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Diasporic placemaking: the internationalisation of a migrant hometown in post-socialist China

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ABSTRACT

International migration profoundly reshapes the urban landscape in sending and receiving countries. Compared to ethnic enclaves in migrant-receiving metropolises and remittance houses in sending communities, we know little about systematic urban changes led by emigration states. In this article, based on three months of fieldwork in a migrant hometown in China, I argue that the dispersion of emigrants per se does not make its urban space inherently 'diasporic'. Rather, a 'diasporic place' can be strategically constructed by local sociopolitical actors, a process I conceptualise as 'diasporic placemaking'. To create an international city branding and boost the consumption-based urban economy, the local state promotes Western architectural forms and imagines globalisation as a new way of life. To understand how migrants and local residents make sense of diasporic placemaking, I analyse deep-running tensions between their diverse self-perceptions and state construction. Instead of an innocent project, diasporic placemaking is replete with ambitions, achievements, and anxieties in post-socialist China's march towards modernity, progress, and prosperity. To advance the constructivist momentum in diaspora studies, I explore how diaspora construction is realized and contested in urban transformations while shedding light on how migrant spaces are valorised and performed by local actors for economic and symbolic purposes.

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International migration profoundly reshapes the urban landscape and built environments in both sending and receiving countries (Çağlar and Schiller 2018). Migration-related urban transformations can be initiated by either migrants or the local state. In destination countries, migrants transplant hometown streetscapes and ways of life to create 'ethnic enclaves', such as Chinatowns, Little Italy, and Koreatowns (Zhou 1992). Whereas earlier ethnic enclaves were essentialised as inferior space rife with vice, depravity, and moral failure (Anderson 1991), contemporary city governments are keen on reconstructing these 'exotic' places in a sanitised form to boost urban tourism and consumer capitalism (Cresswell 2014, 29). This architectural 'staging' of ethno-cultural diversity (Schmiz 2017) provides places of leisure and consumption for cosmopolitan

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urbanites (Rath et al. 2018) as well as an opening for their voyeuristic gaze into the quotidian life and business of an exotic 'other'.

On the other hand, in countries of origin, migrants build 'remittance houses' (Boccagni and Erdal 2020; Lopez 2010) to show off their newly gained wealth and anchor their emotional belonging in the hometown (Boccagni 2014; Erdal 2012). Featured by extravagant Western architectural styles and decorative forms, migrant houses are visible articulations of the owners' conspicuous consumption and their strong desire to mark distinction and establish prestige (Lopez 2015).

In comparison, there is scarce scholarly attention devoted to state-led urban transformations in emigration contexts. In this article, based on three months of fieldwork in Wuse County[1], a prominent hometown of Overseas Chinese (*qiaoxiang*), I argue that the demographic dispersion of emigrants per se does not make its urban space naturally 'diasporic'. Rather, a 'diasporic place' can be constructed by local sociopolitical actors, a process I conceptualise as 'diasporic placemaking'. To conjure up an international city branding and boost the consumption-based urban economy, the migrant hometown capitalises on diasporic resources and imagines globalisation as a new way of life in a quintessentially 'diasporic' space.

This finding also unsettles the prevalent idea in migration studies, especially among scholars examining economic, social, cultural, and political remittances, that changes observed at home come exogenously from migrants (Levitt 1998). Instead, I bring to the fore the migrant hometown's self-initiated urban transformations in which diasporas are centrally featured yet playing only marginal roles as the window dressing. The internationality and modernity of urban space are not brought back by diasporas but constructed endogenously by local actors in the dual processes of cosmopolitan subject-making and diasporic placemaking.

In fact, countless cities and towns across China have engaged in a reconstruction fad to market their distinction as 'international cities' (*guojihua chengshi*) (Ren 2011). Dilapidated residential complexes built by socialist work units (*danwei*) before the 1990s are widely demolished, giving way to high-end gated communities named after Western landmarks, such as 'Caesars Palace', 'Oriental Paris', 'Thames Villa', and 'Rhine Mansion' (Tomba 2014). Shabby, narrow alleys are replaced by multilane boulevards lined with physics-defying skyscrapers, sleek shopping malls, and museums designed by renowned Western architects, all powerful tokens of China's march towards modernity, progress, and prosperity (Zhang 2006).

While leading Chinese metropolises, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, can claim an 'internationality' from their global connections and transnational professional class (Sassen 2001), smaller cities and towns face difficulties justifying their efforts of 'internationalisation', due to their lack of world-city networks (Castells 2011) and the creative class (Florida 2005). Therefore, diasporic placemaking also provides an opportunity for the otherwise mediocre migrant hometown of Wuse to catch up in this urban 'internationalisation' frenzy. By adopting Western architectural and decorative forms and promoting Western lifestyles, diasporic placemaking enables the local state to orient itself in the politico-aesthetic hierarchies of 'progressive' and 'backward', 'modern' and 'traditional', 'international' and 'isolated'.

At the same time, I seek to understand how migrants and local residents make sense of diasporic placemaking. My interview data reveal the deep-running tensions between state

construction and ordinary citizens' diverse self-perceptions. While some residents relish the constructed diasporic milieu and consumerist capitalism, others remain critical as to the authenticity of such claims and the increasing social stratification inscribed in the commodification of urban space. Therefore, diasporic placemaking is by no means an innocent or neutral project (Lefebvre 1974; Harvey 1992). Rather, it is replete with ambitions, achievements, and anxieties among the local state and residents amid rapid urban and social changes of post-socialist China (Zhang 2006; 2010).

In what follows, I first take stock of extant literature on how international migration shapes or is featured in urban changes of both receiving and sending communities. After pointing to the scarcity of insights into how the state in migrant hometowns renovates the urban space, I bring into conversation a constructivist approach to diaspora studies and draw attention to the poorly understood diaspora construction in the domain of urban space. Following an outline of my methodologies, I delve into the case of Wuse County by examining how diasporic placemaking is implemented in spatial and experiential aspects, justified through the construction of a 'modern' diaspora, and contested by migrants and local residents. This article ends with a call for a more constructivist examination of diasporic placemaking from the perspective of spatial sociology.

International migration and urban transformations

The intersection between international migration and urban transformations has taken root in sociological scrutiny since the beginning of the discipline. Early Chicago School scholars developed an 'urban ecology' to account for the impacts of immigration and rural-urban migration on urban development (Park and Burgess 1921). In the 1970s and 1980s, studies of 'ethnic enclaves' rekindled the cross-fertilisation between migration studies and urban sociology by probing into distinctive settlement areas established by post-1965 immigrants in American cities and suburbs (Light 1973; Logan and Molotch 1987; Light and Bonacich 1988).

Ethnic enclaves are not only an economic institution that channels immigrants into the societal mainstream through the ethnic economy (Zhou 1992) but also a spatial structure that plays vital symbolic roles in boundary-making and nation-building projects (Anderson 1991; Yeoh and Kong 1994). While earlier ethnic enclaves were often depicted in an image of moral decay with opium dens, dimly lit brothels, and gang violence, contemporary city governments erase this racist, colonialist past and remodel these 'exotic' spaces for ethnic tourism and multicultural branding in Western metropolises (Schmiz 2017; Rath et al. 2018). Therefore, migration-related urban transformations in receiving countries are shifting away from an urban formation led by migrants themselves for social solidarity, and increasingly toward state-driven efforts for urban consumption.

In sending countries, international migration also fundamentally reshapes the urban landscape both from below, i.e. as a migrant-led endeavour, as well as from above, i.e. as a state-led enterprise. On the one hand, it is widely documented that migrants tend to build posh houses in their hometown for a wide array of social and symbolic reasons (Boccagni and Erdal 2020). These so-called 'remittance houses' (Lopez 2010) improve migrant relatives' living conditions and provide strong emotional support as the mooring for

migrants' future return (Erdal 2012). More importantly, often spacious, luxurious, and exotic, these mansions symbolise their owners' entrepreneurial success and distinctive social status (Chu 2010, 39–43).

On the other hand, however, research on the role of hometown governments in shaping urban changes remains incipient. Like their counterparts of *im*migration countries, *e*migration states can exert extensive influence in remaking what I refer to as 'diasporic urban space'. Similar to the contemporary re-creation of Chinatowns in Western metropolises, diasporic placemaking in migrant hometowns also stimulates exotic tourism and leisure consumption while projecting a Western-oriented imagining of modern lifestyles. Through a case study of Wuse County, China, I argue that diasporic space is by no means natural or unproblematic in and of itself even in migrant hometowns. Instead, 'becoming diasporic' hinges upon local social and political agents' active construction. Then the ensuing questions are, how diasporic space can be constructed and, more fundamentally, who or what is diasporic?

Diaspora construction in urban space

Emigration states around the world are busy establishing transborder ties with migrants and their descendants in the name of 'diaspora engagement policies' (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003). The term 'diaspora' was originally reserved to describe a few specific groups who dispersed from their homelands due to catastrophic events but keep their identity intact in foreign lands, such as Jews and Armenians (Gamlen 2019; Varadarajan 2010). Therefore, this term has been emotionally charged with a nostalgic yearning for the historic homeland and semantically distinguished from the more neutral term of 'emigrant'. Sending states increasingly adopt the discourse of 'diaspora' in their policies towards emigrants while neutralising this notion by discarding its original element of 'victimhood' (Brubaker 2005).

Similarly, successive regimes in China since the twentieth century, including the late Qing dynasty, the Republic of China, and the incumbent People's Republic of China, have all mobilised the representation of Chinese emigrants as 'sojourners' or 'Overseas Chinese' (*huaqiao*), but seldom called them 'emigrants' (*yimin*). Beneath the discourse of 'Overseas Chinese' is the state's heavy emphasis on emigrants' two idealised traits, namely, their global scattering and connections with the homeland (Wang 2009). China disfavours the connotations of 'leaving home' in the concept of 'emigrant' while romanticising their timeless, nonchanging membership in the ethno-nationalist community of 'Chinese nation' (*zhonghua minzu*) (Liu 2020). These features of the 'Overseas Chinese' discourse echo semantically and theoretically with the notion of 'diaspora', allowing for an examination of the 'Overseas Chinese' policies through the conceptual lens of diaspora construction (Zhou 2017).

Accompanying the rise of 'diaspora engagement policies' is the prodigious growth of diaspora studies and the dispersion of the very term 'diaspora' itself in semantic and conceptual terms. While some scholars make fixed, essentialized depictions of diasporas as 'bona fide actual entities' (Sheffer 2003, 245), Brubaker calls for a constructivist retheorization of diasporas as 'an idiom, a stance, a claim' (2005, 13). The central goal for diaspora studies is to scrutinise the political, social, and symbolic construction whereby putative diasporas come into existence. Twelve years later, Brubaker restresses the

state's deployment of the performative language of diaspora aimed at mobilising 'knowledge, experience, and economic resources' (2017, 1560).

Building on this constructivist momentum, I refrain from perceiving diasporas as ontologically distinctive from migrants per se. Instead, their distinctions are constructed in sociopolitical processes. Diaspora construction is a deliberate practice of singling out a specific subgroup within migrants for strategic reasons. Attached to desirable motifs, emblems, and symbols, diasporas are valorised as positive, favourable figures capable of 'making claims and legitimating projects' (Brubaker 2005, 12). My empirical research demonstrates that, however, diasporas themselves may play a rather insignificant role in this primarily state-led process.

In the same vein, scholars have unravelled how diasporas are constructed for developmental, neoliberal, and nation-building purposes (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Gamlen 2019; Kim 2016; Varadarajan 2010). There is a paucity of research, however, into diaspora construction in the realm of urban transformations. In fact, two romanticised features of diasporas, namely, their global dispersion and ethno-cultural ties with the homeland, may be particularly appealing to city governments hungry for an international standing in the age of globalisation.

Indeed, even in migrant hometowns, diasporic place and the associated lifestyle do not manifest themselves as natural, unproblematic qualities. Instead, they are contingent upon sociopolitical construction. In turn, the local state develops the consumption-based urban economy and meets the middle class's rising demands for Western materialist comforts. Hence, the diasporic space is not only built, but also felt, perceived, interpreted, and imagined as a way of life (Wirth 1938; Gieryn 2000). I conceptualise this process as 'diasporic placemaking', in which migrant hometowns attach the urban space with stereotyped 'diasporic' elements and mark it allegedly distinguishable from non-diasporic places where emigration is not prominent.

Methods

Wuse County, China provides an ideal prism through which we can examine how diasporic placemaking is conceived of and contested in the narratives, imaginations, and practices of local actors. With over forty-five million emigrants and their descendants around the world, China is one of the largest diasporic home countries (Zhou 2017). More specifically, Wuse County boasts one of the largest new diasporas (*xinqiao*) from China. According to official statistics, over forty percent of its total registered population of 600,000 reside abroad in over a hundred countries, with the vast majority concentrating in Europe. They migrated to Europe following China's loosening of emigration control in the 1980s and engage mostly in low-skilled entrepreneurial businesses, such as restaurants, laundries, convenient stores, and garment factories. Wuse's County Government has maintained closed ties with diasporas for roots tourism, foreign investments, grassroots diplomacy, and diasporic placemaking.

From June to September 2019, I conducted fieldwork in Wuse County using three qualitative methods, including interviews with officials and ordinary citizens, participant observation, and text analysis. First, I carried out thirty-seven semi-structured interviews with nearly all officials within the diaspora affairs apparatus (*qiaowu xitong*), which consists of numerous institutions across executive and legislative branches that involve in

diaspora policymaking. In particular, I held in-depth interviews with principal architects behind Wuse's diasporic placemaking projects, including officials from the Section of Land-Use Planning, the Bureau of Urban Construction, and the People's Political Consultative Conference.

Following my interviews, some officials invited me to participate in their field research trips (*shidi diaoyan*) to examine a wide range of issues, such as how to design a local Museum of Overseas Chinese History, how to develop a tourist resort featuring architectural styles of more than twenty European countries, and how to highlight diasporic elements in the festive decorations for the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. In these field trips, I participated as an external expert who visited field sites alongside diaspora bureaucrats, attended closed-door meetings, joined social gatherings between officials and diaspora guests, and offered independent advice in forums (*zuotanhui*). By 'shadowing' (Quinlan 2008) diaspora bureaucrats on these occasions, I obtained first-hand knowledge of their imagination and projection of Wuse County as a 'diasporic' place.

Moreover, to inquire into how migrants and local residents make sense of diasporic placemaking, I conducted twenty-two unstructured interviews with ordinary citizens in Wuse County. I recruited first interviewees through personal connections and then adopted the snowball sampling strategy while selectively diversifying their age, gender, occupations, and degrees of exposure to Western culture. I began the interviews by asking them the open-ended question of how they liked Wuse's Western buildings and sculptures and then dug deep into their perceptions of the town, the diaspora, as well as residents themselves. All interviews were held in Mandarin Chinese and lasted on average half an hour.

I also collected news reports from the *Qiaobao* (or literally 'Diaspora Press'), the local media outlet of the Communist Party of China, on pertinent projects, conferences, and events in Wuse County since the 2000s. Bureaucrat interviewees also provided comprehensive urban planning documents, internal reports, publicity materials, and photos of the historical urban landscape. I thematically coded interview transcripts, field notes, and textual data using NVivo software. More specifically, I adopted the abductive coding scheme (Tavory and Timmermans 2014) to yield unanticipated empirical discoveries based on my familiarity with preconceived theories and my repeated exposure to both data and new theories throughout the entire research process.

'Internationalising' the urban space

A tour of Chinese cities and towns is indeed a grand tour of European and American landmarks. Local governments across China entered a construction frenzy to build grandiose, Western-style office buildings, including a life-size replica of the Capitol Building housing a prefectural government, a White House-style office building in a heavily indebted county, and the office complex of a state-owned enterprise modelled after Louis XIV's Versailles castle (Kuo and Watts 2013). Underlying these eye-catching, awe-inspiring symbols of state power and political aesthetics is local governments' debt-fuelled spending on urban infrastructure projects aimed at 'internationalising' China's urban landscape (Ren 2011).

According to Yin and Qian (2020), this wave of 'copycat architecture' construction originated in the early 2000s. Under the Hu-Wen administration, the accelerated capitalist reforms led to the formation of 'entrepreneurial cities' (Wu 2003) that sought to transform the urban image 'from blue-collar manufacturing to services and financial industries' (Wu 2003, 3). While a series of anti-corruption campaigns under the new leadership of Xi Jinping has largely put a halt to the construction of pharaonic government compounds (Bradsher 2013), real estate developers fervently picked up this xenophilic penchant to 'package' a middle-class, Western lifestyle for the emerging upscale homebuyers (Wu 2010). Some residential neighbourhoods faithfully duplicated the Eiffel tower, Venetian canals and gondoliers, and the Sphinx while others airlifted the entire Austrian town of Hallstatt onto the Chinese soil (Guo 2017).

These lived 'theme parks' turn cities into 'growth machines' (Molotch 1976) by pushing up the monetised and symbolic values of urban areas (Zhao, Huang, and Sui 2019). More broadly, the Western architectural iconography is specularized as monuments of China's newly gained national wealth and global supremacy in the post-socialist era (Bosker 2013). 'Becoming an international city' has emerged as a principal goal for cities – big and small – across China. In particular, top-tier metropolises, such as Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, project their international ambitions through mega international events, including the 2008 Olympic Games and the Expo 2010, as well as state-of-the-art high-rises, towers, stadiums, and museums, designed by renowned Western architects (Ren 2011).

In comparison, smaller cities and towns do not have bountiful logistical and symbolic resources to claim an 'internationality'. For instance, located in a relatively isolated, mountainous region, Wuse County lacks arable land or efficient transportation systems to develop the local economy. It only got rid of the labelling of 'underdeveloped county' (*qianfada xian*) in 2015. Geographic isolation and economic underdevelopment have inculcated a strong sense of 'lagging behind' (*luohou*) among local bureaucrats and residents. These practical obstacles, however, do not impede Wuse from dreaming of 'internationalisation'. The key lies in its status of 'Hometown of Overseas Chinese' (*qiaoxiang*).

Yet, despite Wuse's century-long emigration history and mass emigration since the 1980s, few architectural elements before the 2000s were associated with diasporas or the West. My analysis of historical photos shows that Wuse's urban landscape had long been characterised by socialist, or Soviet, architectural styles. Most residential buildings were constructed by work units (*danwei*) with grey concrete façades and minimalist decorations. Although some landmarks were financed by donations from overseas Chinese, they were architecturally indistinguishable from nearby structures. This mundane urban landscape in a prominent migrant hometown can be attributed to the strong ideological and architectural legacies of the socialist era centred around frugalism and egalitarianism (Lu 2006). What really demarcated the boundary between diasporic and non-diasporic spaces is largely the product of the local state's heavy intervention in the new millennium.

Since the mid-2000s, Wuse initiated the 'European Continental Style' (*oulu fengqing*) and 'World Wuse' (*Shijie Wuse*) projects. The concept of 'European Continental Style' first appeared in the 2006 comprehensive urban plan and took nine years to come to fruition. In 2015, the County Government created a leadership group composed of high-

ranking local officials and began the large-scale urban 'upgrading and renovation' (*shengji gaizao*). Over a ten-month span in 2015, it invested seventy-five million yuan (eleven million USD) in two specific projects.

The first project was to renovate thirty-five official and residential buildings along a street designated as 'The Street of European Continental Style' (*oulu fengqing yitiaojie*). Several landmark buildings previously featured by a solemn soviet style, including the County Library, the Labor Union Building, the Bureau of Urban Construction, the Clock Tower, and the Courthouse, were remodelled in the highly refined Beaux-Arts style. The ornamentation uses a motley of baroque, renaissance, and neoclassical elements with Roman columns, sculpted façades, flying angles, and hemispherical domes. The previously monotonic, undistinguished socialist urban landscape was transformed into exotic, transplanted mosaics built on stereotypical European aesthetics.

The second project led to the installation of dozens of Western sculptures and landmarks. A gigantic Dutch windmill was erected near the entrance to a major bridge. Statues of historical European celebrities, such as Beethoven, Johann Strauss II, Columbus, and Napoléon, along with cultural sculptures, such as Manneken Pis, Heracles, and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, kaleidoscopically dot parks, crossroads, and street corners. According to the 2015 implementation plan of these projects, Wuse would no longer be a small, backward county enclosed by hills and mountains, but become an international town where people could 'visit Europe freely without leaving home' (*zubuchuhu, changyou ouzhou*).

More importantly, diasporic placemaking makes possible the conversion of symbolic capital into economic capital. As critical geographers have argued, the social production of space is increasingly dominated by capitalist interests and incorporated into class struggles in the post-Fordist world (Lefebvre 1974; Harvey 1992). This neo-Marxist approach is particularly illustrative in the case of Wuse to lay bare the economic logic behind diasporic placemaking. An official adopted the discourse of 'lagging behind' (*luohou*) to justify the local state's strenuous promotion of exotic tourism and commodified urban economy,

> Wuse is a mountainous small town. We don't have rich land or natural resources to develop the economy. Without a strong manufacturing industry, we can only catch up with other cities by focusing on developing the service sector, especially foreign trade and retail. We have to come up with something to mark our distinction. So we need to play the diaspora card smartly. (*dahao qiaopai*)

Therefore, dressed in the architectural languages of openness and internationality are indeed articulations of the local state's developmentalist strategies. Diasporic space is a 'growth machine' (Molotch 1976) fuelled by the County Government's strong impulses for reversing its late development and catching up on both material and aesthetic fronts. Diasporic placemaking provides a new set of spatial grammars to narrate consumption-oriented economic plans and the popular 'international' city branding in post-socialist China (Zhang 2010; 2006).

The local state perceives a 'modern' diaspora and 'diasporic' urban landscape as key enabling factors for the development of urban tourism and commodity trade. The County Government widely publicises Wuse's diasporic atmosphere and Western lifestyle to attract tourists and boost local consumption. Since early 2019, the County

Government has encouraged hotels and agritainment companies to renovate their facilities in 'essentially exotic styles' (*yiyu fengqing*) by reimbursing fifteen percent of the decoration costs. It grants preferential financial support to the construction of 'European pastoral complexes' (*oushi tianyuan zongheti*) and rewards restaurants with tax reductions for their employment of foreign waiters. Wuse also actively promotes the wholesale trade of wine as a pillar industry. A widely used slogan on buses, signposts, and billboards portrays Wuse as a unique tourist destination where visitors can 'shop globally and tour globally' (*mai quanqiu, guang quanqiu*).

The 'upgrading' of urban landscape and economy from its original Chinese, or socialist, style to Western paradigms indicates a hierarchical aesthetics in which the West takes precedence over the Chinese. A popular Chinese saying sums up this widespread xenophilic mentality – 'the moon is much rounder abroad than in China' (*guowai de yueliang bijiao yuan*). Despite the celebratory framing of the Wuse diaspora as scattered in over a hundred countries, only European cultures and lifestyles are glorified. Those from the developing world are curiously ignored or even frowned upon. This Europhilia cannot be explained alone by the overwhelming concentration of the Wuse diaspora in Europe. Instead, it is part and parcel of diasporic placemaking as a performative practice at both material and symbolic levels.

Performing authenticity

What really stands out in Wuse County's diasporic placemaking project is the local state's great emphasis on the authenticity of its internationality as a 'Hometown of Overseas Chinese' (*qiaoxiang*). According to local officials, Wuse's genuine internationality stands in stark contrast with the so-called 'fake, Las Vegas-style exoticism' in non-diasporic cities and towns.

Over the course of my fieldwork, several provinces issued administrative orders to require real estate developers to change place names that are 'grandiose' (*da*), 'exotic' (*yang*), 'bizarre' (*guai*), and 'imitative' (*chong*) (Zhan 2019). In response, a residential neighbourhood in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province readjusted its title from 'Manhattan' to the more Chinese-sounding 'Manha Town'. I asked an official if Wuse County should be concerned and whether it would issue similar orders. He laughed at my question and answered confidently,

> Wuse is different from other places. They blindly worship anything foreign and exotic. But our internationality is grounded in our culture. It runs in the blood of Wuse people who disperse (*sanju*) around the world. We don't need to change anything. We only need to maintain our distinction.

Hence, an 'authentic' internationality has allegedly become Wuse's outstanding symbolic capital (Bourdieu 2013). Local officials dismiss the exotic urban landscape in non-diasporic places as nothing more than knockoffs while taking pride in their own version of 'internationality' as culturally natural and politically unproblematic. The status of an eminent migrant hometown avowedly legitimates what may otherwise look exotic and bizarre as an organic part of Wuse's diasporic ambience.

Another official was more outspoken about Wuse's 'spiritual' internationality vis-à-vis other cities' 'superficial' internationality,

> Wuse isn't the only city that pursues the European Continental Style. Other cities may have even more Western-style buildings. It's like assembling parts into a machine. As long as you have the formula, anyone can do that. However, every city needs a spirit. Wuse's spirit is our diaspora. What we are aiming for is "the harmony between form and spirit" (*xingshenjianbei*). Without a spirit (*shen*), the form (*xing*) in other cities can only be specious.

In fact, Wuse's diasporic placemaking project goes far beyond the physical objects of buildings and art installations. Its agenda is all-encompassing. According to the officials, the authenticity of Wuse County's 'internationality' is amply demonstrated by the fact that it not only exudes from the superficial appearance of physical buildings but also permeates the quotidian behaviour and mentality of local people from all walks of life. Whereas non-diasporic cities' internationality is limited at the atmospheric level and showcased by artificial objects, the genuine 'internationality' in Wuse is allegedly experiential in the sense that it is effectively enacted in the day-to-day life of ordinary inhabitants. An official exemplified this 'everyday internationality' of Wuse by depicting the 'typical' local lifestyle,

> We eat Western cuisines and appreciate buildings with the European Continental exoticism. We begin our day with a sip of coffee. We eat not only wheat pancakes stuffed with pork[2] but also pizzas and jamón.[3] We drink not only yellow wine with egg silk[4] but also original wine imported from La Rioja, Tuscany, and Bordeaux.[5] We understand and incorporate the Western lifestyle into our daily life.

In particular, imported wine is promoted as a local specialty that exemplifies the constructed authenticity (Zukin 2009) of Wuse's internationality. Although Wuse is neither a transportation hub nor a major consumer market, it has organised two trade expos for wine. In addition to business transactions, Wuse strives to establish itself as a promotional ambassador for the upper-class, Western lifestyle built upon red wine. An official at the Bureau of Commerce stressed the contrast between the more 'international' Wuse people and their 'provincial' clients,

> We are not just selling wine but, more importantly, its lifestyle. So we set up a section in the expo where clients can learn how to taste and appreciate wine. They can also eat jamón that our Overseas Chinese brought back from Spain. People from other places don't know much about wine or jamón. They would cut jamón into big, thick pieces. It's not authentic at all. But Wuse people know how to cut and eat jamón in small, fine pieces. We have to educate our clients about all these nitty-gritties.

The County Government also facilitated numerous training programmes for baristas, sommeliers, pâtissiers, and chefs of European cuisines. A 2019 policy document states that Wuse County would fully incorporate the elements of the European Continental Style, including European architecture, wine, and coffee, build a European town (*ouzhou xiaozhen*), and develop into a 'site for experiencing European boutique life' (*ouzhou jingpin shenghuo tiyandi*). The local state envisions the 'internationality' of Wuse County to be so profound that it not only educates people from elsewhere about European lifestyles but becomes a mecca for those hoping to experience the idealised Western life.

Despite the local state's claim for 'authentic internationality' inscribed in the diasporic urban space, the selection of Western decorative forms was, in fact, contingent upon local officials' wilful thoughts. For instance, Wuse's comprehensive urban design requires the

overarching principle that all reconstruction projects should adopt architectural elements from European countries where most Wuse diasporas are located. Nevertheless, my interview with Jianping Zhang, an architect and bureaucrat, showed otherwise,

Zhang: We take into account the emblematic color of each region in Europe and incorporate them into the architectural design.
Author: Which region does the color of umber correspond to?
Zhang: Umber is an exception. Because Wuse is positioned as a Town of Coffee (*kafei xiaozhen*), we use umber to represent the coffee culture here.
Author: Why do we use red for roofs?
Zhang: Many buildings adopt the French neoclassical style. This style uses beige for façades and gray for roofs. We do have beige façades, but we don't like gray roofs, because they look too somber in the Chinese traditional culture. So we borrow red from roofs in Scandinavia. Most roofs in Denmark are red. With beige façades and red roofs, we create our own style based on different elements from Europe. It becomes a unique characteristic of Wuse.
Author: But there are only a few Wuse diasporans in Denmark or Scandinavia in general.
Zhang: That's fine. Many roofs in Spain and Italy are also red. We can also say that red comes from the Mediterranean countries where we have large diasporas. We can always achieve mastery through flexible incorporation (*ronghuiguantong*).

Therefore, it is the desire of the local state, rather than the Wuse diaspora, that shapes the colour scheme, or, more generally, the parameters of diasporic placemaking. Rather than Wuse diaspora's own tales of hope and chagrin, longing and belonging, compromise and perseverance in transborder journeys, what diasporic placemaking really displays are selected Western cultural prototypes from which Chinese diasporas, as an underprivileged minority group, are often excluded and distanced. After all, as I have discussed in the beginning, Chinese migrants, along with their ethnic enclaves, have been exoticised and consumed in a long-standing othering process in the West.

The migrant hometown, on the other hand, might have accomplished what Harvey (1992) describes as 'time/space compression', because of its proclaimed temporal 'progress' towards modernity and spatial 'upgrading' towards internationality. The proclaimed heightened authenticity of its diasporic placemaking efforts begs the question of where this so-called 'genuine' internationality comes from.

Constructing a 'modern' diaspora

The answer lies in the cosmopolitan subject-making of Wuse emigrants as modern diasporans. In the local state's performative and discursive practices, Wuse diasporans are characterised as modern urbanites with 'advanced' Western ideas and global horizons as well as ambassadors of European culture and high-society lifestyle.

The County Government has organised four 'Global Wuse People Conferences' with the aims of 'promoting the reflux of diasporic elements' and 'forging the county economy with a world thinking'. In these conferences, diaspora individuals received honorary titles from the local state, such as 'honorary citizen', 'outstanding village sage', and 'distinguished migrant elite', in recognition of their contribution to remitting economic, cultural, and symbolic resources from Europe back to Wuse for urban development. In my interviews and publicity materials of these ritualised events, officials repeatedly extolled the Wuse diaspora's modernity and globality,

> They have seen the world and mind the world. Their worldviews are cosmopolitan. They are open-minded (*kaifang*) and generous (*daqi*). They are influenced by the advanced ideas and social order in the West. They have experienced the modern lifestyle and can bring back Western ideas, values, and behavior.

A highlight of the second Global Wuse People Conference in 2015 was a ceremony in which high-ranking officials and Overseas Chinese representatives pulled five jars of water collected from five continents across the globe into a tank with water from the 'mother river' of Wuse. According to the official press release, this ceremony manifested the 'open-minded, receptive, entrepreneurial, and cosmopolitan' spirits of the Wuse diaspora and embodied their strong aspiration of bringing honour and distinction from all over the world back to their hometown. Through political rituals and performative representations, the Wuse diaspora allegedly acquires the peculiar qualities of 'modernity'. Moreover, as active ambassadors of Sino-West exchanges, diasporas are also said to have played pivotal roles in the transmission of their modern and international qualities to Wuse, thus justifying its diasporic placemaking project.

When asked how Wuse County achieved the leapfrogging from a 'European Continental' town to 'World Wuse', officials often insisted that the increasing 'internationality' was not simply an elevation of Wuse's self-positioning from being European to being worldly. They told me that as the Wuse diaspora becomes more international, so does Wuse. By depicting its diaspora as intermediaries who actively channel back the much-needed 'internationality', the local state makes great efforts of 'worlding' (Ong 2011) itself as an 'international small town' (*guojihua xiaoxiancheng*).

Due to their dispersion in the socioeconomically better-off West, the Wuse diaspora is valorised as business and cultural elites equipped with the more favourable Western know-how and modern spirits. They fulfill a modernist imagining of the border-crossing, jet-setting life with substantial physical and social mobility. They have come to be associated with the supposedly upscale Western lifestyles, tastes, and wealth vis-à-vis the indigenous, mundane, traditional, or even backward ways of life and beliefs in the developing world. Meanwhile, the Wuse diaspora is portrayed as the embodiment of positive traditional Chinese values, including a strong work ethic, frugality, familialism, and business acumen, which form the 'secret sauce' for their hard-won success in foreign lands.

Therefore, straddling the line between the timeless, unchanging traditional culture and the Western essence of boundless modernism, the Wuse diaspora allegedly acts as the bridge between the past and the future, the old folk values of the homeland and the modern outlook of the West (Ong 1999, 43–45). These dual characteristics allow for the construction of the diaspora as remitters who constantly send back 'internationality' to the hometown. As a consequence, Wuse itself purportedly accrues more 'internationality' from these remittances and its diasporic placemaking project becomes justified and distinguished. Nonetheless, these state constructs have not gone unchallenged by diasporas themselves and local citizens.

Contested diasporic place

Many diaspora leaders readily accepted state-designated honorary titles and positive depictions to compensate for their status loss in host countries (Zhou and Li 2018).

But they had curiously little participation in the renovation of the urban landscape, which was, after all, a project dictated by the local state. While some migrant interviewees enjoyed the coffee and wine in Wuse, others were perplexed by its Westernised atmosphere. A migrant who frequently visits Wuse complained, 'I see these buildings every day in France. But when I'm back in my hometown, why am I still seeing them? I want to see more original tastes of Wuse!'

In my interviews, most migrants were frank about their poor education and limited integration in Western society. A migrant who was established by the local state as a 'diaspora leader' described all Overseas Chinese as '*tubalu*', or literally 'the rustic Eighth Route Army', a slang to belittle someone as backward, poorly educated, ignorant of the modern lifestyle, and often hailing from rural backgrounds. This identification of '*tubalu*' belies the official discourse of a modern, urban, upper-class diaspora and exposes a rather contradictory self-perception of Wuse diasporas as mostly composed of low-skilled migrants who struggle to absorb foreign worldviews, aesthetics, and lifestyles, let alone remitting 'internationality' to their hometown.

Even officials had conflicting views of diasporas as modern subjects. A bureaucrat admitted the disparity between the reality and the official characterisation of Wuse diaspora,

> We have to recognise that the overall quality (*zonghe suzhi*) of Overseas Chinese is not high. Their knowledge structure (*zhishi jiegou*) is poor and their educational level very low. They are, by all means, more Chinese than Western.

This bureaucrat adopted the discourse of *suzhi* (quality) to regard the diaspora as 'a low-quality population'. Anthropologists point out that assessing the quality of an individual articulates the boundaries of social strata in post-socialist China and lies in the centre of the state's neoliberal governance (Kipnis 2006). Similarly, the state evaluation of the diaspora's values in social hierarchies indicates that the Wuse diaspora's 'modernity' is far from a social fact, but a deliberate political designation. Notwithstanding a linchpin in the state framing, diasporas themselves play rather marginal parts in the rewriting of urban space. Instead, diasporic placemaking is principally driven by the local state hungry for economic growth as well as a rising middle class craving for distinction.

The state promotion of foreign trade in Wuse as an 'international' town met the growing demand for cross-border e-commerce (*haitao*) in the so-called 'consumption upgrade' (*xiaofei shengji*) of Chinese consumers. Against the backdrop of post-socialist China's consumption revolution (Davis 2000), the commodification of the urban economy converges with the appetite of Wuse's middle class for high-end products. Longing for bourgeoisie ways of life and materialist comforts of the 'First World', the majority of my interviewees readily enjoyed the influx of foreign products, as an interviewee pointed out,

> Maybe people in other [Chinese] cities also drink coffee and wine and wear clothes of foreign brands. But how many of them use shampoo, dish wash, and olive oil imported from Europe? We do. The joss papers[6] in Wuse are not normal ghost money. We burn euros and dollars so that our ancestors can continue buying foreign products in the afterlife. These are the best examples of Wuse's internationalization.

In this narrative, the internationality of Wuse is other-worldly, both literally and figuratively. The burning of joss papers in foreign currency allegedly carries the locals' Western-oriented consumption habits and desires to the afterlife to achieve a supernatural indefinity beyond any individuals' physical lives.

Nonetheless, the sweeping capitalist globalisation has its discontents. Whereas some residents relish the consumption of foreign goods vis-à-vis Chinese brands, others are more cautious about the increasing social stratification beneath this consumerist fever. Upon hearing my question of 'do people live a Western lifestyle', a local resident answered sarcastically,

> No ordinary people drink wine or coffee every day. Overseas Chinese may love them, but they only stay in Wuse for a couple of days every year. County officials also love them and then come up with the idea of developing Wuse into a coffee town and a wine town, because they can use the public money (*gongkuan*) to eat and drink for free (*baichi baihe*). They can live a European life on bribery and corruption. But ordinary citizens (*laobaixing*) are more comfortable with eating congee[7] and drinking tea.

From this perspective, what the local state boasts as the quotidian 'international' lifestyle belongs only to a small circle of privileged migrants and corrupt officials. To vaunt an experiential, rather than superficial, form of internationality, the local state aims to let Wuse's internationality emanate not from the façades of remodelled buildings but out of the sipping of morning coffee and the swirling of wine glasses by ordinary people. Lying underneath this diasporic placemaking, however, may be a widening socioeconomic gulf between a powerful minority who dictates this project and the vast majority who actually occupies this space in their daily life.

Beyond the materialist comforts introduced by diasporic placemaking, local citizens seem more critical of the Westernized architecture. Many interviewees criticised the local state for 'Western worshipping' (*chongyangmeiwai*) and abandoning the Chinese cultural core. A retired businessman penetratingly analogised the local government as 'a frog in the well that knows nothing of the ocean' (*jingdizhiwa*) and its diasporic placemaking as 'a blind imitation with ludicrous effects' (*dongshixiaopin*). In these accounts, diasporic placemaking is, in essence, the Westernisation or internationalisation of urban space with borrowed legitimacy from the status of 'Hometown of Overseas Chinese'. Diasporic placemaking appears more contested than imagined, as local inhabitants' diverse understandings may not always conform to the views imposed by the state.

Conclusion

The nexus between international migration and urban transformations has long fascinated migration scholars and urban sociologists (Çağlar and Schiller 2018). This scholarship focuses on receiving cities in the West in their examinations of Chinatowns, Koreatowns, and other exotic urban areas. These ethnic enclaves were first formed by migrants as a result of social marginalisation and ethnic community-building but later transformed by neoliberal city governments into places for leisure consumption and symbols of multiculturalism (Rath et al. 2018). In contrast, urban changes in sending communities are relatively underexplored, except for the bourgeoning literature on remittance houses built by diasporas to establish status and prestige (Boccagni and Erdal 2020).

Through a case study of China, I foreground the role of emigration states in 'diasporic placemaking', the process that turns what used to be traditional, mundane urban space into an exotic, 'diasporic' place. In this imagination, the diasporic space of a migrant hometown is more than the sum of physical buildings featured by a Western architectural milieu. It is also allegedly constituted by Western lifestyles centred around wine, coffee, and other bourgeoisie symbols catering to the rising consumerist middle class. This urban metamorphosis not only lays the groundwork for the promotion of materialist consumption but also fulfills the migrant hometown's 'international' self-positioning in the age of globalisation.

Following the constructivist turn in diaspora studies (Brubaker 2005; 2017; Kim 2016), I argue against taking for granted the formation of 'diasporic place' even in migrant hometowns and advance our theorisation of diaspora construction as dual processes of cosmopolitan subject-making and, more importantly, diasporic place-making. Departing from the social remittances literature's overemphasis on the role of migrants in bringing back changes to hometowns (Levitt 1998), I underscore social agents who have never left and their endogenous efforts of capitalising on diasporic resources and initiating migration-related urban transformations.

Diasporic placemaking appeals particularly to small migrant hometowns that are troubled with a sense of 'lagging behind' in China's sweeping trend towards 'internationalising' (*guojihua*) the urban landscape (Ren 2011). Lacking the top-notch metropolises' global connections and creative and professional classes (Sassen 2001; Florida 2005; Castells 2011), the small town of Wuse County relies instead on its status as a 'Hometown of Overseas Chinese' to justify its equally ambitious urban internationalisation projects aimed at 'worlding' itself and becoming a quintessentially 'diasporic' place. Underneath the Western architectural iconography and neon signs of coffee shops and wine bars that allegedly inject European exoticism into Wuse's urban space is the widening gap between those who construct this space (i.e. local bureaucrats and upper-class citizens), those who are featured in this placemaking (i.e. a 'modern' diaspora), as well as those who actually utilise this space in their quotidian life (i.e. ordinary residents).

While the local state takes pride in their allegedly 'authentic' internationality and looks down upon 'the fake, Las Vegas-style' exoticism in non-diasporic places, many migrants and local residents call into question the increasingly stratified, commodified society envisioned by diasporic placemaking. By investigating how different social and political agents make sense of this project, I push forward the 'use-centered' sociology of space (Gans 2002) by interrogating the users as well as those who are used in urban transformations. I also juxtapose different desires, narratives, and imaginations to unravel the mechanisms of control and conflict derived from the production, exploitation, speculation, distribution, and reconstruction of urban space (Lefebvre 1974; Harvey 1992).

Diasporic placemaking is by no means a unique practice in Wuse County. Migrant hometowns across the developing world are enthusiastic about capitalising on their diasporic resources and imagining globalisation as a new way of life (Boccagni and Erdal 2020; Lopez 2015). Future research on diasporic placemaking may establish a closer conceptual bridge between migration studies and the bourgeoning 'sociology of space' (Gieryn 2000). Crossing the dichotomies between urban and rural, here and there, homeland and hostland, spatial sociology allows for a more critical understanding of the remaking of places in migrants' transborder connections (Urry 2001). As places are

never 'finished' but always 'becoming' (Cresswell 2014), we need to inquire into how places are performed, practiced, and experienced not only by people on the move but also those who stay put in sending and receiving communities.

Moving beyond the physicality and materiality of ethnic enclaves, migrant houses, and diasporic places, we can take a closer look at the social and symbolic meanings, structures, and actions behind migration-related placemaking (Löw 2016; Bourdieu 2018). Migrants' senses of place, including exclusion and inclusion, displacement and emplacement, uprootedness and rootedness, are reshaped in their transborder movements and infused with the logic of state power. Applying spatial thinking in migration studies (Logan 2012) enables us to engage in deeper dialogue with humanistic geographers in studies of whether migrants are offered or deprived of a 'field of care' and homeliness (Tuan 1977; Relph 1976). How social agents invest meanings into places of emigration, transit, immigration, and return awaits more spatially inspired sociological analysis.

Notes

1. To protect my interviewees, all names of places and persons are pseudonyms in this study.
2. A popular local dish for breakfast.
3. Dry-cured ham produced in Spain.
4. Warmed Chinese alcoholic beverages mixed with scrambled eggs.
5. Renowned wine-making regions in Spain, Italy, and France respectively.
6. The burning of joss papers is a Chinese ritual to send money and goods to deceased relatives in the afterlife.
7. Chinese plain rice porridge.

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