five years or older who use Chinese as the primary language spoken in the home. Using language spoken in the home is a strong metric when determining the locations of the Overseas Chinese communities in the United States because it will find the people who are most engaged in Chinese language

media. The dataset we are using to find the location of all the Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms was aggregated by Popovic, Jenne, & Medzihorský (2020) by manually scouring the Hanban website for all institutions and then collecting their exact location from Google Maps. These two sets of data are visualized below in Figure 1 and Figure 2 below.

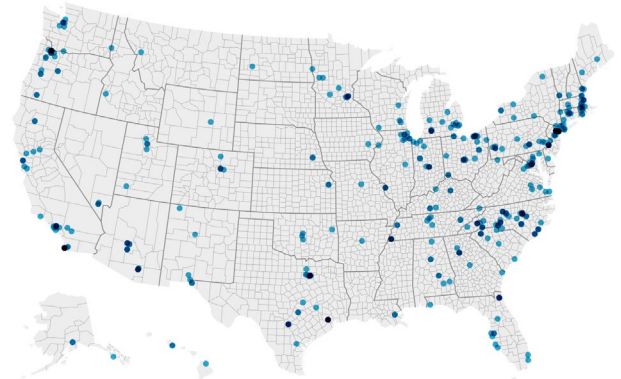
Figure 1



Note. Data sourced from US Census Bureau. Image created by Kilpinen, Jon T., 2014. "Chinese Speakers, 2012." United States Map Gallery. Map 11.05. <http://scholar.valpo.edu/usmaps/84> Copyright 2014 CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Figure 2

Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in the United States



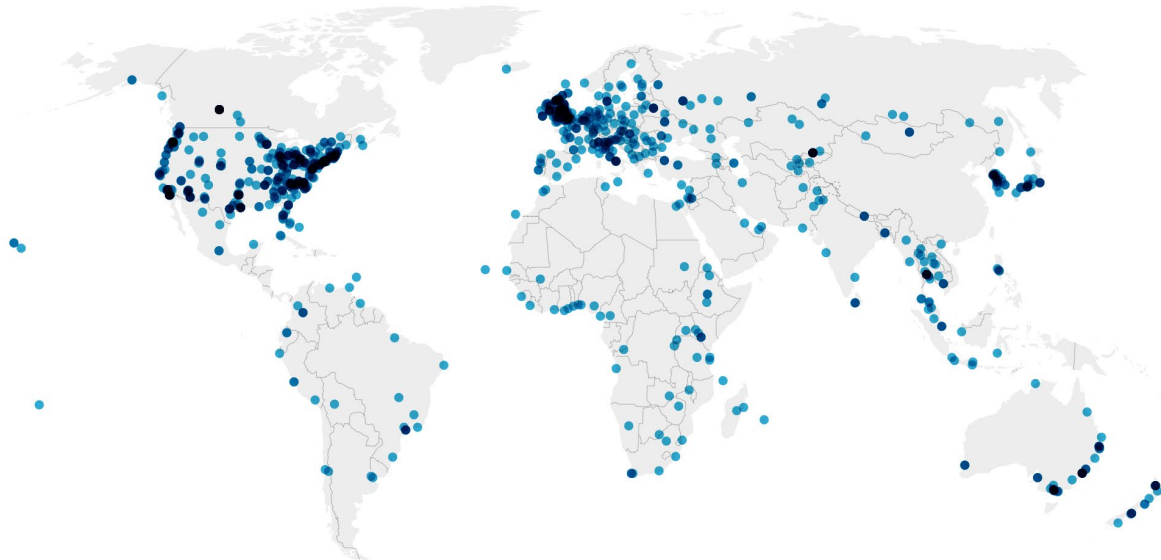
Note. Data used from Popovic, Jenne, & Medzihorský (2020)

By comparing the census data to the locations of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms in the United States, it is clear how the patterns line up. The locations of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms is positively correlated to the Overseas Chinese communities as expected. Figure 3 below is a visualization of this worldwide dataset plotted on a world map. “Universities and colleges hosted 530 Confucius Institutes while primary and secondary schools hosted 631 Confucius Classrooms across 127 countries” (Popovic, Jenne, & Medzihorský 2020, 1455). By applying our hypothesis, we can deduce that concentrations of

Overseas Chinese communities are on nearly every continent and in most nations, roughly distributed as shown in Figure 3 below. The data also shows that there are larger concentrations in the developed nations than in the less developed nations.

Figure 3

Confucius Institutes and Classrooms



Medzhorsky, Juraj, 2020, "Replication Data for: "Charm Offensive or Offensive Charm? An Analysis of Russian and Chinese Cultural Institutes Abroad" Milos Popovic, Erin K. Jenne, and Juraj Medzhorsky. Europe-Asia Studies. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1785397>", <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CWVIVY>, Harvard Dataverse, V2
Source: Milos Popovic, Erin K. Jenne, and Juraj Medzhorsky - Get the data - Created with Datawrapper

Note. Data used from Popovic, Jenne, & Medzhorský (2020)

PRC Intentions

With the locations of the Overseas Chinese determined above, we can look at what the Communist Party of China’s (CPC) vision is for them. The Overseas Chinese propensity to maintain their “Chinese-ness” and avoid assimilating to the local customs serves as both a blessing and a curse for the Chinese government. During the Qing dynasty and Republic of China periods, dual nationality was recognized which allowed the Overseas Chinese to maintain their Chinese citizenship. Tensions were mounting, however, as the countries of Southeast Asia grew resentful of the Chinese migrants who refused to assimilate but were retaining most of the

wealth (Suryadinata 2017, 27). For this reason, the PRC enacted the 1980 Nationality Law which revoked the citizenship of any Chinese nationals who became citizens of other nations. While this placated the Southeast Asian countries to an extent, as Overseas Chinese were no longer Chinese citizens, there remained an air of suspicion against the Chinese. During this time the PRC viewed the diaspora as a liability to inter-Asian cooperation (Wu 2019, 13).

The end of the Cultural Revolution and the establishment of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission in 1978 marked the beginning of the PRC's current attitude towards the Overseas Chinese: an asset which could be leveraged and supported for domestic enrichment. This theme has remained constant from the turn of the century to today. President of the PRC, Xi Jinping, has stated that one of his key policies is "Grand Qiaowu" which employs an all of government approach to Overseas Chinese Affairs (Wu 2019, 19). The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office was absorbed into the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the CPC in order to leverage the greater funds and reach of the latter. This led many to believe that the CPC was placing a greater emphasis on the Overseas Chinese but according to Wu, this reshuffling of governmental offices is "less a signal about the increased policy significance of Overseas Chinese, and more about an organizational streamlining of policy processes related to overseas Chinese affairs" (Wu 2019, 19). To this end, President Xi has stated that maintaining the United Front is key to uniting the Chinese people both at home and abroad and bringing China into superpower status. (Xinhua 2022)

There are two main goals of the CPC regime relating to the Overseas Chinese: 1) using them to promote China's cultural soft power, and 2) leveraging the "Bamboo Network" to aid in the growth of the Belt and Road Initiative. Soft power is the ability of a country to persuade others to do what they want without force or coercion, but instead through positive opinions of

its culture and values. One of China's main issues has been its poor soft power abroad. The country's reputation of civil rights abuses against its own population as well as a propensity to take more than it gives in international partnerships has left a poor impression on many foreigners. President Xi has espoused in his public speeches that it is the role of the Chinese abroad to help strengthen the soft power of China through creative forms of communication and media to increase the appeal and credibility of China (China Daily 2014). One of the forces that China has used to this end has been International Students and the Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms we used above to find the diaspora. The students themselves have been acting as ambassadors to the institutions they attend and often reproduce and defend CPC narratives. It is possible that over the course of a degree, these actions may reduce other students' opposition to these views and give a better overall impression of China (Han & Tong 2021, 586). The Confucius institutes supplement this by ensuring state sponsored narratives are promoted in Chinese outreach courses, which led to their censure and the shuttering of hundreds of locations by the United States Government. However, it appears they accomplished their goal, as a recent report on the hundreds of closures stated that in none of the cases were they confident to say the institutions were closed, rather saying that all institutions showed continual collaboration with the Chinese government (Peterson, Yan, Oxnevad 2022, 16).

This gradual transformation of opposition from within has been a core strategy of the PRC and also speaks to the amount of control they have over the Overseas Chinese communities. The campaigns appear to be working. In the early years of the PRC, most of the Chinese students who went abroad to complete degrees never returned and settled abroad, but in 2017, 80% of students who left to study abroad returned to China (Heath 2018). The CPC has also been in the business of cultivating favorable foreign media outlets by handsomely rewarding Overseas

Chinese outlets that cover CPC interests favorably and strong-arming or outright acquiring those who do not (Cook 2020). This comes in the form of economic and political privileges for good behavior or losing your job or funding for negative behavior. By curating the media that diaspora populations consume, the CPC is able to win over the hearts and minds of the Overseas Chinese further aligning them with the party's views and interests.

Surprisingly, force and coercion are being used to support the soft power efforts. This has manifested itself in the form of state sponsored espionage to attack or discredit opposition voices. Chinese embassies abroad take a much more active role abroad than most other embassies. They maintain very close ties with the Overseas Chinese and pro-actively manipulate and influence them to construct an international environment friendly to China's ambitions (To 2014 as quoted by Han & Tong 2021, 589). By maintaining such close ties, they know where many of the Overseas Chinese work or go to school. This allows the CPC to manipulate them by either exploiting their Chinese nationalism or by threatening to harm their families back in China. This has been especially prominent in the communities who have direct ties to topics the CPC does not want publicized. In one case, a Uyghur man was detained after returning to China for a visit and was interrogated for 10 hours. He was told if he cooperated after returning abroad that there would be rewards. He was also threatened that if he did not cooperate, he would never be able to return to see his family. He pretended to cooperate but knew he would never be able to go back once he informed the Canadian authorities (Mooney & Lague 2015). While in this case the man did not cooperate, there have been countless other times where Overseas Chinese did cooperate and passed secrets back to China about the affairs of dissidents abroad. Through coercion they can gather the information they need to stop the spread of negative opinions of China's culture and values to reinforce their soft power.

The second goal of the CPC is to leverage the “Bamboo Network” to support the Belt and Road Initiative. The fantastic success of the Overseas Chinese communities is often attributed to what became known as the “Bamboo Network” which are business ties forged along familial and cultural ties within the Overseas Chinese. Rather than focusing on brand building and expansion, these family-run businesses remain small and favor trade, investment, or manufacturing of intermediate goods. They connect to one another informally based on trust and interpersonal ties allowing them greater freedom to maneuver in unpredictable legal environments (Chuah et al. 2016, 1100). These networks of businesses have grown from the earliest days back in the Ming dynasty to the enormous economic bloc they are today. Although they have played a huge part in forming the global Chinese market and are often proud of the rise of China, most of these businesses have had little to no involvement with state-directed projects (Nyiri 2021).

The Belt and Road Initiative, also sometimes referred to as One Belt One Road, was a strategy developed by President Xi Jinping to purposely develop international economic corridors to both expand the ability to send Chinese goods abroad, but also to feed China’s growing need for raw materials. The plan is part of a greater strategy of the “China Dream” where President Xi intended to make China as strong and relevant as it was in ancient times (Suryadinata 2017, 168). To make this plan a reality, China began investing heavily into the infrastructure of both overland and maritime trade routes. They also founded the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to assist in funding all the efforts. China’s hope is that these Belt and Road countries would come to rely on China over the other advanced western powers for their economic security and development, thereby supporting the expansion of Chinese economic goals. Ultimately, the goal is to alter the world order to remove western hegemony over Asia and

replace it with Chinese control (Brands 2022). Many Chinese politicians believe the Overseas Chinese would be a key factor in working with these nations.

Chinese leaders have spoken in general terms about the need to mobilize the economically powerful Overseas Chinese residing in Belt and Road countries to act as both a source of investment as well as a bridge between China and the governments of the countries in which they live. The ability to action on these goals has been limited because many of the Overseas Chinese have found that rather than working with the Chinese state-owned enterprises it is more prudent to undertake joint projects with local businesses and workers to guarantee their investments against possible anti-Chinese backlash (Suryadinata 2017, 179). Since the Overseas Chinese have not been receptive, the brunt of Belt and Road Initiative projects, especially those in Africa and the Middle East, have been run directly by state-owned enterprises using migratory Chinese laborers. The predominant perception is that Chinese firms have been reluctant to use local labor forces and instead have been importing in cheaper Chinese labor. There were even waves of rumors fueled by the poor conditions accepted by the laborers that China was sending over convicts to be used as laborers, but these rumors have been shown to be false (Hairong & Sautman 2012). The reasons for this trend vary depending on the type of project, but include local populations not having high enough skills, minimizing the risk of labor unrest, and avoiding labor unions and other legal issues just to name a few (Hillman & Trippett 2021). It is yet to be determined how much more support the Overseas Chinese will provide to the Belt and Road initiative especially in the less developed nations. This could be positively affected by the success of promoting China's cultural soft power.

Conclusion

Two goals were presented in this paper; first, to geolocate the Overseas Chinese which was accomplished through an estimation based on the locations of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms. Comparing those locations to the demographics of the United States, a strong positive correlation was found which was then applied to the rest of the world to determine where the broader Overseas Chinese communities are located. This allowed the demonstration of how the Overseas Chinese have spread across nearly every continent and have established population centers in most countries around the world.

The second goal presented in this paper was to analyze the PRC's vision for the Overseas Chinese which was found to be twofold; first, to spread Chinese soft power and second, to aid and stimulate the development of the Belt and Road Initiative. The first of these is by far the stronger of the two and appears to be the primary focus of the PRC. Control over the diasporic populations is achieved through control over Chinese language, media, and the narrative fed to other news sources. This is bolstered through the use of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms that teach young minds the CPC approved versions of history. The Overseas Chinese then act as instruments of the state promoting Chinese culture and state-sponsored positions either wittingly or unwittingly in the areas around where they settled. The second goal of aiding the development of the Belt and Road Initiative is one that the PRC values highly but has had a much harder time converting into real action from the Overseas Chinese. The PRC has had to rely more heavily on their own state-sponsored corporations to facilitate the sought-after development. Ultimately, the Overseas Chinese have been an important focus of China's interactions abroad and will continue to be for the foreseeable future as China will continue to influence them and be supported by them.

If China can continue to leverage the Overseas Chinese to their full potential, the PRC may be able to achieve its overall goal of hegemony in Asia. Further research in this topic could focus on the efficacy of these Chinese cultural outreach programs to see if Chinese culture is becoming more palatable outside of Asia or if Chinese pressure has been having the opposite effect of turning people away. With China's 20th Communist Party Congress having concluded in October 2022, Xi Jinping secured a historic third term as General Secretary of the party. He is now considered more powerful than any Chinese ruler since Mao Zedong. (Brands 2022) With this power, the pressure on the Overseas Chinese is very likely to become more intense.

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