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Migration and development: China and its diaspora

**Transnational linkages, power relations, and the migration–development nexus:
China and its diaspora**

Transnational linkages, power relations, and the migration–development nexus:

China and its diaspora

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Abstract

While accepting that the migration–development nexus is best understood from a transnational perspective, recent studies analyse this nexus in a partial way rather than holistically. We review the literature, then attempt an enriched account of the complex and rapidly evolving relationship between diaspora and development in China – a country undergoing profound demographic, economic, and social changes. Using in-depth interviews with a variety of key informants or stakeholders and a transnationally oriented framework, we analyse features across three core policy dimensions that incorporate both international and domestic dynamics: citizenship, top talent recruitment, and soft power. Our findings contribute to the literature on Chinese-state-diaspora relations. They show that China’s approach to its diaspora policy and development, practice, and outcomes reaches with powerful new effects across national borders. The transnational–relational perspective gives an optimal paradigm for researchers and policymakers to understand changing strengths and complexities in interactions (contestation, conflict, negotiation, cooperation) between multi-scalar and multi-dimensional linkages, and to form diaspora policy and engagement programs responsive to unprecedented global political, economic, and social disruption.

Keywords: migration–development nexus, transnational linkages, strength of linkages, power relationships, Chinese diaspora, dual citizenship, talent recruitment, soft power

Introduction

Since 1990 the number of people living outside their country of birth has increased by 70 per cent to an estimated 272 million (3.5 per cent of the world’s population) in 2019. An estimated 112 million Asians live in Asia outside their country of birth (UN DESA, 2019). Migration is no longer dominated by singular movements to new settlement, but by temporary and circular movements (GCIM, 2005; Hugo, 2014), steering scholarly interest in the migration–development nexus toward a more nuanced transnational–relational perspective (Ley and Kobayashi, 2005). This shift acknowledges the changed complexion of migration, and the many interlocking cross-border linkages through which migrants operate and interact with other actors, with effects in destination and origin countries across various sectors (Portes et al., 1999; Waldinger, 2008). It also interrogates power relations, revealing unequal linkages that exclude some diaspora groups or transnational actors while embracing and disproportionately benefiting others (Mohan, 2008; Bailey, 2010; Bastia, 2018), validating this new perspective.

This new thinking about the migration-development nexus has also entailed increased engagement with the notion of diaspora. As defined by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) *diaspora* comprises ‘emigrants and their descendants, who live outside the country of their birth or ancestry, either on a temporary or permanent basis, yet still maintain affective and material ties to their countries of origin’ (Agunias and Newland, 2012: 15). This definition highlights two characteristics of diaspora: movement across borders and, most importantly for our purposes, the transnational linkages mentioned above.¹ Between them, these concerns with circular and temporary migration, translational linkages and the notion of diaspora constitute a new paradigm in thinking about the relationship between migration and development.

China, whose diaspora is among the largest, is undergoing profound demographic, economic, and social transformation (Peng, 2011; Knight et al., 2011; Zhao and Zhang 2018). This has led to dramatic changes in engagement strategies, and adjustments in power relations between various transnational actors involved in linkages that shape (perhaps even constitute) the migration–development nexus (Thunø, 2018). In 2009 the *Provisions on Defining the Identities of Overseas Chinese, Chinese of Foreign Nationalities, Returned Overseas Chinese and Relatives of Overseas Chinese* differentiated diaspora into two groups, by citizenship and duration of residency: *huaqiao* and *huaren* (Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, OCAO, 2015). *Huaren* are emigrants who take up foreign citizenship, and their descendants. *Huaqiao* are Chinese citizens granted permanent residency overseas (living in a destination country for at least 18 months within two consecutive years), or long-term temporary residency (entitled to legal residency for five years or more and living in a destination country for at least 30 months). One estimate counts 60 million people in the diaspora (NPC 2018): 6 million *huaqiao*, and the remainder *huaren*. Many temporary migrants – including students studying overseas (around 1.5 million in 2018) and labourers (979,000 in 2017) – are not officially included, though subject to China’s diaspora engagement policies. ‘New migrants’, those leaving China since the 1978 ‘opening’ (Ding, 2015), are better educated and more skilled, more likely to settle in developed countries such as the US, European countries, and Japan than in traditional South-East Asian destinations, and more linked in transnational economic, political, and cultural networks (Thunø, 2018).

Declining fertility (Zhao and Zhang, 2018), rapid ageing of the population (Peng, 2011), and skill shortages in the coastal region since 2010 (Knight et al., 2011) mark a sustained rural–urban shift (Tan, 2017), as the world’s largest manufacturer transitions ineluctably to a knowledge-based economy (Dahlman and Aubert, 2001) with heightened cultural and diplomatic sway. Concomitant with such orchestrated post-1978 changes are shifts in destinations, demographic composition,

¹ For economy of expression, we will use *linkages* or *links* to mean *transnational linkages*.

overall numbers, and therefore strategy for engaging the many diaspora populations for managerial and technological innovation and enhancement of soft power (Thunø, 2018). China is dramatically reforming its engagement policies to accommodate new power relations with the outside world (Brady, 2017). Two fundamental trends are relevant here. First, the move from tapping diaspora capital investment for economic development (1980s and 1990s) to emphasising diaspora as promoting soft power (since 2000). Second, the rise of ‘recruiting highly skilled talents’ (*zhaocai yinzi*), replacing an earlier practice of ‘attracting foreign businesses and capital investment’ (*zhaoshang yinzi*). It remains unclear, though, how various actors – political bodies, government agencies, public service organisations, diasporic groups and individuals – interact to determine the strength of transnational linkages, shape and reshape power relations, and consequently influence development outcomes, both for China and for its diaspora.

To capture changes in China’s migration–development nexus and identify causes, it is imperative to investigate the evolving strength of linkages that affect specific domains of development and to interrogate power relations in continual flux. We limn the most recent changes, and seek to characterise them from a transnational–relational perspective, reconceiving diaspora (Skeldon, 2008) by treating retained links to homelands, especially contributions sent back, as core features (Bauböck and Faist, 2010).

To achieve our research objective we first synthesise different strands of the literature into a conceptual framework for understanding the diaspora–development nexus, taking account of the strength of linkages and targeting a better appreciation of heterogeneity in migration-related development. We emphasise the *dynamic* and *relational* elements in transnational analysis, to comprehend the new complexity of this domain. We next apply our framework to examine the nexus empirically, based on our recent interviews: primarily with informants such as government officials, public institution servants, NGO leaders, and Chinese researchers active in overseas-Chinese research, and also with diaspora individuals in Singapore. We explore (1) how power relations track shifts in China’s development, internationally and domestically; (2) how changes in power relations add complexity and new dynamics to interactions among transnational actors; and (3) how these interactions form or transform various linkages, modulating their strength and their salience.

Last, having outlined the framework and the case study design and analysed our in-depth interviews to reveal changes in the diaspora–development nexus for China, we extract some theoretical and policy implications.

Overview of the literature

The migration–development nexus from a transnational perspective

Faist (2008) and de Haas (2010) note a shift from optimism associated with remittances and return migration in the 1950s and 1960s, to a pessimism about ‘brain drain’ in the 1970s and 1980s, then a return to optimism (‘brain gain’, ‘brain circulation’) over diaspora’s role in promoting transnational flows of financial, social, and political resources since the 1990s – underpinned by the neoliberal development agenda (Larner, 2007). This resurgent optimism is coeval with transnationalism’s integration into migration studies (Tan et al., 2018). In this context, Glick-Schiller et al. (1992a: ix) defined *transnationalism* as the process through which ‘migrants establish social fields that cross geographic, cultural and political borders’. From that larger perspective, diasporic groups and individuals with their wide-reaching linkages have become development agents, facilitating the flow of tangible and intangible resources to homelands – remittances, knowledge, cultural activities, and political ideas – at different scales (Poirine, 2006; Sinatti and Horst, 2015).

Scholars analysing the migration–development nexus observe that linkages come in various forms, whether economic, political, and socio-cultural (Portes et al., 1999). Boyle et al. (2013) identify specific cases of multi-dimensional linkages; some are primarily political (e.g. diaspora advocacy and diplomacy), some are mainly to do with economic development (e.g. diaspora capital markets, direct investment, remittances, and corporates), and some others appear to be socio-cultural but still closely related to economic development (e.g. diaspora knowledge networks, philanthropy, tourism, and human capital transfer). Such linkages are well documented in the literature. It is widely accepted that remittances can enhance consumption, foster income-generation opportunities, and improve access to health and education services for migrant families – as well as fuelling investment, promoting economic growth, and reducing poverty at the macro-level in origin countries (Lacroix, 2013). Analysing the US-based Liberian diaspora, Antwi-Boateng (2011) identified several mechanisms for exerting soft power to promote civic advances in the homeland, including public diplomacy (i.e., lobbying the destination country), financially supporting particular political parties, and appeals through personal social networks. Diasporic linkages also bring social change, though these impacts have received less thorough research or policy attention. Diaspora visitation for example, often as tourism, motivates source countries to protect natural and cultural heritage sites (Iorio and Corsale, 2013). Also, the successful integration of skilled migrants into destinations can encourage and support those left behind to pursue higher levels of education (Stark and Wang, 2002).

Transnational linkages can also be divided by scale. Glick-Schiller et al. (1992b) and Smith and Guarnizo (1998) differentiated linkages driven or facilitated by states or supranational institutions (‘transnationalism from above’) and those propelled by migrants themselves (‘transnationalism from below’). Faist (2000) next distinguished three types of linkages, all aligned with transnationalism

from below: transnational kinship (family ties and obligations), circuits (formed by participation in transnational activities such as trading and business networks), and communities (implementing institutionalised practices and forming collective identity with homeland). The most prominent strand of transnationalism from above is diaspora engagement strategy, which has emerged as an essential new policy field, especially in major migrant-sending countries (Boyle et al., 2013). To tap abundant resources in the diaspora, countries of origin have developed systematic strategies in two key directions. One focuses on ‘diaspora-centred development’ in countries of origin, and the other on promoting ‘diaspora diplomacy’ internationally or specifically in destination countries (Ho, 2020). Diasporic organisations and communities, once considered marginal in the migration–development process, increasingly have valuable influence on economic development and the formation of transnational identity. Mohan (2006), drawing upon empirical evidence concerning UK-based Ghanaians’ linkages to homeland, argued that diasporic organisations serve as a transnational public sphere involving ‘deterritorialised citizenship’, which constructs a ‘moral universe’ for the diaspora to fulfil ‘obligations’ toward homeland development. Linkages initiated and maintained by diaspora individuals and families represent the primary form of ‘transnationalism from below’, which is considered eminently sustainable and low-cost (Antwi-Boateng, 2012).

The migration–development nexus from a relational perspective

Recent studies agree that the intertwining of places of origin and reception can lead to a rich variety of outcomes, not always inimical to development (see Portes, 2016). Migrants are constituents in dynamic political and social relationships, and countries are the sites at which these relationships achieve traction: subject to invigorating contestation, shaping state action, and affecting development outcomes. Whatever else, the linkages need to be understood as articulations of power relationships that privilege some interests and subordinate others (Rosser, 2020). At least three streams of research attempt to conceptualise transnationalism as a reflection of power constellations: (1) *world-system* theory, focusing on global power asymmetries; (2) transnationalism distinguished as *from above* or *from below*, emphasising interactions between power elites and grassroots agents; and (3) *class theory*, which stresses heterogeneity among diaspora groups. This heterogeneity takes several forms. First, linkages and resultant development outcomes vary due to global economic and political power asymmetries (Portes, 2016). Conventional world-system theory suggests that migration and its associated capital flows redistribute resources from the periphery to the core on unequal terms, due to imbalances in the world economy. The formation and impact of linkages also vary between diaspora groups, according to distance from the geographic core (Dickinson and Bailey, 2007). Second, linkages do not exert a uniform influence on development at different scales (individual, organisational, national) or across sectors (Glick-Schiller, 2015). Glick-Schiller et al. (1992b) and Smith and Guarnizo (1998) distinguish ‘transnationalism from above’ and ‘transnationalism from

below', explicitly emphasising conflicts between powerful elites and people at the grassroots. Even at the same scale, linkages vary in their impact across sectors. A nation-state might view economic linkages as beneficial while finding political linkages suspicious and challenging (Portes, 2016). Third, diaspora communities from the same source are often not assignable to a homogeneous group, maintaining quite different types and degrees of connection with homeland and shaping development differently (Pasura, 2008). Communities in a diaspora may be united by a sense of homeland; but often they will be divided along class, ethnic, racial, religious, and gender lines (Cohen, 2017) and socio-political backgrounds (e.g. moving for different reasons and at different historical periods) (Guarnizo, 2017).

These heterogeneities raise two essential questions. One relates to the transnational *actors*. Who defines development in relation to migration, and whose interest is paramount in the migration–development nexus (Bastia, 2018)? The other question relates to *strength*. Is variation in the strength of linkages an appropriate indicator of heterogeneous migration-related development outcomes, and what factors determine such changes in strength, and how are these to be assessed? Actors involved in a transnational space are not necessarily congruent in development interests and pursuits (Faist, 2008). One might reasonably have assumed that in most circumstances linkages embody the interests of dominant political, economic, and socio-cultural forces within wider power relationships, while the interests of subordinate forces – in less developed countries and regions, and among vulnerable members in diaspora (female, poor, uneducated) – are less well served. Ho and Boyle (2015) observed in Singapore that diaspora engagement tends to prioritise the economic development agenda of government over anything that is important to diaspora groups, including socio-political issues such as dual citizenship and public services. Lampert (2012) found that the influence of London-based Nigerian organisations on the homeland often reinforces rather than transforms established gender relations and socio-economic inequalities. Nevertheless, Boyle and Kitchin (2015) censured the unidirectional interpretation of transnational linkages or diaspora strategy as premature and unnecessarily pessimistic. Indeed, power relationships involved in transnationalism are better to be considered dynamic. For example, Mahler (1998) identified a fundamental problem for the 'above and below' typology: the field lacked a clear definition of 'elites' and of 'grassroots'. She argued that the two transnationalisms are not distinguished by static groupings of actors (elite or grassroots); we should attend, rather, to how linkages shape existing power relations. Linkages at various scales are not sealed against each other, and their interactions extend beyond conflict and competition to negotiation and cooperation. Transnational linkages do not always consolidate existing socio-economic and spatial inequalities but sometimes combine the interests of domestic elites and those in diaspora (Boyle et al. 2013). Forces conflict, collaborate, and evolve; and so it is with the strength of linkages.

A conceptual framework for research on migration and development from a transnational-relational perspective

Built upon the literature, our own framework highlights the strength of linkages in the nexus, and embraces the dynamics of strength and power relations manifested by the actors' interactions. The approach is schematised in Figure 1. The framework shows how international migration influences a range of development outcomes through multi-dimensional and multi-scalar linkages, mediated by power relationships and complex contextual and individual factors. Development outcomes and influencing factors are shown respectively by panels on the left and right, and at the bottom of Figure 1.

[Figure 1 here. Caption: '**Figure 1.** The transnational framework for our China case study']

Types of transnational linkages

Inspired by Portes et al. (1999) and Smith and Guarnizo (1998), we propose that linkages be divided into three broad categories according to their scale of operation, each scale relating to the set of transnational actors involved. The scales host linkages within and between diverse economic, socio-cultural, and political sectors. As shown in three overlapping circles in Figure 1, *micro-scale linkages* involve individuals and households, based on kinship, friendship, and other personal ties. *Meso-scale linkages* are the province of diaspora organisations and communities such as international corporations, migration firms, hometown associations, alumni networks, religious groups, professional bodies, and political organisations. *Macro-scale linkages* are led or facilitated by states and sub-national governments in origin countries.

Power relations and the strength of linkages, considered as dynamic

Bearing the dynamic feature of power relations in mind, we capture the interaction between transnational actors at various scales in Figure 1 with the three overlapping circles. During interaction the standing of actors in power relations can shift, along with the strength of linkages they forge. Analogous to and often associated with spatial mobility, social mobility involves changes of relative standing in power relations, for organisations and diaspora groups (Guarnizo, 2017; Van Hear, 2018). Ultimately what matters in determining their strength is neither the frequency nor the scale of activity (Itzigsohn et al., 1999; Low, 2015) but the extent to which they embody *changing* relations of power (Rosser, 2020). There may indeed be correlations, but we do well to keep the variables conceptually distinct. Our framework, while appearing to rank scales, does not entail that macro-level linkages automatically have greater strength than those at the meso or micro level. We draw out these *relational* underpinnings of the strength of linkages in Figure 1 by emphasising power relationships as a root cause, directly influencing linkages and indirectly mediating most of the factors driving their formation. So refined, this framework reflects how impacts on development are shaped by power

relationships, shown in the figure by shaded dashed-line arrows marking linkages to origin and destination countries.

Our approach elevates the role of power relationships in configuring linkages in two ways. First, it directs attention to specific actors that create linkages, their control of resources, agenda- and decision-making capacities, the way linkages embody material and other interests, and the level and forms of leverage that actors have over policy making and implementation, domestically and internationally. Second, it targets interaction (contestation, conflict, negotiation, cooperation) between sets of actors, interests, and agendas as shapers of transnational networks through influence on their governance. The relevant governance mechanisms include internal administration of networks, their relationships with other networks, and policy settings and implementation practices in national and international sites in which the networks operate.

We depict the critical influence of power relationships on the nature and evolution of linkages at the base of Figure 1, to reflect their foundational position. We see power relationships as affecting linkages both directly (through for example the direct involvement of particular diaspora groups in creating, funding, and managing linkages) and indirectly (via their influence on levels of political stability, economic development, and diaspora policies).

Primary data and method for understanding the Chinese-state-diaspora relations

To understand interactions between actors that determine the strength of linkages and the restructuring of power relationships, we conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with actors at various scales involved in China's migration–development nexus. In December 2018 and January 2019, we interviewed various macro- and meso-scale actors across 10 Chinese cities in Beijing, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Jiangsu, each being a major source of emigrants. In June 2019, we interviewed micro-scale actors: Chinese migrants in Singapore. Altogether, five groups of respondents were interviewed: (1) Chinese government officials (national, provincial, and municipal) in population and migration administration; (2) informants from the leading public institutions in China, especially the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (ACFROC); (3) leaders from NGOs doing diaspora or Chinese returnee work; (4) Chinese researchers actively working on diaspora issues: in demography, economics, public policy, international relations, and history, from Chinese prestigious universities and research institutes; and (5) three categories of Singapore-based Chinese migrants: Singaporean citizens, permanent visa holders, and temporary migrants (Table 1).

[Table 1 here]

Standard random sampling techniques would have been prohibitively time-consuming and expensive. Because of the sensitivity of our research topic and geo-political tensions with the US and Australia, it is especially difficult to get permission to conduct interviews in China. Based on our close collaborations with Chinese researchers – and their networks involving high-tier policy-making

agencies – we managed to employ purposive sampling to identify informants, initially approaching national, provincial, and municipal government agencies, NGOs, and leading research institutions. With the assistance of local collaborators in China, introductory telephone calls and email approaches were made to national agencies to explain the study and seek out interested persons. We also organised a number of workshops on migration, diaspora, and development in conjunction with Chinese research institutes, attracting many informants. With snowballing we engaged still more respondents, for a total of 42. We employed the snowball approach to recruit 25 Chinese migrants in Singapore, whose diverse age, gender, educational attainment, and occupation assure the representativeness of the sample. Semi-structured questionnaires were used to collect information on all respondents' perceptions of and participation in linkages.

The interview transcripts were translated from Chinese into English and then imported into NVivo 12 for qualitative analysis. Data on the two respondent samples from China and Singapore were analysed separately using a thematic *framework analysis* approach (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002). We extracted repeated themes, assigned suitable headings to each, coded and indexed the textual material according to theme, and regrouped the texts accordingly: in table format, for further interpretation (Smith and Firth, 2011). Then the themes from China were compared with those from Singapore to find overlapping themes, which we considered a suitable arena for discussing the interactions. Eight repeated themes emerged from respondents in China: top talent recruitment, socio-cultural linkage especially soft power, institutional reform, citizenship, immigration to China, overseas Chinese organisations, the Belt and Road Initiative, and reintegration of Chinese returnees. Four major themes were identified from respondents in Singapore: citizenship, socio-cultural linkage, talent recruitment, and familial linkage. Three renamed overlapping themes – *citizenship* (representing political linkage), *top talent recruitment* (representing socio-economic linkage), and *soft power* (representing cultural-political linkage) – are selected for our discussions.

Findings and discussion

Dynamic interactions of macro-, meso-, and micro-level actors: forming and re-forming linkages

Citizenship

Soon after the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, dual citizenship was offered to everyone who could claim Chinese origins; but implementation stalled after the *Sino-Indonesian Dual Nationality Treaty* (1955), intended to halt China's diplomatic isolation in South-East Asia which then hosted three quarters of all overseas Chinese. In 1980 China's new *Nationality Law* closed entirely the option of dual nationality. Since 1999, proposals on granting dual citizenship or quasi-dual citizenship have constantly been submitted to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) (Wang et al., 2006).

Our interviews reveal that the resurrection of dual citizenship discourse is driven by diaspora actors at micro and meso scale: individuals and organisations. ‘Overseas Chinese in academia, and overseas Chinese communities generally, have a strong voice on dual citizenship’ [Government official 3, Zhejiang, male, 40s]. With ‘new migrants’ the demands are more strident: ‘They want to purchase housing in China, and travel there conveniently. [They] demand dual citizenship’ [Researcher 3, Guangdong, male, 50s]. This reflects an attempt by individuals, some with increased negotiation power, to influence linkages controlled at meso or macro levels. However, the Chinese government has no immediate intention to offer such rights. Dual citizenship would come at a cost to the Chinese polity, including loss of assets and compromised control of citizenship and *hukou* (China’s differential household registration system, implemented since 1958). Our respondents noted this cost, along with risk of foreign interference, conflicts between migrant and non-migrant interests, and political sensitivity in South-East Asia (Thunø, 2001; Levitt and Nyberg-Sørensen, 2004). One respondent argued: ‘Dual citizenship is beneficial for development, because it can indeed attract overseas talent’ [Government official 1, Beijing, male, 40s]. But another remarked: ‘Non-dual citizenship policy is not perfect, but still satisfactory ... If China allows dual citizenship, there would certainly be massive loss of assets’ [Researcher 4, Zhejiang, male, 50s]. Transnational actors at macro level (government) and at micro and meso level (diaspora individuals and organisations) are not congruent in their interests regarding citizenship.

Negotiations have not yet issued in policy reform, but in heated discussion on possible substitutes for dual citizenship. Respondents proposed three broad options: (1) full dual citizenship with selected countries; (2) long-residence visas or green cards for all in the diaspora; and (3) such cards or visas for the highly talented. Researcher respondents raised the question of institutional reform, for certain diaspora groups (especially highly skilled) and in the major provinces or municipalities of origin (such as Fujian, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Shanghai) [Researcher 5, Shanghai, female, 50s]. Some suggested that excluding sensitive countries, mainly in South-East Asia, might render dual citizenship more politically palatable: a partial strategy, to cover major new diaspora groups (North American, European, Australian). One respondent elaborated: ‘Perhaps China can learn from India. Even if China cannot implement dual nationality, can there be any substitute for it at the national level? China now has the convenience of providing visas for people who often enter and exit. Now there are five-year multiple-entry visas. ... They can apply for green cards with unlimited stay if they are eligible, especially if people pay taxes up to a certain amount. These will be convenient for diaspora to find employment and claim social security if they return to China’ [Government official 4, Beijing, female, 40s]. Such options may enable further negotiation between actors across all scales, toward potential reform in China’s citizenship and residency policies.

Among the 25 migrants interviewed in Singapore, 17 had converted to Singaporean citizenship along with all of their family members, 3 had not converted (nor have family members), and 3 had adopted a strategy of ‘one family two citizenships’. Three major reasons were given for retaining Chinese citizenship: ineligibility for Singaporean citizenship; a strong sense of belonging to China; and close familial connections in China, especially with parents. Members of some families deliberately chose *diverse* citizenships. One explained: ‘I discussed it with my husband ... [possessing different citizenship] gives the family more options in the future. Who knows what could happen in the future? ... Until now I feel it is a right decision because we can have a property in China. I can retire with some benefits in China because I am a Chinese’ [Migrant 2, female, 50s, Singapore]. Over 40 per cent of respondents who converted to Singaporean citizenship had hesitated, not really wanting to lose Chinese nationality. One commented: ‘I struggled for a long time about changing the nationality ... There are deep feelings [of belonging to] China. But Singaporean citizenship will give my family many benefits in housing purchase, children’s education, tax reduction, and even medical services and expenses’ [Migrant 3, male, 50s, Singapore]. Narratives indicated that most respondents would be very keen to choose dual citizenship if it were allowed.

The narratives from both China (origin) and Singapore (destination) reveal that the proposal for dual citizenship is predominantly initiated ‘from the bottom’. This is in line with Boyle and Kitchin (2015), who note that the citizenship issue has not received sufficient attention ‘from above’, in diaspora strategy. Although citizenship mediates the extent to which diaspora could engage in and contribute to the development in homeland, it is considered more connected to interests within diaspora than to a nation’s development agenda. The case of China accords with the observation by Ho and Boyle (2015) with regard to Singapore, which as a source country tends to prioritise its national development agenda over diasporic socio-political pursuits.

Recruitment of top talents

The narratives of talent engagement in China largely focused on ‘top talent’ programs and their challenges, notably the Thousand Talents Plan (TTP) established in 2008, aimed at recruiting leading international scientists and research professionals, technological innovators, and entrepreneurs. ‘About 90 per cent of TTP recipients are reported to be overseas Chinese’ [Government official 3, Zhejiang, male, 40s]. However, ‘attracting top talents becomes quite sensitive now’ [Government official 5, Beijing, female, 50s]. Respondents attributed this sensitivity to China’s relations with western countries, particularly the intensifying trade war with the US. ‘Talents holding US nationality could not come back to China, due to the tense Sino-American relationship. In fact, the majority of talents who have returned to China or intended to serve China under arrangements are from the US’ [Government official 5, Beijing, female, 50s]. But an NGO leader ascribed the sensitivity to IP breaches: ‘The US has to protect intellectual property. It cannot accuse the Thousand Talents if they

did not breach the intellectual property rights ... If China respects IP rights, it will attract more people back' [NGO leader 2, Shanghai, male, 50s].

Four respondents in Singapore acknowledged the issues of top-talent recruitment policy and programs in China, but none planned to participate. Three were university researchers. They expressed the same concern over these initiatives. One commented: 'Actually the Chinese government did a lot in terms of talent training during the late 1980s, but unfortunately, after that, the government didn't make sufficient efforts to get these people back ... It actually is a waste ... However, now the policy is very clear. If you are an employer in [university name], you can only work here ... [Regarding] the collaboration between China and those [leading researchers or high-tech professionals] in the US, there are many things going on. Maybe some of the Chinese researchers [based in the US] don't do things properly. Some of them have two jobs, one in the US, the other in China. Of course, that's not appropriate' [Migrant 4, 60s, male, Singapore]. Another commented: 'I was a guest professor in some universities in China, but I did not apply for any talent program such as the TTP and have no intention to' [Migrant 5, 50s, male, Singapore]. Nevertheless, these respondents explicitly expressed their willingness to collaborate with Chinese researchers. 'Of course, we do have a collaboration with China, but not just China. We can collaborate with the US, with Japan, with China. That's basically for pure academic collaboration. We don't have any feeling that we must collaborate with China ... Of course, you may feel that it is easy to collaborate with the Chinese people' [Migrant 4, 60s, male, Singapore]. One respondent kept saying: 'I will not be in China, but I still can make contribution to homeland through academic exchanges and PhD students training. Actually, most of my PhD students are from China and they return to work in China after graduation' [Migrant 5, 50s, male, Singapore].

For two decades following China's grand 'opening up' in 1978, linkages between the country and its diaspora population were dominated by remittances and foreign capital investment (Liu and Van Dongen, 2016). When it joined the WTO in 2000, China's economic development entered a transnational period. Traditional industries, dominated by labour-, resource-, or capital-intensive manufacturing sectors, have struck natural- and human-resource limitations (land, water, energy; emerging workforce shortages). According to *Made in China 2025*, a strategic plan issued by the State Council of China in 2015, building an advanced manufacturing industry opens a pathway for China to sustain its economic growth, safeguard national security, and increase global political and economic influence. China's manufacturing sector is undergoing crucial transitions, shifting from the low to the high end of the industrial chain. Tapping entrepreneurial, scientific, and professional skills in the diaspora has solidified as a strategic aim. All levels of government have sought to attract such talent (Liu and Van Dongen, 2016) – prioritising the knowledge network over capital flow, as have other economically advanced economies such as the US and Singapore (see Ho and Boyle 2015). But

this cooperative interaction between Chinese governments and highly talented diaspora individuals runs counter to the interest of some destination countries, as they strive to achieve or maintain vanguard positions in the fourth industrial revolution. Attracting talent is no longer a 'bring in' strategy confined to domestic development imperatives, but an essential component in and a trigger for competition and attempts at repositioning, by global powers in an era of high technology. China's talent programs showcase a range of interactions between various actors. Attracting talent is not decided exclusively by Chinese domestic development, or the interaction of the government at the macro level and highly talented diaspora individuals at the micro level; it is also conditioned by interactions between China and other global powers.

Soft power

Soft power is a term widely used in characterising assets that a country deploys to attract individuals and win foreign publics through appeal to shared values (Nye, 2004). China has increasingly sought to supplement its traditional use of hard power with soft power intended to 'gradually change China's image in the international society from negative to neutral to positive' (Wang, 2008: 269). Since the late 1980s soft power has been stressed through the export of Chinese culture and social values (Ding, 2015), escalating since President Xi's accession in 2013. China now invokes a 'national imaginary': of those in the diaspora deployed as 'public diplomats' or lobbyists in Chinese foreign affairs (Thunø, 2018) and good 'story tellers' who adapt China's stories to the local context in destination countries (Ding, 2015).

Two variants emerge in the 'telling stories' theme: individuals telling 'small stories', and media propagating 'localised stories'. On small stories, one respondent commented that 'foreigners do not care about the big story such as China's national rejuvenation; rather they are interested in small stories relevant to their own life' [ACFROC leader 2, Beijing, female, 40s]. Some examples were given to explain how to tell these. 'They [in the diaspora] can undertake a series of activities to familiarise foreigners with Chinese culture. For instance, [restaurant people] can teach foreign folk how to cook Chinese dishes, or offer discounts to those who are familiar with some aspects of Chinese culture or speak a little Chinese' [ACFROC leader 3, Zhejiang, male, 50s]. The narratives focused more on media than on individual story telling. Theoretically, these media can simultaneously tell China's stories to foreigners and maintain or strengthen diaspora solidarity. But we uncovered a consensus that China is not successful in its foreign communication efforts, including engaging diasporic media. A researcher respondent put it straightforwardly: 'The government needs to admit that its foreign communication work is a failure' [Researcher 8, Beijing, female, 40s]. Some NGO leaders agreed: 'It is hard to find harmonious co-existence of diasporic media and local mainstream media in destination countries, especially western countries, because they think and talk in different ways' [NGO leader 3, Jiangsu, male, 50s]. China's accelerating global media initiative is a key aspect

of its exercise of soft power (Sun, 2010). China appears to have engaged diasporic media proactively in constructing soft power at the very beginning, which turned out to be ineffective in the opinion of stakeholders. Their view differs from that of Hamilton and Ohlberg (2020), who claimed that the Communist Party of China (CPC) has succeeded in controlling Chinese-language media overseas and suppressing many voices critical of China's stance on human rights. The term 'failure' used by the respondents refers to a limited understanding of how to apply the concept of soft power to media operations.

From the perspective of diaspora individuals in Singapore however, political, social, and cultural connections with China are weak. While some respondents (or their family members) had participated in socio-cultural activities such as festival galas organised by the Chinese Embassy, cultural workshops organised by the Confucius Institute, and root-seeking tours financed by diaspora organisations (e.g. Hua Yuan Association), they considered these as occasional events of little consequence. According to a leader of a diasporic organisation who once participated in the World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention and other forums organised by OCAO (*qiaoban*) and ACFROC (*qiaolian*), 'the communication channel between Chinese governments and overseas diaspora organisations is unblocked ... *qiaoban*, *qiaolian*, and *zhengxie* [CPPCC] invite us to attend conferences regularly. But the role of these organisations in building linkages between diaspora and homeland is still limited. [Chinese governments] should do more to provide guidance and collaborative opportunities [to the diaspora organisations]' [Migrant 6, 40s, male, Singapore]. A quarter of the respondents in Singapore felt marginalised as ordinary migrants, 'not the target that Chinese governments intend to connect with'.

Chinese governments consider all in the diaspora (not just elites or the highly skilled) a bridge or channel for disseminating Chinese culture through personal networks. Soft power as a mode or goal of linkages is expected to accommodate interaction, especially cooperation, between Chinese leadership at the macro-scale and a wide range of diaspora groups at the micro-scale including those without political and socio-economic advantage. Moreover, diasporic media, as meso-level actors, are expected to be actively involved in soft power, simultaneously conveying the leadership's message to those in diaspora to consolidate their homeland orientation and reflecting the interests of diaspora groups (mainly of the elites). In this regard, soft power provides a transnational space where actors at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels interact, despite domination by macro-level actors. However, voices from below (the narratives of diasporic individuals) reflect the fact that transnationalism from above (such as diaspora strategy to promote soft power, in this case) is not always effective. Ho and Boyle (2015) once indicated that social exclusion of diaspora individuals, and socio-economic inequalities consolidated by diaspora, undermine the expected benefits from Singapore's diaspora strategy. Similarly, non-elite Chinese diaspora in our case study show

reluctance to participate in soft power initiatives due to social exclusion. China's case adds new knowledge that the anticipated effects of diaspora strategy can be compromised by ineffective or inefficient institutional practices.

Dynamic strength of linkages

As suggested by our framework, the strength of transnational linkages is dynamic, evolving along with changed power relationships and interactions of actors. Our narrative analysis identifies two components: *relative strength*, as variation in strength among different linkages, and *absolute strength*, as the effectiveness of a particular linkage in producing development outcomes.

Concerning relative strength, our narratives exhibit two prominent variations among linkages. First, new forms of economic link that feature innovation in science and technology, and socio-political connections that advance soft power, have taken over the prominence of conventional links based on remittances and financial investment. Put plainly, the strength of linkages that engage top talents and enhance soft power is higher than that of conventional economic linkages. This finding is consistent with the diaspora strategy of other advanced economies (Ho and Boyle 2015). Moreover, despite familial linkages embodying the massive interests and demands of those in diaspora (in Singapore, for example) in frequency and scope, they receive less research and policy attention from China. Respondents from government agencies, public organisations, and Chinese research institutes seldom mentioned such linkages, let alone discussing their role in development. Our narratives underscore this transformation: 'In the past, China's state of economic development focused on attracting foreign capital investment and advanced technology. This trend has taken a complete turn toward export of Chinese soft power in recent years. Presently, China is actively reaching out to the international community to facilitate the exchange of technology, wisdom, and experience, establish a community with a shared future for all mankind, promote integration of overseas Chinese into the destination societies, and motivate them to tell good Chinese stories' [Researcher 6, Beijing, female, 50s].

Second, our narratives align with the existing theory that linkages embodying the development interest of powerful elites (Chinese leadership in this case), such as those related to top talent and soft power, show higher strength than those strongly demanded by the subordinating powers (those in Chinese diaspora), such as citizenship. Despite intense concern with citizenship in our interviews, China has no immediate intention to offer its diaspora such rights. Respondents commented that 'academic research [concerning dual citizenship] is not allowed' [Government official 2, Zhejiang, male, 40s]. Further, all proposals on granting dual citizenship or quasi-dual citizenship have declined since 1999; but substantial resources have gone to top talent and soft power. Different levels of government have striven to establish Science and High-tech Parks (SHPs) and provide financial support to science, technology, and innovation for luring top talents back, according to respondents

from SHPs in Beijing, Nanjing, and Suzhou. Some offered specific examples on improving diasporic media's story telling: 'At the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening [in 2019], the Chinese government attached great importance in bilingual media [in destination countries] to tell China's stories in the language of the local residents. These media should recruit local staff to adapt China's stories to the local context that the foreigners can understand' [ACFROC leader 2, Beijing, female, 40s].

Concerning absolute strength, our narratives show that the effectiveness of these linkages is influenced by interactions among the actors – global powers, Chinese leadership, organisations, and differentiated diaspora groups. Although linkages associated with talent recruitment and soft power have gained prominence, they may not yield effective development outcomes. China's rising economic standing, along with its pursuit of advances in science and technology and growing soft-power presence in global governance contexts, increases international tensions, especially with the US. One respondent commented that 'the US and China are simultaneously experiencing industry restructuring and upgrade. China is the US's competitor. This is a new form of wrestling, leading to multi-polarisation' [Government official 7, Jiangsu, male, 60s]. These power relations in turn affect the strength of linkages between China and its diaspora. Respondents noted that under the strain of China-US relations talent programs need a lower profile. 'We will keep attracting talents for sure, but do not call it Thousand Talents Plan' [Government official 1, Guangdong, male, 40s]. Some respondents (including in Singapore) also realised that participation by diaspora individuals in talent programs is increasingly inhibited. 'Talents holding US nationality could not come back to China, due to the tense Sino-American relationship. In fact, the majority of talents who have returned to China or intended to serve China under arrangements are from the US' [Government official 5, Beijing, female, 50s].

Similarly, soft power initiatives are challenged by global power relations. Respondents gave examples that were also reported by researchers and news agencies, including episodes in foreign affairs, ranging from the 2008 Olympic torch relay when many in the Chinese diaspora reacted strongly against western media coverage of the Tibet riots (Li, 2011) to Hong Kong student protests against the extradition bill (very evident in news reports, at the time): mainland students in the diaspora confronted Hong Kong students, mobilised and facilitated by China's social media, notably WeChat and Weibo. However, in Australia this skirmish in the domain of public and civil diplomacy spiralled into a real diplomatic issue when the Chinese Consulate-General in Brisbane publicly praised the actions of the mainland Chinese students in Australia. In response, Australia's Foreign Minister warned diplomats to respect rights of free speech and protest in Australia. This escalated to heated discussion of foreign interference from China on Australian university campuses (*The Diplomat*, 2019). In this regard, the absolute strength of China's major transnational linkages is

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constrained by pressure from global powers and restricted participation by Chinese diaspora individuals.

Restructuring power relations in China

In the face of interactions discussed above, China continues to experience a restructuring of power relations. They include institutional reform to optimise macro- and meso-level organisational roles in linkages – promoting, according to our narratives, ‘New Social Class’ (NSC) and social mobility in the diaspora.

Institutional reform

In March 2018 the Central Committee of the CPC issued a decision on ‘Deepening Reform of Party and State Institutions’: ‘*Qiaoban* [OCAO] was absorbed by *tongzhan bu* [the United Front Work Department, UFWD], and the work of connecting overseas Chinese organisations was allocated to *qiaolian* [ACFROC]’ [ACFROC leader 1, Beijing, female, 50s]. Respondents highlighted ACFROC’s aptness for engagement across national boundaries because it is not a government agency. This restructuring reflects the CPC’s low-profile attempt to reinforce its diaspora engagement, by empowering NGOs and so reducing the international community’s concern over China’s influence on destination countries. However, ACFROC is normally considered an embodiment of government or the CPC rather than genuinely independent (Liu and Van Dongen, 2016), so its empowerment can be viewed as CPC’s push to enhance diaspora engagement rather than civil amity. Some respondents’ optimism about ACFROC should therefore be treated with caution; the matter requires further study.

Previous studies suggest that the increasing influence of diaspora can reshape diaspora institutions at origin countries. For example, Cano and Delano (2007) reported that the growing salience of linkages between the Mexican government and Mexican diasporas led to such initiatives as the Institute of Mexicans Abroad (Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior), and diaspora engagement schemes such as Your Home in Mexico (Tu Vivienda en México). China’s institutional reform is expected to bestow on organisations greater power and resources, enhance their ability to bridge top-down and bottom-up transnationalism, and help optimise development outcomes at various scales. This brings to centre-stage linkages forged and maintained by diaspora-related organisations. Such meso-level linkages are essential in mediating interactions among multi-tiered development linkages. One respondent provides a case in point. ACFROC had liaison with a diaspora individual who maintains a connection with US local government officials. Through this person’s mediation ACFROC invited some US officials to Beijing, and succeeded in initiating cultural-exchange programs. When these Americans expressed interest in building economic and socio-cultural cooperation with schools and the electronic industry sector in Beijing, ACFROC introduced

Chinese government agencies to establish formal cooperation in educational exchanges and industrial investment. The example shows how grassroots linkages can cross to higher levels. Overlapping linkages at micro, meso, and macro levels combined to convert small-scale activities to large-scale official events and economic investment and educational programs.

Emergence of the New Social Class (NSC)

In 2006 the CPC Central Committee released *Opinions to Consolidate and Strengthen the United Front in the New Century and New Stage*, emphasising for the first time the emergence of a new class. The NSC controls 10 trillion *yuan* of capital (1 *yuan* \approx USD 0.15, August 2021), and accounts for more than a half of technology patents and a third of China's total tax revenue (CPG, 2006). CPC persistently urges government at all levels to explore ways of extending the United Front Work to the NSC. Informants from agencies managing Chinese migrant returnees and SHPs indicated that migrant returnees constitute an important part of the NSC. According to one respondent [Organisational leader 5, Jiangsu, female, 40s], 'the associations for the NSC members have been established at different levels ... Many activities are designed to engage those highly talented freelance workers and entrepreneurs, many of which are overseas returnees.' A returnee who started up a biomedical company in a Jiangsu SHP said: '[the associations of NSC] always invite me to participate in their activities' [Returnee 1, Nanjing, Male, 30s].

The NSC comprises four main groups: managers in private and foreign-invested enterprises; highly skilled practitioners in social organisations; freelancers; and new media entrepreneurs (*China News*, 2015). Few are migrant returnees, but our Jiangsu respondents were more likely to join NSC groups than their counterparts who have never lived overseas: perhaps because values, life and work styles, knowledge, skills, and experience acquired overseas leave returnees less adapted to the competitive Chinese labour market. Those SHPs designated to draw highly skilled migrants back are incubators for skilled high-tech entrepreneurs, forming a pool of NSC members. Since 2008, as a result of unprecedented financial crisis, economic slow-down, and massive industrial restructuring in developed countries, China has increasingly witnessed the return of international students and skilled migrants (Beechler and Woodward, 2009). Return migration is among the social forces that drive the restructuring of social classes in China.

Social mobility of Chinese diaspora individuals and groups

Interaction among macro- and micro-level actors mainly serves the development interests of Chinese elites, reaffirming their privilege, but they also partially *reconfigure* power relations, for many diaspora individuals. Our interviews show leaders of diaspora organisations building relationships with government agencies and officials through engagement activities, by receiving government delegates in destination countries, organising government-initiated events, and attending Chinese

government and CPC conferences. These people may translate their rising political status into social and economic prestige, in China and in destinations. One respondent [ACFROC at Qingtian county of Zhejiang, male, 50s] stated that ‘diaspora people who initially ran small businesses have privileges of acquiring information on urban development and then seek permission from governmental departments to carry out real estate and hydro-power development projects. Moreover, they were elected to ACFROC leadership roles.’ Clearly, dynamic interactions between multi-scalar linkages do not dilute the power of existing elites but promote the standing of some diaspora elites. It is partly in line with Boyle et al.’s (2013) argument that transnational linkages do more than simply consolidate existing inequality. Mahler (1998) observed the rising social status of returning migrants in the original communities due to economic and social remittances. Our China case study adds that the increased social status can be translated to further economic and political interests.

Conclusion

We have sought to present an incremental advance in conceptualisation of the migration–development nexus, well informed by existing theories and literature, to enhance understanding of the varying strength of multi-scalar and multidimensional linkages shaped by vigorous interactions between actors in complex power relations. That variability in strength accounts well for heterogeneous migration-related development outcomes. We have argued for a more nuanced appreciation of linkages and their developmental effects, by distinguishing three key sectors (economic, political, and socio-cultural) and identifying three discrete but intimately connected levels at which these processes operate: at macro, meso, and micro scale.

Using this framework and recent in-depth interviews in China and Singapore and literature synthesis, we have presented a comprehensive examination of current change in China’s specific linkages and development from a transnational–relational perspective. Three key findings confirm the utility of this approach. First, China’s diaspora policy is shaped by the interactions between domestic and transnational factors: declining fertility, a rapidly ageing population, and wholesale economic restructuring; changing global and regional power structure due to economic, technological, and talent-recruiting and -retaining competition, geopolitical tensions between China and its major trading partners, and uncertain international relations in the new technological era.

Second, to optimise the role of diaspora in development and engage it effectively, China works with multi-dimensional and multi-scalar linkages, especially when attracting highly skilled talents, engaging diaspora in public diplomacy, implementing institutional reform, discussing citizenship and residency issues, and attending to emerging issues of the New Social Class and social mobility in diaspora. While China’s diaspora–development nexus is dominated by transnationalism from above (macro-scale linkages initiated by government), the role of transnationalism from below – meso-scale linkages initiated by diaspora-related organisations and micro-scale linkages by diaspora individuals

– is increasingly prominent, but people have no control over citizenship reform. These linkages and top-down initiatives have not worked harmoniously.

Our third and last key finding is that China's diaspora policy not only shapes its domestic development but also influences global sentiment and brings new dynamics to bear on global power relations (most saliently with the US, and its allies like Australia), especially through talents and soft power. These findings suggest that China's approach to its diaspora policy and development, practice, and outcomes reaches with powerful new effects across national borders. The transnational–relational perspective gives an optimal paradigm for researchers – and for policymakers, to understand changing strengths and complexities in interactions (contestation, conflict, negotiation, cooperation) between linkages, and to design diaspora policy and engagement programs responsive to unprecedented global political, economic, and social disruption.

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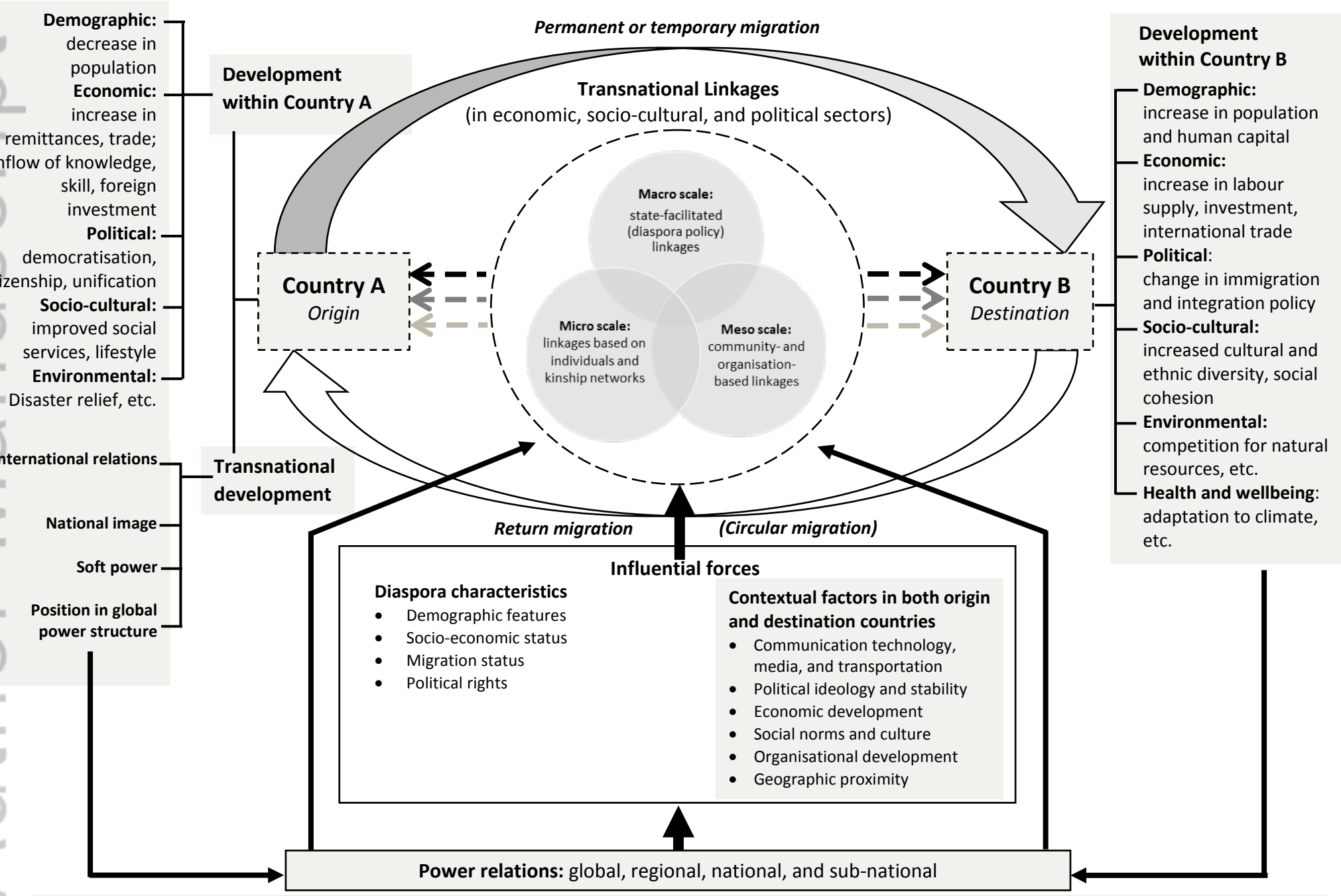
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---> Impacts (different densities of shading represent variations in strength); ↻ flows of population. Overlaps between circles correspond to interactions between transnational linkages at different scales.

Table 1. Respondents by city (and country), and affiliations

Study area	Government officials (state and local)	Informants from ACFROC	NGO leaders	Researchers	Migrants
Beijing	5	2	3	7	
Nanjing (Jiangsu)	1	1	2	1	
Suzhou (Jiangsu)	1	–	–	–	
Hangzhou (Zhejiang)	1	1	–	1	
Lishui (Zhejiang)	–	2	–	2	
Shanghai	–	1	1	1	
Guangzhou (Guangdong)	–	1	–	4	
Zhongshan (Guangdong)	–	1	–	–	
Zhaoqing (Guangdong)	2	–	–	–	
Shenzhen (Guangdong)	–	–	1	–	
Singapore	–	–	–	–	25
TOTALS	10	9	7	16	25

Transnational linkages, power relations, and the migration–development nexus:

China and its diaspora

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