

Overseas Chinese, Soft Power and China's People-to-People Diplomacy in Timor-Leste¹

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Introduction

Over the past decades, people-to-people diplomacy, also known as public diplomacy, has become one of the cornerstones of international relations between countries around the world. Countries often use public diplomacy² as a soft power instrument to build relationships with other countries. Joseph S. Nye defines soft power as the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments ... Soft power arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies' (Nye 2004:256). Conversely, hard power, defined as 'the ability to coerce, grows out of a country's military and economic might' (ibid.). Now enshrined as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), people-to-people diplomacy is part of China's soft power toolkit. The Chinese

1 This chapter is part of the author's research project for her PhD studies on China–Timor-Leste relations at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne. The empirical data used in this chapter derive from the author's fieldwork from 2014 to 2018.

2 Paul Sharp defines public diplomacy as 'the process by which direct relations with people in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extend the values of those being presented' (d'Hooghe 2007:5). This definition suggests a broader interaction beyond the state level, and thus includes non-state actors' involvement in public diplomacy.

Government considers its overseas communities important assets in promoting and strengthening China's presence in and relationships to countries with which it engages. The term 'overseas Chinese' refers to two categories: *huaqiao* and *huaren*. The most widely accepted definitions of these terms by academics and policy circles are *huaqiao* as overseas Chinese who reside outside China and have obtained permanent residency abroad but still maintain their Chinese nationality, and *huaren* as ethnic Chinese who reside in and become nationals of other countries (Tan 2013:311).

In May 2017, China and Timor-Leste celebrated 15 years of bilateral relations. China was the first country to present its credentials and establish diplomatic relations with the newly independent government of Timor-Leste in May 2002.³ Over the past 15 years, the relationship between the two countries has been cordial, and China's presence in Timor-Leste has been on the rise. Material indications of their close relationship include a series of public buildings in the Timorese capital Dili built with grants from China Aid, as well as technical assistance in the agriculture, health and military sectors. This highly visible support is a cornerstone in China's soft power efforts in Timor-Leste.

While providing development assistance to the country, China also stressed people-to-people relations as a pillar of its foreign relations with Timor-Leste. This was manifested in an April 2014 high-level joint statement by the two countries establishing a 'Comprehensive Partnership of Good Neighbourly Friendship, Mutual Trust and Mutual Benefit' (Timor-Leste Government 2014). A year later, in April 2015, China's Vice Chairman of the Standing Committee of the 12th National People's Congress, Chen Zhu, visited Timor-Leste and reiterated the importance of people-to-people relations as part of China's overall practical cooperation with Timor-Leste towards broadening Beijing's 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road initiative (Xinhua 2015). Though there have been few reciprocal

3 Record of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste on the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Full Diplomatic Relations between the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste and the People's Republic of China on Monday, 20 May 2002.

visits and exchange programs,⁴ a practical manifestation of this diplomacy has been an influx of Chinese migrants to Timor-Leste. It is estimated that between 4,500 and 5,000 recent Chinese migrants currently reside in Timor-Leste.

This chapter argues that the Chinese Government tries to use overseas Chinese in Timor-Leste as public diplomacy agents to promote officially approved narratives of China's cultural values and advocate for Taiwan's diplomatic isolation. As the Chinese in Timor-Leste are known for their entrepreneurial spirit and business acumen, the increased presence of new Chinese migrants has changed Timor-Leste's economic landscape. Thus, China's people-to-people diplomacy may foster good relations between the two countries; however, it is not always mutually beneficial. This public diplomacy predominantly benefits China through its overseas community's engagement as intermediaries between the two countries, which fosters China's economic advancement through access to Timor-Leste's markets, resources and public funds. Such engagement has created tensions, both between the Chinese-Timorese and the new Chinese migrants and between new Chinese migrants and the local community.

This chapter presents an overview of Chinese migration to Timor-Leste. The analysis touches upon the migration history of the overseas Chinese community and the recent influx of new Chinese migrants. The second section examines the role of overseas Chinese as public diplomacy agents in China's strategy for building people-to-people relations and illustrates how the Chinese Government attempts to use overseas Chinese to promote the Chinese state's soft power goals. The third section analyses the overseas Chinese community's engagement in social and economic activities, including Chinese-Timorese interactions. The chapter concludes by highlighting a series of issues that are creating cultural and racial tensions around Chinese migrants and their business interests in Timor-Leste.

4 Reciprocal visits involve government officials including military officials, representatives of political parties, and public and private enterprises. There have been frequent visits by the Chinese business community to Timor-Leste. Some have been facilitated through the Macau Forum for Economic and Trade Co-operation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries. Since 2003, the Chinese Government has dispatched three to five Chinese medical doctors to Timor-Leste on an annual basis to provide medical treatment. The Chinese Government also provides scholarships for Timorese students and short training courses for Timorese government officials in China. As of mid-2017, the total number of Timorese students and public officials, including military officials who have received short training courses, in China is estimated to be more than 1,500 people, 120 of them students.

An overview of overseas Chinese migration to Timor-Leste

China has a long history of contact with Timor-Leste. Previous research suggests that Chinese traders were sporadically visiting Timor long before the first Portuguese in the 16th century to trade in sandalwood, beeswax and honey (Berlie 2015; Durand 2016; Gunn 2016; Pinto 2014a, 2014b; Ptak 1987). Most of these Chinese merchants, like other Asian traders, stayed temporarily, and very few of them settled and established businesses in Dili. By the 18th century, many overseas Chinese arrived from Macau and started to settle in Timor. They initially settled in the Portuguese colony of Lifau, but moved to Dili in 1769 when the capital moved there from Oecussi (Berlie 2015:40). However, it was only in 1906 that the Portuguese colonial government started to facilitate the arrival of a large number of Chinese labourers into the territory. They sought male labour from Guangdong and Fujian provinces in particular, as well as Macau (Kwartanada 2001:7; Telkamp 1979:7). The decline of the Qing Empire's social and economic power led large numbers of Chinese from rural areas to leave in search of a new life (Chew and Huang 2014:306).

The early arrival of Chinese migrants was welcomed by the Portuguese colonial government to help increase local economic activities and fill gaps in local skills such as masonry, carpentry and other trades (Gunn 2010:56; Saldanha 1994 in Kwartanada 2001:4). The Portuguese authorities acknowledged the skills of the Chinese, including their economic entrepreneurship, and encouraged the immigration of Chinese families, not just male labourers (Pinto 2014b:276). The colonial government declared that Chinese migrants were not allowed to be involved in local markets. This policy restriction was designed to reserve opportunities for Timorese vendors to sell local goods and agricultural products such as rice, cassava and beans once a week. In the predominantly Catholic territory, this was usually on Sundays after mass. Conversely, apart from lack of capital to begin with, Portuguese authorities did not encourage Timorese involvement in any large-scale commerce and provided more opportunities for the Chinese and other outsiders such as Arabs and the Portuguese themselves to participate (Kwartanada 2001:4). This policy demonstrated that, unlike in many Pacific colonies, the Chinese community in Timor-Leste was granted privileges under the colonial system. In return, many Chinese businesses became firm supporters of the colonial regime (Wise 2011:147).

As political turmoil in China increased between the Nationalists and the Communists, more people left for Southeast Asian and Pacific countries, including Portuguese Timor (Chew and Huang 2014:306). By 1975, it was estimated that around 25,000⁵ overseas Chinese resided in Timor-Leste (Berlie 2015:40). Half of them were Portuguese citizens and the remainder were Taiwanese (Capizzi et al. 1976:385). Despite some being married to local women and settling in different parts of the territory, the Portuguese colonial government had discouraged them from assimilating into indigenous life. This policy was similar to the anti-integration policy pursued in the Dutch East Indies, which was continued after Indonesia gained independence (Turner 2003:340).

Just before the Indonesian invasion in November 1975, the Fretilin⁶ government—which the People's Republic of China (PRC) was the first to recognise—promised to give citizenship rights to the ethnic Chinese and allow them to officially become part of Timor-Leste society (Capizzi et al. 1976:385). Prior to Fretilin's declaration of independence, most ethnic Chinese were Taiwanese citizens, and only a few of them held Portuguese nationality. However, in January 1975, the Portuguese Government issued a diplomatic communiqué stating its recognition of Taiwan as part of the PRC (Gonçalves 2003:58). This left the nationality of the ethnic Chinese uncertain. Today, these ethnic Chinese identify themselves as Chinese-Timorese or Timorese-Chinese and Hakka speakers. The common expression for Chinese who arrived before 1975 is *Xina-Timor*. During field research in Dili, however, a respondent of Chinese background strongly defended her social identity as Timorese-Chinese, not Chinese-Timorese. She was third-generation Chinese in Timor-Leste; both her maternal and paternal grandparents came from Canton in the mid-19th century. However, not all Chinese-Timorese share her concerns about this ambiguous term.

Ethnic Chinese in Timor-Leste's homogeneity as Hakka speakers contrasts with ethnic Chinese groups in Indonesia, where Hokkien and Teochew backgrounds predominate (Hoon 2008:4). Chinese-Indonesians are classified as Indonesian citizens, but culturally are divided into *peranakan*, ethnic Chinese who no longer speak Chinese languages or dialects, and *totok*, ethnic Chinese who continue to speak Chinese. The identity of

5 Other sources reported that up to 1975 there were around 20,000 Chinese Hakka living in Portuguese Timor—see Chew and Huang (2014). Others still stated there were 13,500 (Kwartanada 2001:5).

6 Fretilin was formed in 1974—originally named the Associação Social-Democrata Timorese or Timorese Social Democratic Association (ASDT)—as an independent movement against Portugal.

ethnic Chinese in Indonesia was severely politicised, with restrictive laws imposed during almost 35 years of the Suharto regime (Koning and Susanto 2008:161; Purdey 2003:425). They were subject to suspicion, particularly by the military, of having a tendency to lean towards the Indonesian Communist Party, which had links to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). By contrast, Chinese-Timorese ethnic identity was never problematic, neither before nor after independence.

Following the 1975 Indonesian invasion, many Timorese nationalists and Chinese-Timorese were killed by the Indonesian military. Around 700 ethnic Chinese were murdered in 1975 alone (Berlie 2015:40). Over the next few years, many Chinese-Timorese left the territory due to economic hardship and political pressure from the Indonesian Government towards pro-independence groups. A year before the Indonesian invasion, a number of wealthier ethnic Chinese left the territory following the Lisbon revolution of April 1974.⁷ By April 1975, around 600 ethnic Chinese had departed Dili with support from the Taiwanese Government. This group dispersed to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and Australia. Dispersal to Australia was largely due to its proximity to Timor-Leste and reflected warnings from the Taiwanese consul Huan Yinchuan not to return to Taiwan due to the sophisticated and competitive business practices there. Most Chinese-Timorese were considered to have limited capacity to do business outside the territory and did not invest their money outside Timor. Taiwan only opened its door to the wealthiest ethnic Chinese (Nicol 2002:61).

In the 1980s, the Australian Government's Special Humanitarian Program also encouraged many Chinese-Timorese to immigrate (Chew and Huang 2014:310). According to the 2011 Census, there were 5,522 Timor-Leste-born ethnic Chinese living in Australia (Australian Government 2014). The departure of Chinese-Timorese from the territory created an economic vacuum in Timor-Leste. The Indonesian Government facilitated the arrival of around 1,000 Chinese-Indonesians with Hokkien origins during the early years of occupation (Kwartanada 2001:5). They were drawn from various urban centres, including Kupang, Surabaya and Jakarta. Along with these Chinese-Indonesians were merchants from Makassar (Sulawesi) and other military-backed Indonesian businessmen.

7 The Lisbon revolution is also known as the Carnation Revolution and was led by the Portuguese armed forces in April 1974 to overthrow the dictator regime, or *Estado Novo*/New State, under António de Oliveira Salazar. The fall of the *Estado Novo* also led to the end of Portuguese colonial power in Africa (Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau and São Tomé and Príncipe) and Timor-Leste and only then was Timor-Leste invaded by Indonesia and occupied for 24 years.

These groups formed joint ventures for large-scale business activities such as coffee and sandalwood trading (Dunn 2003:221–22). The arrival of Chinese-Indonesians in Timor-Leste not only filled an economic gap, but they also became intermediaries for the Indonesian Government, similar to the role performed by Chinese-Timorese during the colonial era (Kwartanada 2001:1). Following the 1999 referendum for independence, the Chinese-Indonesian community left with the Indonesian regime. Normalisation of Timor-Leste–Indonesia relations has allowed some to return and resettle in Timor-Leste. This includes the owners of the two largest printing shops in Dili, Sylvia and Xeros. In the post-independence period, some Chinese-Timorese have also returned, mostly from Australia as well as Macau and Hong Kong. The returnees who decided to resettle include families associated with Jape, Lita Store, Leaders and Kathleen Gonçalves. Today, some 4,000 Chinese-Timorese live in Timor-Leste.⁸

During the United Nations transitional administration from 2000 to 2002, few Chinese citizens from mainland China or other Asian countries entered Timor-Leste, apart from a small number of Chinese police officers and sojourners who stayed temporarily. In the post-independence period, following the official establishment of China–Timor-Leste relations in 2002, the number of new Chinese migrants increased, with large numbers arriving from 2004 onwards. This contemporary wave of migration follows the pattern of Chinese migration in other parts of the world since the ‘open door’ policy was launched by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s. Chinese government officials and academics refer to this wave of Chinese migrants as *xin yimin* (new migrants) (Siriphon 2015:148).

The recent migration of overseas Chinese to Timor-Leste is mainly from rural areas of the coastal province of Fujian. Fujian has been a source of overseas migrants for several centuries (Liang and Morooka 2004:145). Most Chinese who migrated to developing countries from the 1990s onwards are from Fujian (Pieke and Speelman 2013:12). Fujian migrants are known for their resilience in the face of hardship, notably being drawn to work in Fukushima, telling Chinese researchers, ‘All you need is courage. The one thing the earthquake and radiation zones have is work, and wages are higher’ (cited in Smith 2016:147). Despite an interruption during the 2006 political crisis where the Chinese embassy in Timor-Leste evacuated around 250 residents to China, along with a few Chinese-Timorese who

8 Fieldwork interview with author, 22 August 2014. Dili.

sought refuge, many elected to stay behind.⁹ Those who left went back to Timor-Leste when the security situation returned to normal. Since then, the number of newly arrived Chinese migrants has increased yearly. It is reported that around 4,000–5,000¹⁰ new Chinese migrants currently reside in Timor-Leste, and some of them are married to local women and have children. Their numbers remain relatively small compared to the 7,000 Indonesian citizens currently living and working in Timor-Leste (Aritonang 2015).

Early migration from China to Timor-Leste was mostly driven by political turmoil and economic hardships in China and the colonial government's migration policy. The recent wave of migration from Fujian to Timor-Leste also reflects both push and pull factors (Liang and Morooka 2004; Thuno 2007). These include a desire for a better chance to improve life and easy access to economic opportunities as well as social pressures and rising economic competition in China. The similar experience of other developing countries suggests that some Chinese migrants have used the opportunity as a stepping stone to settle in other developed countries after economic success in the first host country (Zhuang and Wang 2010:177–78). The reality of Timor-Leste as a young country became a pull factor, attracting overseas Chinese to chase new market opportunities, especially for China's cheap products.¹¹

Today, the Chinese community in Timor-Leste comprises Chinese-Timorese (or Timorese-Chinese), new Chinese migrants from the mainland and other ethnic Chinese from Macau, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. Despite all being considered overseas Chinese, there are complex differences amongst the groups given their very different origins, tenures and ideological and political stances (Liu 2005). For example, the Chinese-Timorese consider themselves to be local and view the new Chinese migrants and other ethnic Chinese as foreigners. They do not share their cultural backgrounds, speak different languages and have different lifestyles. Most Chinese-Timorese

9 Chinese-Timorese named Afuk, 28 September 2014. Interview with author.

10 According to a research report conducted by the Office of President in 2014, 1,000 new Chinese migrants arrived in Timor-Leste that year. The Immigration Office reported around 3,000–4,000 new Chinese migrants arriving in Timor-Leste between 2002 and 2014. Some of them left the country after their contracts with Chinese companies terminated. However, the number of new arrivals has continued to increase annually.

11 In an interview with a new Chinese migrant in Dili, the respondent said: 'Timor-Leste has [a] bright future ... the country has great opportunity for conducting business ... it has enormous potential for future market because there is not much economic competition on the ground' (New Chinese migrant, 25 September 2014. Dili. Interview with author).

have adopted some elements of local culture whilst maintaining their Chinese traditions. For the purpose of this chapter, I focus mainly on the new Chinese migrants, or *xin yimin*, and Chinese-Timorese for their historical presence and dynamic involvement in social and economic activities in Timor-Leste.

Overseas Chinese and China's public diplomacy in Timor-Leste

Public diplomacy has become an important part of Beijing's foreign policy and is considered an essential element of state soft power (Manurung and Saudek 2016:4). Over the past three decades, the Chinese Government has regarded overseas Chinese as instrumental to China's public diplomacy to promote China's image around the world (d'Hooghe 2006:26; Ding 2014:9). China's public diplomacy through its overseas community's interactions in Timor-Leste is slowly gaining traction. The Chinese Government views overseas Chinese in Timor-Leste as key advocates for public diplomacy through social and cultural activities. These efforts have been directed principally into three areas of strategic public diplomacy: cultivating a positive image of China abroad through the promotion of officially approved forms of Chinese culture, supporting its political diplomacy to isolate Taiwan and promoting China's economic interests.

To bolster its public diplomacy strategy, one approach China uses is embracing the Chinese-Timorese community. The Chinese embassy in Dili has supported the Chinese-Timorese in the form of in-kind and financial contributions to their social and cultural festivities, such as the Chinese New Year celebration and moonlight festival. The Chinese Government has also built close relations with representatives of the Chinese-Timorese and unofficially considers them to be part of its overseas community¹² at large.

12 Kathleen Gonçalves, former president of the Chinese-Timorese Association and third-generation Chinese-Timorese in Dili, confirms that China considers and classifies Chinese-Timorese as part of its overseas community, regardless of how long they have been living in and become part of Timorese society at large. Nevertheless, the Chinese-Timorese community do not share a sense of common identity and cultural values with the new Chinese migrants. Chinese-Timorese are more sensitive to local culture and many of them are well adjusted and have adopted Timorese culture as part of their culture as well. Most Chinese-Timorese consider themselves more Timorese despite their continuous practice of and close attachment to Chinese culture (Fieldwork interview with author, 8 and 22 August 2014. Dili). This continuing strong attachment and holding onto Chinese culture, despite long separations from the mainland and experiencing social and political repression from their host countries, is also very common amongst overseas Chinese elsewhere.

The Chinese Government has capitalised on the Chinese-Timorese's knowledge of the country, social, political and economic networks and language ability to promote its public diplomacy in the territory. Often, the Chinese-Timorese are asked to facilitate relations between the Chinese embassy and local Timorese, between the government of Timor-Leste and new Chinese migrants and between local communities and new Chinese migrants.

As an example of their efforts to be seen as 'honest brokers', the Chinese Government is relying on the Chinese-Timorese community to negotiate an agreement with the government of Timor-Leste to reclaim the Sional building located at the waterfront in Dili. The *Associação Comercial da Comunidade Shinesa Timor-Oan* [Chinese-Timorese Community Business Association] has been the leading negotiator in this matter with support from various Chinese-Timorese associations abroad, including the Chinese-Timorese Association of New South Wales and Victoria, Australia. The Sional building was built by the Chinese-Timorese community and rented to the Taiwanese Government for its consular office until 1975. During the Indonesian period, the building was used as the Indonesian Navy headquarters. It is now occupied by the office of the Secretary of State for Youth and Sports. However, there is an expectation that the premises will be converted into an overseas Chinese centre for social and cultural activities.¹³

China is keen to advance its prestige through cultural promotion and the construction of favourable views of the Chinese presence. Previously, the Indonesian Government had prohibited the PRC's influence in the territory, as well as terminated cultural links with Taiwan (Berlie 2015:40). This was because Chinese-Indonesian diplomatic ties were frozen for almost a quarter century until 1990. Nonetheless, the Chinese-Timorese community in the territory quietly maintained Chinese traditions and cultural practices. Beijing hopes to revitalise and foster Chinese culture in Timor-Leste with the involvement of the overseas Chinese community in establishing a Chinese cultural centre and a school to teach Mandarin Chinese. In the interest of revitalising Chinese culture, the Chinese-Timorese community is also keen to revive an old Chinese school for teaching Chinese language and culture. The Chinese-Timorese Association has been attempting to reclaim the former Chinese high school in Dili

13 President of the Chinese-Timorese Community Business Association, 22 September 2015. Dili. Interview with author.

known as *Chun Fá Hok Tong Su Pó Sá*. This school was registered under the Portuguese colonial government in 1960 and is now one of the public primary schools in Dili. During the Portuguese era, there were several Chinese schools in the territory, including a high school, all funded by the Taiwanese Government (Wise 2011:147). Formerly, the Taiwanese Government supported these schools by sending teachers, textbooks and all related learning materials as well as scholarships for Chinese-Timorese students to continue their study at the university level in Taiwan.¹⁴

In 2019, the Chinese Government announced the establishment of a Confucius Institute¹⁵ in Dili's National University of Timor-Leste to promote Chinese culture (Xinhua 2019). In 2014, China and Timor-Leste agreed to establish a sister city relationship between Dili and Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian province, which aims to facilitate the movement of people. This initiative will attract more new Chinese migrants and Chinese enterprises to Timor-Leste.

Apart from assisting the state's attempt to promote Chinese culture, the ethnic Chinese community also plays an active role in promoting Chinese identity in the Timor-Leste. This can be seen in the continued existence of some Chinese places of worship from the Portuguese era, such as the Chinese Temple (*Kuang Ti Meu*) in Dili and Chinese cemeteries in several districts. The Chinese Temple in Dili was inaugurated in 1931 and has been used as a place for prayer and other ritual observances. It also provides a structure to preserve Chinese cultural tradition.

Despite Indonesian authorities' ban on all public events associated with Chinese tradition, they did not prevent the Chinese community from visiting the Chinese Temple and cemeteries for prayer (*Sambayan*). Thus, the Chinese community has continued to practice Chinese tradition through ritual ceremonies, the celebration of Chinese New Year and the use of Chinese names.

14 President of the Chinese-Timorese Community Business Association, 23 September 2015. Dili. Interview with author.

15 Confucius Institutes teach Chinese language and promote officially approved Chinese culture while spreading China's soft power abroad. As of 2019, there were a total of 550 Confucius Institutes installed in foreign universities, in both developed and developing countries, and 1,172 in classrooms for elementary and high school students (Hays 2012; Xinhua 2019).

With the massive influx of the new Chinese migrants into Timor-Leste, the effort to promote the construction of Chinese ethnicity in the country is rising. For example, in the past, there was no 'Chinatown' in Timor-Leste. With the arrival of the Chinese new migrants, there is a concentration of their communities along the street of one of the neighbourhoods in Dili called Hudi-Laran. The locals have named it the slang term *Xina-Laran* (Chinese neighbourhood) and it is possible the neighbourhood will become Dili's 'Chinatown' in the near future. Other visible effects include the ubiquity of Chinese goods and Chinese food, as well as celebration of Chinese traditions such as Chinese New Year and the Tomb Sweeping Festival. For years, the Chinese-Timorese community has been lobbying the Timor-Leste Government to consider Chinese New Year's Day as part of the national holidays and official commemorative dates. In 2018, the Timor-Leste Government finally granted a holiday on 16 February to mark Chinese New Year's Day celebrations (Timor-Leste Government 2018). Both the Chinese-Timorese and the new Chinese migrant communities in Dili welcomed the decision. The day was observed with a number of cultural events, including dragon dance shows in several places in Dili, and a courtesy visit to the Chinese embassy compound in Dili by Chinese Ambassador Liu Hongyang and other Chinese diplomatic officials, who were warmly welcomed for about one hour (Fieldwork observation, Dili, 16 February 2018).

Political diplomacy for China's unification

The question of Taiwan's unification with mainland China has become one of the core principles of China's foreign policy over the past seven decades since Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces fled to the island and declared it the Republic of China in 1949. This leads Beijing officials to define China's key political objectives in the 21st century as reunification and rejuvenation, and overseas Chinese are considered 'potential political assets' to accomplish the tasks (Barabantseva 2010:130). In many countries, China's overseas communities establish branch chapters of the China Council for the Promotion Peaceful National Reunification to facilitate the campaign for China's unification. As of 2016, there are 86 such councils around the world. Though many of these councils claim to be independent non-government organisations, the overseas councils'

websites are expected to be linked to the Chinese Government's official agencies, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the CCP's United Front Work Department (Groot 2017).¹⁶

In Timor-Leste, however, there has not been any overseas Chinese unification council or other organisation to publicly campaign for Taiwan's unification. The Chinese Government, whilst expecting its overseas Chinese to play a significant role in China's political communication and promoting China's image abroad, is also sensitive to the legacy of Taiwan's influence amongst the Chinese-Timorese community. During the Indonesian occupation, the Taiwan link was sustained through Chinese-Timorese living overseas in places such as Australia and Macau, and this was the reason for the Chinese Government's concern. In Australia, many first-generation Chinese-Timorese have strong attachments to Taiwanese culture and tradition, and some of them have business links with Taiwan. The Taiwanese Government has funded Chinese-Timorese Association activities, such as cultural practices and Mandarin classes for Chinese-Timorese children (Wise 2011:153).

Chinese-Timorese in Timor-Leste, despite echoing the Timor-Leste Government's position in their public acknowledgement of the One China policy, do not lose sight of Taiwan. The Chinese-Timorese's position on this matter is in stark contrast to that of the new Chinese migrants, who recognise the One China policy without reservation.¹⁷ Chinese-Timorese have continued to maintain low-profile communication with Taiwan on trade and investment opportunities in Timor-Leste, despite the absence of Taiwan's official trade office in the country. Since independence, a number of Taiwanese businessmen have been paying frequent visits to

16 United Front of the People's Republic of China is a political and popular front under the CCP's leadership. It consists of the CCP itself and eight small political groups (the China Revolutionary Committee of the Kuomintang, China Democratic League, China Democratic National Construction Association, China Association for the Promotion of Democracy, Chinese Peasants' and Workers' Democratic Party, China Zhi Gong Dang, Jiusan Society and the Taiwan Democratic Self-Government League) as well as the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce. The eight small political groups are not opposition parties to the CCP.

17 In my separate interviews with the new Chinese migrants' coordinator Chenguo Qin and the current president of the Chinese-Timorese Association Lay Siu Pan, the former said: 'We are from the mainland, we have to support the central government's policy and we consider Taiwan is part of China' (Fieldwork interview with author, 4 September 2014, Dili). The latter stated: 'We see China as one ... we wanted to see China as one country in the world. We are fully supportive of the Timor-Leste Government's policy in maintaining good relations with China and we respect China's One China Policy ... but we are more familiar with Taiwan because of our historical relations' (Fieldwork interview with author, 19 September 2014, Dili).

Timor-Leste on tourist visas looking for business opportunities. Taiwan's link with the Chinese-Timorese business community operates through Taiwan's Trade Center in Jakarta, at one stage covertly inviting Timorese members of parliament to visit Taiwan.¹⁸ Taiwan uses historical ties and economic diplomacy to maintain links with the Chinese-Timorese community. Since 2007, however, due to China's active diplomacy and the Timor-Leste Government's firm commitment to the One China policy, Taiwan's attempts to influence Timor-Leste through the Taiwan Trade Center have declined.

Despite the Chinese-Timorese community's strong attachment to Taiwan, the PRC Government continues to consider the overseas Chinese community in Timor-Leste as an important asset to advocate for Taiwan's unification in the future. Through its embassy in Dili, the Chinese Government communicates with representatives of the overseas Chinese community about the importance national integrity. As Kathleen Gonçalves, former president of the Chinese-Timorese Association, recalled:

The Chinese Embassy frequently invites us to talk about China's national territory ... we discuss the border issue between Taiwan and mainland China and also Tibet. They want to make sure we are aware of the issue and understand their concerns. Every time there is tension that involves China and other countries regarding territorial issues, they always call us for a briefing and emphasise the One China policy. We support the initiative because it is good for us.¹⁹

The Chinese Government also uses local media to communicate and raise awareness about China's sovereignty. For example, in 2016, as tension in the South China Sea escalated, the Chinese embassy in Dili published Beijing's official statement about China's territorial integrity and historical claim in the South China Sea in a local newspaper for three consecutive days. Despite the absence of any formal unification group in Timor-Leste, the Chinese community's willingness to accept Chinese Government policy indicates their tacit support for Taiwan's diplomatic isolation.

18 During my interview with the former president of the Chinese-Timorese Association Kathleen Gonçalves, she said that between 2004 and 2006 the Taiwan Trade Center in Jakarta invited Timorese members of parliament to Taiwan as part of Taiwan's people-to-people relations program (Fieldwork interview with author, 8 August 2014, Dili).

19 Former president of the Chinese-Timorese Association Kathleen Gonçalves, 8 August 2014. Dili. Interview with author.

Promoting China's economic interests

Overseas Chinese have become important economic intermediaries for China's economic development (Pieke and Speelman 2013; Smart and Hsu 2004). Their engagement in economic activities has been closely linked to China's 1990s 'going out' or 'going global' strategy. The strategy encourages Chinese citizens and Chinese enterprises, including both state and non-state-owned companies, to leave China and venture overseas (Xia 2011:214). Overseas Chinese are seen as not only equipped with financial capital and technological skills, but able to access wider business networks. With the current leadership under President Xi Jinping, China expects overseas Chinese to be involved in extending its economic reach in the 21st century and promoting China's economic interests through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Wijaya 2016).

The recent influx of new Chinese migrants and Chinese enterprises to Timor-Leste is arguably part of China's strategy to expand its economic activities in there. The Chinese Government has been facilitating such migration,²⁰ with others arriving through informal networks or family links with previous arrivals and through the *Associação Comercial da Comunidade Xinesa Timor-Oan*. The exact number of overseas Chinese enterprises is difficult to determine due to the absence of official statistics. However, some Chinese enterprises, mostly state-owned, are involved in a range of construction projects, including the Chinese Nuclear Industry 22nd (CNI22), China International Construction Cooperation, Fujian International Cooperation, Guangxi International Construction Engineering, China Shandong International Economic and Technical Cooperation Group Co. Ltd and Shun International Economical and Technical Corporation Group Company. The projects are funded by the Chinese Government through grants and compete for public tenders in Timor-Leste.²¹

With regards to the BRI, Timor-Leste is now officially integrated into China's Maritime Silk Road initiative. China considers Timor-Leste its 'traditional friend' and attaches great importance to Timor-Leste's

20 According to representatives of new Chinese migrants in Dili, Chinese authorities include staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security and the Overseas Affairs Office of the State Council, who work collaboratively in facilitating the migration. Some of the new Chinese migrants have been arriving through informal networks and family links.

21 For example, the CNI22 won a more than US\$350 million public tender to build power plant in Timor-Leste (La'o Hamutuk 2013).

geographical location within the Southeast Asian region, where Beijing is considered part of the good-neighbour policy. In 2017, the Board of Governors of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank approved Timor-Leste's application to become one of the institution's regional prospective members. To date, Timor-Leste has yet to engage actively with the initiative and details about implications on the ground remain limited. However, an interesting strategy of engagement emerged long before the BRI was announced. China has been using Macau as a platform to increase its economic connectivity with Timor-Leste and other Lusophone countries since 2003. The Forum on Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and Portuguese Countries held its first meeting in 2003 and has since been dubbed the Macao Forum (Jansson and Kiala 2009).

But having discussed Chinese economic engagement in the country, it is also important to note that there are many countries competing for economic opportunities in Timor-Leste through public tenders, such as Indonesia, Portugal, Australia, France and South Korea. Indonesian state-owned companies are arguably the biggest beneficiaries of Timor-Leste's public funds, presumably because of their close connections with Timorese businessmen and political elites. There are currently more than 7,000 Indonesians in Timor-Leste. In an interview with *The Jakarta Post*, former prime minister of Timor-Leste Rui Maria de Araújo stated that there were 24 Indonesian state-owned companies and up to 400 Indonesian private companies operating in Timor-Leste (Aritonang 2015). The Indonesian ambassador to Timor-Leste Sahat Sitorus confirmed the dominant presence of Indonesian state enterprises in Timor-Leste (Simorangkir 2017).²²

Overseas Chinese, economic activities and positive implications

Most overseas Chinese in Timor-Leste are involved in small to medium enterprises. This makes the overseas Chinese community a significant player in Timor-Leste's economy. During Portuguese times, ethnic Chinese monopolised the territory's economy, controlling retail commerce

22 Indonesian state-owned enterprises include Hutama Karya, Waskita, WIKA, PT PP and Adhi Karya and are involved in road construction, houses and buildings as well as cinemas (Simorangkir 2017).

and the coffee trade. This, however, does not mean that all ethnic Chinese are affluent: one-fifth of them live in poverty. Nonetheless, out of the 25 largest firms in the Portuguese territory, only two were Portuguese: SAPT and SOTA.²³ Amongst some 400 wholesale and retail commerce businesses in the Portuguese territory, 95 per cent belonged to ethnic Chinese. The largest business during the colonial period was run by the Sang Tai Hoo family—owned by two brothers (Dunn 2003:38–39). The Sang Tai Hoo family extended their business network to other parts of Asia, mainly Hong Kong, Singapore and Macau. Today, amongst the Chinese-Timorese community, the top three business enterprises are AKAM (the owner of Leader, Lita Store and Toyota dealer), the Jape family, which owns Timor-Plaza, and the Star King.

New Chinese traders settle across the country, but mainly concentrate in Dili, the centre of economic activity. Most of these new Chinese merchants occupy strategic locations for easy access along the main roads by renting land and properties from local government and private individuals, usually for minimum periods of 10–20 years.²⁴ The absence of formal statistics on foreign business enterprises in Timor-Leste makes it difficult to provide accurate figures for new Chinese migrants' businesses. However, it is estimated that there are currently more than 4,500–5,000 new Chinese migrants living in the country and up to 300–400 business enterprises that are currently owned by new Chinese merchants. They are involved in diverse economic activities, from the trading and retailing of cheap goods to the wholesaling of construction materials, hotel businesses, gas stations, restaurants, internet cafes and brothels. Most of the goods and materials sold are directly imported from China, with some from Indonesia.

The increased presence of new overseas Chinese and their involvement in diverse economic activities have prompted conflicting views not only amongst locals and the Timor-Leste Government, but also amongst the Chinese-Timorese community. Some Timorese and the Timor-Leste

23 SAPT (Sociedade Agricola Patria e Trabalho, also known as the Sociedade) was a state-owned firm established by Portuguese governor Celestino da Silva towards the end of the 1800s. Meanwhile, SOTA (Sociedade Oriental do Transportes e Armazens) was an investment company controlled by the Japanese before the Portuguese took over after Japanese occupation during World War II. It was a successor to the pre-war Asia Investment Company. These two companies were involved largely in coffee plantations and export/import activities (Dunn 2003:38).

24 Renting costs range from US\$300 to more than US\$1,000 per month (Zhen Jiang, a new Chinese merchant, 3 September 2014. Dili. Interview with author.).

Government welcome these developments, while others are critical of the new Chinese migrants' presence in the country. On the positive side, the new Chinese migrants' presence helps address local needs and contributes to the social and economic development of Timor-Leste.²⁵ They provide employment, pay taxes, drive down the price of goods through competition and many Timorese families benefit by leasing private and state-owned lands and properties to them. New Chinese migrants are also known as risk-takers, bringing economic activity to remote villages where other merchants, including Timorese, are hesitant to venture. This not only generates income, especially in the districts, but also improves young Timorese's knowledge of and skills in business development.

Issues and concerns

Despite many positive implications, a number of concerns have arisen about social, cultural, economic and political repercussions. Arguably, certain practices of the Chinese-Timorese and the new Chinese migrants can be considered forms of neocolonialism. This can be observed through the influx of new Chinese migrants and their occupation of strategic economic sectors, as well as domination of a number of key economic activities. The experience of Timor-Leste is not unique, with Ogunrotifa Ayodeji Bayo characterising Africa's recent experience with Chinese migrants as neocolonialism through diverse interventions (Bayo 2011:228).

Many in Timor-Leste have observed that the interactions between new Chinese migrants and locals in certain practices have the perhaps unintended effect of distorting local cultural values. For example, during All Souls' Day in early November (*loron matebian*), Timorese families observe the day solemnly by visiting graves, praying, laying flowers and

25 As a former chief of staff of the president's office stated:

I think, like many countries in other part of the world, the influx of new immigrants such as newly arrival Chinese and other foreign workers could recreate and create opportunity in the part of the local economy to grow. Having rather criminalizing immigration is not a solution, or having utterly and strongly xenophobic policy is not a solution either. Timor-Leste is hoping to become a member of ASEAN and ASEAN would soon have its free mobility of its people ... more people coming in from the region. The way the Chinese people doing business in Timor-Leste ... this is one manifestation of Timor-Leste's integration into regional framework ... I think what we have to do, rather than criminalizing that, we have to make sure that our people become more competitive and be more prepared (Fidelis Magalhaes, 2 September 2014. Dili. Interview with author).

lighting candles in honour of dead ones. New Chinese merchants initiated the vending of plastic flowers and candles in front of cemeteries in Dili during the observance day. The practice is considered inappropriate as no merchants, including the Chinese-Timorese business community, have ever done so before. Traditionally, Timorese families prefer to prepare the flowers and candles carefully from home.

Tensions also arise in other ways. Some new Chinese migrants stay illegally after their visas expire. Some have married local women in remote places in order to have easy access to land and other property²⁶ as a way to circumvent the law that does not permit foreigners to own land and properties in Timor-Leste. Others operate joint venture partnerships using Timorese names for business registration to avoid paying higher taxes.²⁷

The involvement of new Chinese migrants in various economic opportunities creates tensions with Chinese-Timorese and locals alike. The Chinese-Timorese feel the new Chinese merchants and other ethnic Chinese are taking over their privileged role as a major economic player in Timor-Leste's economy. New Chinese migrants' encroachment into local markets has influenced traditional market development, which had to date been dominated by locals.²⁸ New Chinese migrants mainly prefer to remit their profits to China rather than reinvest them in Timor. This is similar to strategies used by the Chinese community during the colonial administration, when substantial remittances were channelled to Taiwan and Macau (Yong and McKenna 1990 in Cheok et al. 2013:76).

26 As a Timorese senior scholar noted with concern:

With many Chinese newcomers coming into Timor-Leste, their relationship with Timorese is also full of risk—they will influence Timorese's social and cultural domain through intermarriage like Chinese people in the past ... I see this phenomenon as natural but it is not normal. It is natural because we see interracial marriage is everywhere but it is not normal because it does not follow Timor-Leste's cultural norms and as a result, things that are supposedly natural become not natural. This will bring risk to Timor-Leste in the future. For example, they get married with Timorese and can buy lots of land and own properties in Timor-Leste—this will create a lot of problem in the future (Lucas da Costa, 2 September 2014. Dili. Interview with author).

27 Local newspaper *Independent* reported information from the Timor-Leste Business Registration Center (SERVE) that local Timorese in Dili have facilitated new Chinese traders by giving their names and properties for new Chinese traders' business registration (Dos Santos 2017). Such practices complicated the Timor-Leste Government's control over foreign businesses' tax payments.

28 In an interview with a Chinese-Timorese, the respondent stated that new Chinese migrants are greedy and very aggressive in doing business—their presence destroyed local market development and has increased prices for renting land and properties (Chinese-Timorese respondent, 8 October 2014. Dili. Interview with author).

New Chinese migrant engagement has also raised environmental and safety issues. The increased presence of new Chinese merchants has forced some Timorese families in the capital to move further inland or into the hills in search of accommodation, as residential density and real estate prices in the city rise. Reports of isolated incidents of fighting involving locals and new Chinese migrants in the capital Dili and districts are attributed to social jealousies. It may be premature to claim that there has been a rise in openly anti-Chinese sentiment in Timor-Leste, but isolated incidents have raised tensions and directed racially motivated sentiments at new Chinese migrants. Some conflicts have forced the Chinese embassy to intervene to protect their nationals. The embassy is also now more preoccupied with the wellbeing and security of its nationals than it has been in the past. As former Chinese consul Chung in Dili stated, 'The growing number of Chinese coming here is really keeping us busy, (as) very often they get into trouble with locals' (Horta 2011).

Some new Chinese migrants may have been involved in illegal activities, including human trafficking, gambling and money laundering. More Chinese-run brothels are now open in Dili with women from China and Southeast Asian countries. According to a former United Nations Police officer who worked in the Investigation Unit, new Chinese migrants have supported black market money lending since 2007, directed mainly to new Chinese migrants but also some ethnic Timorese.²⁹ On another front, a Chinese company named Fuzhou Hoo Long Ocean Fishing Co. Ltd, which was licensed by the Timorese Government to fish in Timor-Leste seas, was found to be involved in illegal fishing of protected fish species, particularly sharks. The exposure of their activities by *Sea Shepherd Asia* prompted public protests and resulted in the suspension of their fishing licence (James 2017; Lusa 2017).

These diverse concerns involve not only new Chinese migrants and enterprises, but also members of the established Chinese-Timorese community who have been accused of 'land grabbing'. There are accusations that the Jape Kong Su family evicted many Timorese families to build its modern Timor-Plaza. The eviction case prompted tensions among Timor-Plaza developers, local landowners and a local rights

29 Former United Nations Police officer Jose Brito, 13 October 2014. Dili. Interview with author.

organisation, which prosecuted the case for evicted families.³⁰ The Timor-Plaza case also generated public accusations of bribery involving a former minister of justice and the charge that Timor-Plaza was permitted to use the 5 acres of land in Comoro in return for a large private house construction in the Manufahi district. As a top player in property business amongst Chinese-Timorese, in 2013, the Jape family, or the Timor-Plaza company, also reportedly bought more than 50 acres of prime elevated land in eastern Dili at a very cheap price. The land is expected to be rented out for hotels and other businesses.³¹

Conclusion

People-to-people or public diplomacy has become a potent diplomatic tool for many countries' foreign relations. It has served as a soft power tool to advance Beijing's global rise through the engagement of overseas Chinese and provides an important asset to promote China's social, cultural, political and economic interests around the world. So far, China has benefited greatly from its overseas community's interactions in various ways. Beijing's views the role of ethnic Chinese in people-to-people relations, regardless of their nationality, either *huaqiao* or *huaren*, as a strategic tool to gain access to other countries. For example, prior to China's official establishment of diplomatic relations with Timor-Leste, one of former president Jiang Zemin's first questions to Timorese leader Xanana Gusmão upon their first meeting in Beijing in 2001 was about ethnic Chinese life in Timor-Leste (Wise 2011:150). China's presence in Timor-Leste will continue into the foreseeable future, and its overseas community will no doubt become important agents for China's long-term relationship with the country. Timor-Leste has felt the impact of this pattern of Chinese public diplomacy. The relationship has helped promote the international images of both countries, but has also had repercussions that affect the political economy of Timor-Leste and Timorese society. Overseas Chinese have taken advantage of policy

30 A local non-government organisation, Matadalan ba Rai-Haburas Foundation, noted:

In Comoro, a luxury shopping mall called Timor-Plaza has recently been built by a large construction company from Darwin called Jape Construction. Many people cite this shopping mall as the real signal that Timor-Leste is finally developing. The reality is that Timor-Plaza is a business whose objective is wealth accumulation ... the project of this private company resulted in the forced eviction of many families (Matadalan ba Rai-Haburas Foundation 2010:73).

31 Timorese worker for the Jape Company, 4 September 2014. Dili. Interview with author.

and regulatory gaps as well as limited institutional capacity to advance their political and economic interests. For many, the vaunted mutually beneficial relationship between China and Timor-Leste remains weighted heavily in favour of China and its citizens rather than Timor-Leste.

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