

Research Article

The Role of the Chinese Diaspora in China's Foreign Policy

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ORCIDArif Darmawan: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9225-1162>**Abstract.**

This paper examines the People's Republic of China's diaspora as a tool of foreign policy from its founding (Mao's era) to the present (Jinping's era). China's diaspora policy evolved from time to time, showing the changing migration pattern and reflecting favorable global conditions. Chinese diaspora has become an instrument of China's domestic policy and foreign policy agenda since Kuomintang to the Communist government era. One of China's domestic agenda is the need to attract foreign investment –primarily through diaspora community. In the foreign policy field, there has been a significant continuity in its foreign policy objectives related to its diaspora policy. To strengthen its global ambition, China implemented “new diplomacy,” aiming to change how its neighbors view their ambition with the help of their diaspora communities. Thus, the estimated 50 million Chinese diasporas have become important assets in connecting China to the world.

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1. Introduction

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Diaspora's existence (often called overseas Chinese) has become a part of China's domestic and foreign policy **(1)**. In the domestic domain, the Chinese government's focus is on continuously increasing its economic growth to maintain internal stability. In line with the domestic agenda, China's foreign policy strategy is to maintain a stable and conducive regional and international environment to modernize its economy and improve its prestige and power in international politics. Roy **(2)** states that power, prosperity, and status are the three main objectives to implement China's foreign policy. Beijing desires power, prosperity, and status to play an active role in international affairs and uses its instruments and resources to achieve it.

Barabantseva **(3)** explains three objectives that China wants to achieve related to policy involving the Chinese Diaspora, namely economic, political, and cultural objectives.

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Concerning the economic objective, the Chinese Diaspora plays an essential role in China's modernization process. Chinese ethnic group overseas has abundant resources, particularly in terms of investment and experts. In terms of culture, the Chinese Diaspora may play a significant role in promoting the Chinese language and culture to the whole world, and with Chinese culture getting known more, China's prestige and soft power will increase more. In terms of politics, the Chinese Diaspora serves as the medium to communicate China's interest in the countries where they live.

As stated by Fitzgerald **(4)**, the Chinese government's policy related to the Chinese Diaspora constantly changes adaptation to its foreign policy. In the early period of China's establishment, the Chinese diaspora community distributed overseas was deemed a threat. Thus in its development, there were changes to the policy. The Chinese government started to be aware of the importance of the Chinese Diaspora's modernization effort. With China's increasing soft power, the Chinese Diaspora becomes an integral part of its foreign policy implementation. This essay will elaborate on the policy changes related to the Chinese Diaspora from the Mao Zedong era to the Xi Jinping era.

2. Method

The research method that used in this study is a qualitative method with a descriptive form. Qualitative research is defined as research that tries to understand what the research subject experiences, such as actors, perceptions, motivations, actions, and so on, holistically, and through descriptions in the form of words and language in a natural context and by utilizing other methods that are also natural. This qualitative research focuses more on the process aspect compared to the results, because the relationship of the parts studied becomes more obvious when observed through a process **(5)**. The descriptive form that will be used by the authors in this study intends to explain systematically, actually, and accurately regarding a fact, situation, and event that the author found in the field with some data coverage.

3. Results and Discussion

Policies related to the Chinese Diaspora usually cover domestic and foreign policies **(6)**. However, there were times when the Chinese government must balance the priority of domestic policy and foreign policy, and there were times when the Chinese government prioritized foreign policy over domestic policy or vice versa. During the Mao Zedong

era, two figures dominated China's foreign policy determination, namely Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. There is significant continuity in the implementation of foreign politics now, both from a strategic perspective and from a foreign political implementation perspective. Yahuda **(7)** identifies three phases of China's foreign politics during the Mao era: The China-Soviet alliance phase, foreign policy radicalism, and foreign policy modernization. Since China's foreign policy influences its policy on Chinese Diaspora, these phases are near related to explain the evolution and changes in policy on Chinese Diaspora or overseas Chinese.

The Chinese Diaspora's high population in Southeast Asia is a different complexity in China's relationship and countries. According to Fitzgerald **(8)**, when the Chinese Communist Party took over power in 1949, they inherited some previous government problems (Kuomintang/KMT Government). One of the issues is related to Kuomintang's nationality law, which led to Southeast Asian countries' least trust and the Chinese people's minimum assimilation process with the native community in the Southeast Asian countries. Given this condition, the Chinese government regarded the Chinese Diaspora as a constraint in China's relationship with the Southeast Asian countries.

For the first time, Zhou Enlai formally acknowledged the 'Chinese diaspora issue' in a statement delivered in the First National People's Congress in September 1954 **(9)**. In the statement, Enlai acknowledged that about 12 million Chinese descents were living overseas. They contributed to the economy of the countries where they lived. The nationality issue would be dealt with immediately, particularly for Chinese Diaspora living in the countries with a diplomatic relationship with China, such as the Southeast Asian countries.

This statement shows the new policy on the Chinese Diaspora. When Beijing starts to play its diplomatic role in international relations, the Chinese Diaspora's problems in Southeast Asian countries must become one of its main focuses since it influences its diplomatic relations. China's perception of the Chinese diaspora issue in Southeast Asia is based on two considerations: the Chinese Diaspora's utility to the nation and the requirements to realize peaceful coexistence policy **(10)**. Suppose the People's Republic of China is indeed interested in improving its diplomatic relations with the Southeast Asian countries. In that case, it should be capable of removing the assumption that the country only uses the Chinese Diaspora merely for a political objective. At that time, the people of the Southeast Asian countries were suspicious of Chinese people. Mainly because of the economic and social factors and dual nationality due to the Kuomintang government's policy, which was a severe issue, Chinese people were deemed part of the Chinese government that they must watch out for.

Regardless of the global environment changes, one thing is consistent in the Chinese diaspora policy: the effort to gain foreign exchange income from the Chinese Diaspora. The diaspora community's remittance was significant from 1949 to 1977 **(11)**. During Mao Zedong's leadership, the Chinese Diaspora sent a significant remittance to mainland China's family. During the Cultural Revolution, the remittance drastically declined because of the government's policy to alienate the Chinese Diaspora. However, after the Cultural Revolution declined, and China had fixed its relations with the Chinese Diaspora, the remittance started flowing into China **(12)**.

Issues related to the Chinese Diaspora were again crucial in China's foreign policy and became the national agenda in the era of Deng Xiaoping. In 1974 the commission dealing with the Chinese Diaspora, namely the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission (OCAO), was re-established since the Chinese government was more aware that it needed foreign funds and re-encouraged Chinese Diaspora to deliver remittance to the country **(13)**. Re-establishing relations with the Chinese Diaspora, which were once terminated during the Cultural Revolution, needed a rehabilitation process with them, including with their relatives in China, because of the persecution during the revolution.

The Chinese government was aware that the Chinese Diaspora was an ideal resource to provide capital and experts. It was essential to fix the existing problems after the Cultural Revolution with such a significant position. The most important thing was to fix the relations with the Chinese Diaspora and strengthen the diplomatic and trade relations with the countries where they lived permanently. However, in its implementation, there was suspicion by the Southeast Asian countries and the Chinese Diaspora there that they still saw the Beijing government's political efforts that they must watch out for **(14)**.

To implement its modernization program, China needed capital and experts. Deng Xiaoping much needed the Chinese Diaspora's role to fulfill this, mainly related to experts. During the Cultural Revolution, many Chinese intellectuals and professionals decided to flee from the country. The period from 1966 to 1976 is known as the period of 'ten years disaster'/shinian haojie, in which many Chinese professionals and intellectuals decided to leave China, while they were much needed for China's modernization process **(15)**.

The Chinese government then attempted to re-establish its relations with the Chinese Diaspora, particularly the intellectuals, professionals, and businessmen, encouraging them to visit, study, invest, and live in China again. This re-establishment was a difficult task since many Chinese Diaspora were traumatic of the past, and the concern about the same occurrence made them leave China. Deng Xiaoping planned to recruit 400 Chinese diaspora scientists to work in China. This effort was finally successful when

many Chinese intellectuals and scientists were willing to return to China but not as permanent citizens and only for a brief visit as a worker. According to Suryadinata **(16)**, they were unwilling to live in China because there were no adequate facilities permanently.

Science exchange was indeed an important factor in China's economic development. In this regard, the normalization of relations between the United States and China helped provide China's experts. Although many Chinese diaspora scientists and intellectuals returned to the country only as expatriates, they played an essential role in revitalizing China's scientific community after the Cultural Revolution **(17)**. Besides recruiting intellectuals and scientists, there was a policy to send students to study abroad during the Deng Xiaoping era, particularly to the United States. With this policy, China was expected to absorb advanced Western science and technology. After the normalization of diplomatic relations between the United States and China in 1979, a big wave of Chinese students went to the United States to study science and technology **(18)**

When Deng Xiaoping led China, his central policy was economic reform, aiming at improving China's economy, which would also lead to the country's social change. It was here that Deng Xiaoping was then aware that it needed international environmental stability to focus on the modernization process, which needed stable and increasing relations with the outside world. The modernization process needed mastery of more advanced science and technology, capital, and management skill. Also, China was much helped by the Chinese Diaspora's contribution. However, the Chinese Diaspora's most significant contribution to the country's transformation process was Foreign Direct Investment made by the Chinese Diaspora. According to Naughton **(19)**, FDI brought significant changes to the management, experience, market opening, technology, and human resources. With foreign investment assistance by the Chinese Diaspora, China reached a significant prosperity level in the Deng Xiaoping era.

To improve its soft power, China combines diplomacy and cultural instruments about Chinese cultures such as language, arts, and ethnicity. China's soft power strategy includes using Chinese Diaspora overseas as maximal as possible to promote anything related to China and improve relations between China and the countries where the Chinese Diaspora live. In this period, the Chinese government is then aware of the Chinese Diaspora's potential, which is not only in investment and technology sectors but also in the potential to contribute to China's development effort in all fields, including foreign policy **(20)**.

In the World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention (WCEC) event held in Japan in 2007, Jia Qinglin who was the head of the National Committee of the Chinese People's

Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in his speech confirmed that there were five points of hope for Chinese Diaspora **(21)**: first, Chinese Diaspora was expected to live harmoniously with the local community and actively participate in the development and advancement of the country where they live in; second, China broadly welcomed Chinese Diaspora to participate in China's modernization process in any forms; third, Chinese Diaspora was expected to unite in opposing Taiwan separation and encouraging any China unification efforts; fourth, Chinese Diaspora was expected to continuously maintain and promote their ancestral culture while learning the culture where they live in; and fifth, Chinese Diaspora was expected to promote people-to-people friendship between China other countries throughout the world. From Jia Qinglin's statement above, it is clear how China attempted to make the Chinese diaspora community participate in fulfilling its foreign political ambition to strengthen its soft power and the effort to isolate Taiwan.

At this time, the Chinese government starts to orderly attempt to recruit Chinese Diaspora worldwide to improve their soft power. The efforts made to acknowledge the importance of Diaspora's role are to organize Chinese diaspora convention and send party elites to meet Chinese Diaspora overseas. Through these two measures, the Chinese government maintains connectivity with Diaspora in many countries. For example, in 2001, the top officials of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO) visited more than twenty countries to meet Chinese diaspora figures in those countries **(22)**.

In the implementation of foreign policy in this transition period, China prioritizes the "promoting politics through business, to influence government through people" formula**(23)**. Thus the success in business overseas is also the success in strengthening its political influence. Although China's policy related to Diaspora is particularly directing to the economic modernization process, since the 1990s, it covers the political domain. China's success in the economy through the new diplomacy, which strengthens China's image in the international world, also strengthens Chinese diaspora involvement. Chinese Diaspora plays a significant role as the agent in the broader implementation of China's foreign policy, particularly in striving for China's national interest and widening China's influence in the region, including concerning Taiwan. Regarding its relations with the United States, the Chinese Diaspora also plays a significant role in mediating the two countries' relationship. However, there is still suspicion that limits Chinese Diaspora's more active role in the two countries' relationship.

The relations between the Chinese government and the Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia at this time continuously strengthen. Southeast Asia is a region where the Chinese Diaspora is by population per capita the world's biggest. The existence of

the Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia presents a solid foundation in establishing relations between ASEAN countries and China. For example, under Prime Minister Thaksin's leadership, Thailand led the biggest delegation in the Boao Forum, a World Economic Forum organized by China. It enthusiastically encouraged strategic partnerships between the two countries **(24)**. The strategic partnership between China and ASEAN was also realized in the proposal of the formation of CAFTA (China-ASEAN Free Trade Area) in 2001, which was realized within ten years. The partnership with ASEAN becomes China's stepping stone to play a role and strengthen its influence in East Asia, and the Chinese diaspora community becomes an essential instrument in this strategy implementation.

In the current development, it is clear that the new generation of communist leaders in China understands even more than the success of Chinese diaspora related policy needs appropriate foreign policy. Including using a robust soft power to establish close communication with the Chinese Diaspora. The use of soft power has some important aspects, including: First, by introducing its soft power resources, namely culture and economic development model, the Chinese government may encourage Chinese people overseas to accept their political legitimacy. Second, through soft power attraction, the Chinese government may improve its image in the international world and present comparative discourse to foreign media's adverse reporting. Third, by prioritizing the soft power development, China wants to show that they want to maintain a peaceful international environment that may support its economic modernization **(25)**.

In the new generation era of Chinese communist leaders, Xi Jinping, a pragmatic figure, was then inaugurated as China's paramount leader. In the last few years, China's soft power development seems to strengthen more, in harmony with the military development in dealing with conflict in various areas related to the country. Many parties expect that Xi Jinping will maintain the international policies and strategies applied by his predecessors. As a pragmatic figure, Xi Jinping's international strategy may be interpreted as express but flexible ones, by maintaining the rigid power policy applied all this time while strengthening their soft power **(26)**. On the one hand, Xi Jinping still desires to keep building domestic political support by strengthening the nationalism discourse, which is continuously expressed in achieving the desired national interest. On the other hand, Xi Jinping wants to use effective public diplomacy by performing China's nation branding as a great power responsible for and willing to create a friendly international environment that may support China's progressing modernization and development.

On August 19, 2013, Xi Jinping made an important statement in his speech at the National Publicity and Ideology Work Conference. Although the transcript of the speech in the event was never released to the public, some government top officials tried to convey Xi Jinping's ideas about foreign policy in the speech. In its article in People's Daily, Ming Zhao **(27)**, the State Council Information Affairs (SCIO), explained Xi Jinping's vision related to China's new public diplomacy in detail. According to Mingzhao, the core idea of Xi Jinping's vision regarding public diplomacy is that China must develop the messages or discourse regarding it to determine how to implement international communication, instead of being forced to follow the discourse created and controlled by others. Mingzhao stated that the new form of China's public diplomacy must adapt to Chinese political and cultural values, focus on explaining China's view and policy related to the international world, and always pay attention to the opinion and habit of the international community.

Chinese diaspora related policies certainly should adapt to Xi Jinping's vision related to the new public diplomacy explained above. Ding **(28)**, in his interview with He Yafei, the deputy director of OCAO (Overseas Chinese Affairs Office), explained how the diaspora policy under Xi Jinping's vision was. According to Yafei, China's public diplomacy directed to the Chinese Diaspora must include ideas and practices in traditional public diplomacy, focus on educational and cultural exchange, international broadcasting, promote Chinese culture and language, and create an institutional and systematic approach in interaction with Chinese Diaspora. Yafei stated that the Chinese Diaspora might make a significant contribution to China's public diplomacy. For example, according to Yafei, there were about 20,000 Chinese diaspora schools, 20,000 Chinese diaspora communal groups, 1000 Chinese diaspora media organizations, Chinatowns, restaurants, and traditional medical clinics become an essential platform in the processes of introducing Chinese cultures in hostlands. Moreover, the Chinese Diaspora has strong economic and technology capability, an established marketing network, comprehensive business and political connection, and fast-growing communication resources and media. Through Diaspora related policies, the communist government may implement its public diplomacy to form Chinese diaspora identity, which is closely related to China's national identity in entirety **(29)**.

The communist government has applied various policies related to Diaspora. However, the policies have not contributed much to China's public diplomacy since their application is not directly directed to the target population's needs. Moreover, China's public diplomacy approaches and instruments will not be successful when they do not use effective communication with the target community. Based on Xi Jinping's vision of

public diplomacy, the Chinese government adopts policies to strengthen the relations with the global Chinese Diaspora consisting of the following policies **(30)**: Strengthening International Broadcasting by Controlling Chinese Global Media, Immigration-Related Rule and Law Reform, and Promoting Education Exchange by building International Education Network.

4. Conclusion

From the full review above, we may see that China's policy related to the Chinese Diaspora is a form of reflection or instrument of the policy implementation's objective, both overseas and domestically. The Chinese government often must balance the priority of domestic policy and foreign policy. Foreign policy may take priority, and vice versa, the domestic policy takes priority. The relations between the Chinese government and the global Chinese diaspora community are a form of mutual symbiosis. When China has a better economy and a stronger position in the international world, the Chinese Diaspora will also benefit greatly if the Chinese government's relations are substantial. Through strong relations, the Chinese Diaspora contributes many things to China's advancement in many fields.

To realize the Chinese Dream and make China a major power in global politics, the global Chinese diaspora community's role is also essential. It is here that the Xi Jinping government makes a more intensive effort to involve the Chinese Diaspora in the country's domestic and foreign policy agenda. The Chinese government's cultural identity bond is continuously kept in the Xi Jinping era, among others, through institutions sponsored by the government to be built in many countries, and one of which is the Confucius Institute. This institution serves as the spearhead of China's soft power and public diplomacy application to strengthen the relations between the government and the Chinese Diaspora by strengthening the cultural identity bond (including Chinese language, culture, and values) Chinese diaspora throughout the world. Thus, they will be active in applying China's foreign policy agenda, which is the leading player in global politics.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the writing of this article does not have any conflict of interest.

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