



“Place Branding in a Chinese County: How Diaspora Discourse is Applied to Urban Development”

NARGIZA TAISHYBAYEVA

Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg

Abstract: This study examines how Qingtian County integrates diaspora heritage into its urban development strategies. By examining local policies and development projects, the paper highlights how collective diaspora identity intersects with China's modernisation efforts. Key findings reveal the governments' efforts to integrate diaspora legacies into urban development planning, through place branding strategy to create a competitive image based on selected features, yet some other policies and practices are problematic and contradictory.

Keywords: place branding, diaspora politics, Overseas Chinese Hometown, urbanisation in PRC

1. Introduction

China has progressively incorporated diaspora policies to leverage overseas Chinese for economic development, nation-building, and political support (H. Liu and Dongen 2016; Thunø 2018). Human capital flight and outflow of the working-age population are major concerns related to outward migration. The implementation of politically motivated programs aims to attract Chinese back to China (Goodkind 2019: 15). Overseas Hometown (侨乡)¹ is an important concept to create a collective identity, sense of belonging and emphasise the unique role and contribution of the Chinese diaspora (Barabantseva 2011:114). Scholars have been exploring diasporic place-making and its implications for China's global governance aspirations, examining it through the new trends of diaspora roles on domestic and international stages (Thunø 2018; Liu 2022; Masdeu 2015; C. Wang 2017; Bofulin 2022a; Bofulin 2022b). In recent years, there has been a new trend of creating international city branding in Overseas Hometowns (Liu 2022). This research attempts to shed light on the Overseas Hometown urban development from the lens of place branding. The local governments steering national policies and place branding of Overseas Hometown becomes a strategic measure that can align or conflict with higher-level directives. By analyzing the development projects of the urban plan for Qingtian, this case study this paper attempts to answer the following question: How do local governments use and reconstruct diaspora heritage in place branding urban development?

¹ Localities with outward migration tendencies.

This study commences with an examination of the theoretical principles underpinning place branding, with a particular focus on its application within the context of China's urbanization initiatives. Subsequently, the discourse surrounding the Chinese diaspora is examined, with particular attention to the process of romanticization of international migration. In particular, the Chinese government has historically and continues to make efforts to create diasporic urban spaces, which are often manifested through the objects of westernization. Thematic analysis of data from policy documents allows for an examination of key themes, including characteristic township development, highway interconnections, the overseas Chinese economy as a business model, and a tourist resort. It is noteworthy that the recent relocation of cemeteries and tombs for development and renovation purposes appears to be at odds with the preservation of diaspora heritage and ancestral legacies. In summary, the overseas hometown cases provide insights into the challenges and opportunities of transforming a labor-exporting area into a capitalized urban space with diaspora heritage as its defining feature. While this study is based on a review of media articles and policy documentation and has research limitations, there are sufficient materials to understand the government's vision for the ideal Overseas Hometown.

2. Place Branding as Urbanisation Strategy

Place branding entails the reinvention of places through a process of brand construction, which promotes individual or collective identities; it aims to attract investment and human capital, compete in the tourism industry, and encourage citizens to identify with the place where they live. More importantly, this is intended to stimulate the economy and boost social development and, consequently, the economy (San Eugenio Vela et al. 2023:2; Cavia 2011:107). The goal of the branding is not limited to transmitting and communicating an image to the outside audience. The differentiation between collective and individual identities "specifically works with the local population to increase their pride in their home and the feeling of belonging to a certain place" (Kalandides 2012; San Eugenio Vela 2023). From an urban government perspective, place branding can be seen as a form of economic development competition. Local and regional governments compete in the marketplace by actively shaping how their place is perceived by potential consumers (Cleave and Gilliland 2016:208-209; Pasquinelli 2013 2013:2-3).

In 2014, the State Council of the PRC released the "National New-Type Urbanization Plan" (国家新型城镇化规划, hereafter NUP) as a guideline for implementing urban development policies. NUP's objectives widely range from urban-rural integration, population control,

hukou reform, social welfare system, public service provision, green and sustainable development, and preservation of local culture, to coordinated development among different regions (Thünken 2020:59-61). NUP differentiates the responsibilities of the central, provincial, and local governments (Griffiths and Schiavone 2016:73-91, C. Wang 2020:275). NUP has an additional agenda to promote a shift in China's economic strategy to boost domestic consumption, the service sector, and the global connectivity of inland cities (Chu 2020:4). The plan prioritizes the Citizenisation of migrant workers, moving from rural areas to small and medium towns, to balance demographic and economic distribution.

Citizenisation (市民化), or transfer from rural to urban residence, is a crucial element in the narrative of society's evolution from agricultural to urban and industrial forms and a key feature of Chinese modernization (Mobrand 2015:110). The rural-urban transfer is regulated by a "differentiated settlement policy," which categorizes cities according to type and population size and prioritizes migration flows towards small and medium-sized (satellite) ones. This classification determines each entity's varying settlement requirements and restrictions (Thünken 2020:318). Counties are important linkages in rural-urban integration that connect and govern villages and towns. Rural-urban integration is sometimes achieved by merging villages or incorporating them into townships within the county (Qingtian Government 2024 n.p). Due to mass migration, many villages have become empty or populated, mainly by "left-behind children" and the elderly. These villages are also common in Qingtian (Xu Hui 2021).

Despite the persistent rural-urban divide, the urban lifestyle holds significant appeal for many. However, some individuals hesitate to change their residential status (hukou) from rural to urban. Their primary concern is the potential loss of valuable rural assets, such as contract land (承包地) and housing land (宅基地), which they perceive as outweighing the benefits of city life (C. Chen and Fan 2016). At the same time, rural hukou is regarded as a safety net for migrant workers who constantly travel between cities and villages (Hu 2023:1839). Chan concludes that China's hukou reform has stalled and failed to address the growing social disparities and challenges migrant populations face, particularly concerning access to education for children (Chan 2021). The hybrid identity of transnational Overseas Chinese and governmental efforts to integrate rural and urban spaces are erasing these hukou boundaries, which is both challenging and advantageous for steering urban and diaspora policies.

3. Challenges of Urban Development

Qingtian faces several challenges that hinder urban development and Shiminhua, including environmental conditions, a high proportion of senior citizens, out-migration, and the mobility of its residents. The area is mostly mountainous and has several rivers that belong to the Ou River system and benefit from abundant water resources (M. 陈. Chen 1990:122). Tea plants blanket the region, characterizing and contributing significantly to the economy and livelihoods (Liu et al. 2021:472). The county meets the conditions for a protective type zone and is not suitable for development expansion or population growth, and requires strict control on nature protection (W. Wang et al. 2017:4-5). The Qingtian region has a favorable ecological environment, but its mountainous terrain limits urban expansion, yet the county is nevertheless promoted for urban expansion and development (Data n.d. n.p.; LCDRC 2022b:85; Lishui Shi Tongjiju, 2023:26). The permanent population is relatively small, which reduces the population burden. In 2021, the population was 570,500, a slight decrease from 572,311 in 2020. From 2020 to 2023, the region was observed to have negative population growth due to outward labor migration. The region's total area is 2,477 square kilometers (Data n.d. n.p.). The proportion of elderly residents in Qingtian in 2020 was 18.1 percent, slightly lower than the average Lishui (20.35 percent) and national levels, yet the population merely increased in the last 20 years. The urbanization rate is one of the lowest at the county level in Lishui and has remained as low as 50 percent in the past five years (Lishui City Bureau of Statistics, 2023 n.p. and 2024 n.p.; CEIC DATA n.p.; Government 2022 n.p.). The rapid economic growth and constant influx of migrants have led to severe social issues and an unbalanced demographic configuration (Thunoe, 1996; Zhang 2007; Masdeu 2019). For many years, the export of labor was the main source of finance, and later, the practice of migration was praised as a heroic act of loyalty and a development path.

3.1 Background of Overseas Hometown Economy

The identity of Overseas Hometowns is deeply rooted in their history, geopolitics, and economy, which have collectively shaped a model of migrant economy. This model has been further reinforced by the subtle romanticizing of migration legacies, influencing both the incentives for migration and the processes involved. As part of this dynamic, diaspora policies have been strategically steered by intertwining romanticized narratives with cosmopolitan ideals. Consequently, the positive narrative surrounding migrant legacies has been elevated to an ideal concept, particularly in the Qingtian urban space context.

The networking culture among Overseas Chinese facilitates economic development in Zhejiang province and, on a greater scale, serves as a starting point for the province's integration with the global economy (Rabe 2022:124-125). However, while migrants' remittances and donations have contributed to economic and urban sustenance, the lack of investment in production and job opportunities was discouraging potential investors (Zhang 2007:74-75). Qingtian may not be as prosperous as other 'migration hometowns' of Wenzhou or Xiamen, localities with outward migration tendencies.

Yow distinguishes three economic development models for Overseas Chinese Hometowns: foreign-investment-driven, capital-lacking, and donation-supported. When overseas Chinese heavily donated to their hometown infrastructure in Guangdong and Zhejiang before 1949, the period was characterized as donation-supported. After the economic reform in 1978, the migrants channeled productive foreign investment flow for the industries, which became a prominent receiver of financing, which is why this period is labeled as being in a foreign-investment-driven mode. While some hometowns flourished, others could not overcome the challenges of remoteness and rurality, later losing their kinship links and becoming capital-lacking districts. The capitalized economies arose from foreign direct investment in light manufacturing, household, and private enterprises that used remittance circulation (Yow 2007: 84-85, 98-102). Some similar patterns are observed in Qingtian in space-time dimensions, where familial kinship pushed financing, and political and economic reforms stimulated investment (Masdeu 2019:5). The migrant economy peaked between 1988-2007 when remittances increased by 20 percent annually and encouraged the trade and tourism sectors to become major resources for economic development (Committee 2013:560-563).

Zhang Xiumig concludes that Qingtian's economic growth was outstanding among other counties in the early 2000s and urban areas of Hecheng district, Wenxi, and Chuang Liao towns (鹤城区, 温溪镇, 船寮镇) naturally became industrial and international trade zones (Zhang 2007:72). However, the financial flow did not create conditions for sustainable development, because the incoming donations were primarily allocated to private consumption and real estate of the dependent families. In 2002, Qingtian was one of the most underdeveloped counties in the province, and working outside was one of the few career options available to villagers (Zhang 2007:78-80).

Over time, the government has leveraged the migration legacy and network to attract foreign direct investment and alleviate poverty in regions with Overseas Chinese Hometowns (Yow

2007; Bofulin 2021). The Lishui government recognized and analyzed the contribution of migrant workers and proposed development strategies to integrate their economy into regional policies. An article in the Zhejiang Ribao Gazette sends a message about government cooperation with migrant workers for better development. In 2001, in cooperation with the city government, the Lishui Municipal Commission proposed development strategies to integrate the "migrant economy" into regional policies.

"Qingtian has achieved leapfrog development. The industrial economy is the main force, and the overseas Chinese economy is the driving force."

青田实现跨越式发展，工业经济是主力，华侨经济是动力 (Zhejiang Todays, 2002:38-39)

The government has supported outward migration as a strategy for domestic development, particularly through the 'Overseas Chinese Talent Return Project' (华侨要素回流工程) initiated in 2001. This initiative led to the establishment of a "Leading Group for Overseas Chinese Affairs," which simplifies passport procedures and addresses educational reintegration challenges for returning Chinese children. The government enhanced services such as paperwork processing and travel arrangements to assist the diaspora further. Additionally, a subsidy of 5,000 yuan per person was introduced to encourage low-income residents to work abroad, significantly boosting interest in overseas employment (Li, Wangming 2011:35).

The establishment of the "Investment Pool" (项目投资库) and the "Overseas Chinese Returning Home Investors Association" (华侨回乡投资者协会) has streamlined the process of attracting foreign investment by providing timely project information. These efforts have fostered the growth of foreign trade and advanced the concept of the "headquarters economy." To strengthen ties with the diaspora, the government launched the "Qingtian Overseas Network" (青田侨网) and publishes the "Qingtian Overseas Hometown News" (青田侨乡报), creating communication platforms that keep overseas Chinese connected with their hometown. Additionally, the government supports elderly returnees and maintains strong relations with overseas Chinese communities, hosting a biennial Overseas Chinese Conference to further these connections.

"Encourage low-income people to carry forward the Qingtian spirit of daring to explore and daring to take risks."

鼓励低收入群众发扬敢闯敢冒的青田精神 (Li, Wangming 2011:35-36)

Chinese scholar Li Wangming, in research on urbanization in Qingtian, positively describes the impact of migration and government engagement with the diaspora on urban development. "Qingtian spirit" implies the motivation to escape poverty, take control of one's own life, take risks and delve into the unknown, help the diaspora community and the dependent family, endure struggles of work and a new place of living, and, most importantly, achieve success as an international entrepreneur. Qingtian government shared an article with a similar connotation, stressing the qualities of the Overseas Chinese. Together, these qualities form the narrative of collective identity and the ideal image of the diaspora.

"The overseas Chinese... have cultivated the Qingtian overseas Chinese cultural spirit characterized by' daring to venture, having a global vision; enduring hardship, being simple and honest; uniting in mutual assistance, valuing affection and righteousness; being sincere and kind, willing to contribute; striving hard, pioneering and advancing; loving the motherland and hometown, cherishing the homeland and roots."

侨华人...形成了“敢闯敢冒、放眼全球；吃苦耐劳、质朴敦厚；团结互助、重情尚义；至诚和善、乐于奉献；勇于拼搏、开拓奋进；爱国爱乡，恋祖恋土”的青田华侨文化精神 (People's Daily 2014 n.p.).

The examples mentioned above show idealistically reflected diaspora collective identities throughout the time. The government has romanticized the legacy of migration and encouraged people to follow in the footsteps of previous generations who escaped poverty and carried the burden of their community's survival in the region. The motivation behind supporting migrants is to attract investment from wealthy diasporas, which serves as the country's primary source of financing, thereby contributing to the migrant economy (Benton and Gomez 2014:1163). As they narrate, "set up convenient service windows for the people in counties and towns" (在各县镇设立便民服务窗口) (Zhejiang Todays 2002:39). To sustain itself, the migrant economy model relies on the establishment of specific values and concepts, including diasporic place-making.

Qingtian immigrants arrived as unskilled labor workers to fulfill the emerging needs of the fashion industry in Italy and Spain in 1980-2000. Factories often hired entire groups of migrants through their village connections (Lan and S. Zhu 2014b). Networking between Chinese and Overseas Chinese in Italy stimulated the trade of materials and finished products between the two countries (Ceccagno 2012). Ideally, migrants would change their status from hiring workers to starting trade or restaurant businesses. This transition is made possible by accessing capital and discovering new opportunities while relying on an established community network. For rural immigrants, migration is costly and often involves repaying debts during the initial period (Ottati and Cologna 2015:38-40). Many workers extend their

working hours to acquire financial capital, repay debts, and further develop their businesses, often without breaks or holidays (Lan and S. Zhu 2014a:155).

In 2011, Latham and B. Wu conducted fieldwork in Europe and found that income inequalities in China, reflected in social stratification and labor market segregation, have influenced economic and social structures in Overseas Chinese communities in Europe. This has led to poor working conditions and even forced labor practices in some European Chinese businesses (Latham and B. Wu 2013:23, 45-46). Traveling to Europe from China was often facilitated via developed routes of human trafficking, common in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, illegal migration declined in the late 2000s (Latham and B. Wu 2013:23-24). Despite the tragedy of international migration, often driven by poverty, most migrant workers who travel across the globe have more bitter memories than nostalgia. The government-led discourse on Overseas Chinese and their hometowns has long been romanticized, interpreting their experiences as heroic sacrifices and paths to success.

3.2 Romanticising International Migration and Europeanisation of Urban Space

Zhu and Maags identify five stages in the heritage process: institutionalization, authentication, recognition, museumization, and commercialization. Through 'value appropriation,' cultural sites and practices are selected and transformed into public and private goods. Chinese heritage legislation provides a legal basis and spreads selected practices and heritage discourses vertically, mediated by official heritage institutions. The authorities and experts then select the cultural themes and objects that have the potential to become representative and receive formal recognition (Y. Zhu and Maags 2020:128-141).

Heritage discourse serves as a powerful narrative that frames the elite's involvement in rural revitalization as a preservation of cultural tradition, masking the underlying economic and social power dynamics. This discourse legitimizes their dominance in rural governance by positioning the "New Gentry" as protectors and promoters of heritage. It justifies the privatization of resources and land that primarily benefits the elite. The new gentry select social elites select nostalgic memories and aspects of traditional cultural revitalization to match the demands of contemporary social transformation and diversified aesthetic expressions (Tao, P. Chen, and Aoki 2024:50).

Historically, Overseas Chinese have been the main financial fuel for urban development (Zhang 2007). However, some scholars argue that the diasporic community itself had an insignificant influence on the contemporary state-led diasporic place-making process for their migrant

hometowns and other "international cities" (国际化城市) (Liu 2022). Urban diasporic-space-making is a deliberate process of capitalizing on migrant resources to conceptualize urban development, westernization, and social transformation from agrarian communities to capitalist societies, infused with diasporic values and migration heritage (Liu 2022: 212, 209-227). China approaches the conceptualization of the urban heritage industry as a form of theatre, where cultural spectacles are curated through museumification, documentation, and ritualization to evoke sensations of awe and nostalgia (C. Wang 2017). Local governments attempt to integrate the transnationalism of diaspora into cosmopolitan practices by staging performances for external audiences (Jamec 2023). Qingtian's identity, shaped by the romanticizing of migration history and Europeanisation, serves the national goal of and enhances its regional competitiveness through a blend of modernity and diasporic values (Bofulin 2022a: 390-392).

The narratives of international Overseas Hometowns are strategically constructed through the interaction of socio-political actors alongside cosmopolitan and consumerist agendas to justify social transformation. Perceptions, narratives, and practices in the case study locality reflect aspirations for internationalization as a path to socio-economic development, transforming a rural agrarian society into an urban and capitalized one. Chinese diaspora discourse is dominated by heroism and cosmopolitan themes, where the idealized image of successful and loyal returnees aligns with government-led agendas (Jamec 2023:61, 63). International cosmopolitanism is reflected in objects of Western food consumption and branded product availability, which market consumerist attitudes as part of the appreciation of urban life. Jamec proposes a re-understanding of one of the representations of transnationalism — coffee consumption culture—and discusses the bitterness of the overseas migrant's experience.

In Mingxi County, the government initiated a Coffee Room to promote coffee culture consumption as a cosmopolitan curiosity for tourists. However, an attempt to capitalize on crafted heritage subjects has failed. Jamec explains that locals adopt coffee culture, but more as a casual and individual habit rather than a social one. In contrast, tea drinking is considered and practiced as a more ceremonial and community event. While Qingtian, coffee is represented as a symbol of cosmopolitanism (Bofulin 2016), in Mingxi, coffee drinking is not. Jamec argues that "coffee consumption is forced upon the body" because migrants have been drinking low-cost coffee to endure tiredness and hardship during long hours in detrimental working conditions. This example may seem insignificant, but alongside other themes of hard-

earned success abroad, financial contributions to the hometown, and international and educated migrants, the discourse shapes a highly idealized image of the diaspora.

This approach neglects and ignores the dark side of the migrants' experience. News articles from China News and other popular platforms present identical storytelling on Qingtian migrant communities (China News 2023 n.p.; 163.com n.p.). The media portrayal of Qingtian highlights its remarkable transformation from a once impoverished county to an economically prosperous and internationally connected area. Qingtian's development is frequently depicted through the lens of its migrant economy and the internationalization that modernized the county, elevating it to the status of a "top ten county." (163.com n.p.) Articles from China News emphasize Qingtian's economic success by comparing South European townships and describing the growth of an internationalized market as a testament to its prosperity (China News 2023 n.p.). Additionally, a video from the popular platform 163.com not only traces the history of Qingtianese migration but also addresses the challenges arising from ongoing migration, such as empty villages and the increase in left-behind elderly and children. With emotional interviews with lonely seniors and minors and images of empty houses, the video evokes mixed feelings and narrates its vision of the past and present of rural areas.

"Qingtian's economic disparity and lack of emotion, magnified by the exchange rate and distance, has long been hidden under the booming so-called overseas Chinese economy."

青田这份被汇率和距离无限放大的经济落差与情感却位长久的掩盖在繁荣蓬勃的华侨经济下 (163.com n.p.)

The video is structured to show the progress and transformation on regional and national levels. Ultimately, the migrant economy is framed as a product of bravery that shook off the poverty.

"Two hundred years ago, the courage to leave the mountains allowed the Qingtian people to escape poverty. And the courage to go home two hundred years later allowed the people of Qingtian to find the answers..."

... 两百年前从山区走出国门的勇气让青田人拜托了贫困。而两百年后的回家的勇气让青田人找到答案... (163.com n.p.)

The key themes in these media sources are immigrants' hardships, close ties to Europe, attractiveness for foreign investment, economic success, and general competitiveness. Each of the articles introduces Qingtian as an exemplary country shaken by poverty, hardships, and struggles. It now enjoys a booming economy and a European urban lifestyle while needing its overseas youth. Perhaps it is exaggerated to make assumptions based on a few internet sources.

However, the positive side of the migrant legacy is highlighted in the different articles, coming from a long government-led Europeanisation process.

European style (欧洲式) is identified as "synonymous with a modern, sophisticated way of building or interior design." The foreign architectural design (洋楼) can be interpreted as the hallmark of Overseas Hometowns (Bofulin 2016:95). According to various media sources on Qingtian, such as China News 2023, News 2023, and 163.com n.p., the county is celebrated as the hometown of international, hardworking migrants who remain loyal to their roots. The urban space is full of European touches, there are cafe shops, western food, fine wine, and great choices for a shopping experience. An article from the Lishui Government indicates 2009 as the starting point for the renovation and westernization of urban spaces. The "international" layer of local identity is stated to increase the country's competitiveness (Lishui Government 2021 n.p.).

"Eight famous sculptures, including statues of Napoleon, David, and a bullfighter, have been installed along the road.... The "one core, two wings" urban space should strengthen the unique characteristics of the Overseas Chinese Hometown to stand out in regional competition."

沿路布设了拿破仑雕像、大卫雕像、斗牛士等 8 座著名雕塑。“一心两翼”城市空间，强化侨乡特色，才能在区域竞争中脱颖而出 (Lishui Government 2021 n.p.)

Interestingly, the traditional European style was interpreted as representing a universal and unified Europe, without specific reference to any particular epoch, culture, or region. At the same time, the internationalism of the overseas Chinese diaspora from Qingtian is no longer confined to Europe; instead, they have become increasingly transnational and mobile in recent years (Masdeu 2019). Another article emphasizes the influence of migrants and how it has enabled the country to synchronize with European cities and, consequently, global progress. The county aspires to become the "most beautiful county" of European style.

"The significant influence of overseas Chinese has shaped Qingtian into a distinctive" hometown of overseas Chinese," making it synchronized with world-renowned cities like Paris, Barcelona, Rome, and Milan. This influence allows Qingtian to keep pace with the world."

华侨的巨大影响，造就青田浓郁的侨乡特色，使得青田与巴黎、巴塞罗那、罗马、米兰等各国名城同步，与世界同步 (Qingtian Government 2021 n.p.)

The government has experimented with migration heritage not only as part of the architecture or a general town ambiance but also as a concept for commercial projects. One innovative

engagement with the diaspora is Qingtian's Imported Commodity City (ICC), which exemplifies how the ideas of diasporic urbanity can be materialized. In 2013, the Qingtian County Bureau of Commerce launched ICC, which includes specialized markets, an exhibition center, business services, and leisure tourism. Bofulin explains the intricate relationship between government, migration, and urbanization in the context of "cosmopolitanism through internationalization." In this regard, the local government employs the latest diaspora engagement strategies, leveraging the resources from emigration flows to transition the local economy from being a labor exporter to a service-oriented economy catering to domestic tourists. The ICC project "intended to function as a driver of future economic and urban transformation through internationalization" (Bofulin 2021:11)

This shift is reflected in the evolving diaspora mission, which aims to connect China with the world. The local government engages with the overseas Chinese via various activities, including legal affairs and public administration, investments, digital transformation, public diplomacy, and local urban restructuring (LCDRC 2022). The local economy is expected to transform from a labor exporter to a service-oriented economy for domestic tourists. The target audience consists of new returnees and Overseas Chinese who are visiting their hometown (Bofulin 2021:3). At the same time, the authorities are making efforts to fulfill the objectives of the national NUP and at the same time attract overseas talent to China, encouraging them to settle in urban areas and contribute to the process of urbanization and modernization (LCDRC 2022). Local governments leverage diaspora heritage and cultural narratives to enhance regional competitiveness and drive urban development. By integrating European-style aesthetics and promoting the legacy of overseas Chinese migrants, Qingtian has transformed into an "International County," showcasing a blend of modernity and constructed diaspora values.

4. Enhancing Place Image: Urban Development Planning

In 2022, the Lishui City Development and Reform Commission (丽水市发展和改革委员会, hereafter LCDRC) issued a localized urbanization plan for the region, detailing different guidelines, goals, and projects for Qingtian and other counties. The planning period spans from 2021 to 2025, with a perspective extended to 2035. The plan emphasizes urban demographic growth as an essential condition for further development. Under the leadership of the CPC

under Xi Jinping, Qingtian is expected to be revitalized as the local government implements policies, projects, and investments to make urban life in Qingtian more attractive.

The document begins by reviewing the achievements during the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020), emphasizing significant progress in urbanization: population growth, urban integration, and improvements in infrastructure and services. The urban population increased, and urbanization exceeded 60 percent. Significant attention was given to the rural issues, to which the rural "Revitalisation Strategy" (乡村振兴战略) addresses its solutions, including population relocation, rural-urban integration, and others. Policies were implemented to integrate rural migrants into urban settings, including the large-scale relocation and rapid settlement" (大搬快治) program. Major improvements in urban infrastructure and public services, such as education, healthcare, and transportation, enhanced the quality of urban living (LCDRC 2022:1-4).

Under the provincial general strategy titled "Lishui to Build a Model City for New Urbanization in Mountainous Areas of the Country by 2035," the "Cross Mountain Integration" initiative serves as a local steering plan to fulfill the objectives of the NUP (LCDRC 2022:8). Citizenisation (shiminhua) measures include the integration of rural-to-urban migrant populations, simplification of the household registration process, and moving the villagers from mountainous areas to urban areas (Qingtian Government 2017 n.p.;LCDRC 2022:2, 19-20). The demolition of villages and graves is often seen as a necessary step to expand urban areas and relocate populations.

The plan is guided by Xi Jinping's thoughts on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era, touching upon high-quality green development, cross-mountain coordination, and Lishui's integration into the Yangtze River Delta Economic Belt. Basic principles of governance include strengthening the leading role of the central city, reshaping township patterns, integrating industries and cities, promoting urban-rural integration, balancing protection and innovation, and emphasizing efficient and intensive development. The plan aims to promote Lishui's rural urbanization, accelerate the construction of the "One Belt, Three Zones" development pattern, and establish Lishui as a model for new urbanization in mountainous areas of Zhejiang and across China.

The Lishui Plan outlines eleven projects designed to improve and foster communication, trade, technology, infrastructure, education, and healthcare sectors. (Appedix A) While a clear focus is on comprehensive development, a significant amount of investment is allocated to road

construction. The total investment is 370.27 billion RMB, with a significant proportion allocated for communication-related projects, amounting to 17.920 billion RMB, representing about 48.39 percent of the total budget. Other projects, including the Old City Core Area Renovation, Water Conservancy Hub, and Pumped Storage Power Station, may be categorized as infrastructure maintenance. These projects received another half, comprising about 16.455 billion RMB, equal to 48.39 percent. The public service sectors of healthcare and education received only about 4.46 percent of the total investment (LCDRC 2022:53-70, see Appendix A). Road construction aims to enhance mobility and create the conditions to accommodate an influx of people into smaller communities. Qingtian was given the 'Characteristic Township' as its development model, emphasizing its unique migration legacy, possible as this legacy is deeply intertwined with themes of transnationalism, modernity, success, and a connection to ancient ancestral roots. These themes are central to conceptualizing the county's economic and developmental activities, particularly in trade and tourism.

The Overseas Hometown can be constructed as a place brand by local socio-political actors, capitalizing on diasporic resources and reflections of globalization. The Overseas Chinese Hometown brand is a project under the Characteristic Towns initiative based on cosmopolitanism, internationalization, and modernity. The promotion of the diaspora legacy serves as an instrument for the construction of a unified nation and the fostering of a sense of belonging among local communities. This plan aligns with a broader national strategy of rural modernization and revitalization. Investment projects include regional intercommunication, infrastructure developments, and trade (LCDRC 2022: 14,19, 53-70). The local officials present the further development of Qingtian, which has emerged from a history of complex interactions between local actors and migrants, within the framework of the "Overseas Chinese Hometown city brand" (侨乡城镇品牌). Urban planning attempts to reflect diasporic heritage in urban space, create a particular cultural experience, and strengthen the county's identity and image (LCDRC 2022:2-8, 14-15, 19). Place branding in Qingtian involves 'image orchestration' to influence perceptions and enhance the county's reputation. By promoting its positive narratives of diaspora heritage, the county aims to differentiate itself from other regions, attracting tourism and foreign investment.

4.1 Characteristic Township Development

The characteristic township initiative (特色小镇) is an idea to provide a new platform integrating industries, residences, tourism, and culture for small- and medium-sized townships.

Small-to-medium-sized towns became more prioritized for China's urban development and modernization. Characteristics are the chosen qualities with the potential to develop into a leading economic sector. Policy efforts promote regional development, economic diversification, and sustainable urbanization (Y. Wu et al. 2017:23).

The NUP's agenda criticizes urban-rural architecture and spatial design for lacking authenticity and not adapting to the local environment and culture. Therefore, localized urban planning for Lishui stresses a characteristic identity and its maintenance (The State Council of the PRC 2014 n.p.; LCDRC 2022:2-8). The modernization of the country, in which Westernisation and globalization are reflected as the ideal model of a developed entity, is justified by the attempt to preserve the heritage of the diasporic legacy. The city and county authorities describe this development conception as considerable and conscious of local traditions and characteristics. Capitalization of the diasporic values is encapsulated with the idea of an "Overseas Chinese Hometown city brand," the concept of designing an ideal image of the county's future. In particular, Qingtian's characteristic township development concept was chosen to use its migration legacy and promote it as an international trade and tourism center. The plan aspires:

"...to build the most beautiful county city with European-style charm and promote the development of the city brand as a homeland for overseas Chinese."

建设欧陆风情最美县城，推动侨乡城市品牌建设 (LCDRC 2022b:3, 14-15).

While Overseas Hometown is one of the identity markers of Qingtian, the county government also uses other features to construct the image of the place brand. The migration legacy celebrates the heroic past of the early generation of migrants and their remittances and donations; now, it is maintained by the diaspora organizations and overseas talents who are returning (163.com n.d. n.p.; China News 2021 n.p.). Another subject of local identity is carved stone, sold by Qingtian merchants all over Europe. The museum, dedicated to carved stone, is located at the center of the county's urban perimeter and was established in 2010 (China News 2015 n.p.). In 2015, China News highlighted the legacy of carved stone and the cultural markers of Qingtian. As part of this recognition, Shangkou Town (山口镇), located within the county, was listed among the towns to be promoted as characteristic towns in Zhejiang Province." Another characteristic is "rice-fish symbiosis" (稻鱼共生)² which became a global agricultural

² Fish provides fertiliser to rice, regulates micro-climatic conditions, softens the soil, disturbs the water, and eats larvae and weeds in the flooded fields; rice provides shade and food for fish (Lansing and Kremer 2011)

heritage (Lishui Government 2023 n.p.;L. Government 2022 n.p.). In 2021, the rice-fish culture was chosen as one of the innovative practices of rural revitalization in Zhejiang Province (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2022). However, this traditional agricultural practice is not unique to the region or only to China. It is practiced in many cultures worldwide (Lansing and Kremer 2011:19841– 19842).

Based on the data available, the migrant's hometown legacy, carved stone craftsmanship, and agricultural innovation are shown as the set of characteristic labels that create Qingtian's unique and competitive identity. Nevertheless, the migration legacy is the most marketed identity layer because of the opportunity and market it provides. Place marketing encompasses identifying, anticipating, and satisfying the needs and desires of target markets. Within a market-based approach, marketing aims to develop and offer products and services that meet the market demand. The Characteristic Development initiative for Overseas Hometowns depicts particular locality qualities that correspond to the market's need or have a chance to develop one. Ideally, a successful place marketing campaign would increase the number of incoming tourists and the potential urban residents or its Overseas diaspora living abroad. Therefore, improving the infrastructure is an important precondition to accommodate anticipated mobility flow. To fill this gap, regional integration of road construction, in the form of the One Belt Three Zones initiative, aims to interconnect counties in Zhejiang with highways.

4.2 Trade and Tourism: Narrating a Story of Success and Beauty

One project of the Lishui plan employs the existing Overseas Chinese economy as a business model concept. The "Qingtian Global Trade and Business Hub" (青田环球商贸聚集中心) with investment is the sole project that incorporates the Overseas Chinese economy and is executed under the auspices of the "Qingtian Overseas Chinese Experimental District Center" (青田县华侨试验区中心). The project started earlier but is ongoing and was projected to be completed in 2023. The shopping mall will be an all-in-one urban complex with imported trade, shopping, tourism, office space, and leisure activities. (Qingtian Government 2023a)

In the context of Qingtian, place promotion has been used to attract domestic tourists, international Overseas Chinese, and investors, communicating its offerings and advantages. This involves promoting local diaspora culture to the outside as part of both historical heritage and present times. Projects such as ICC and the "Qingtian Global Trade and Business Hub" are narrated to provide domestic tourists with an international shopping experience and space for development.

The county is also promoted as a tourist destination for the international diaspora living abroad, aiming to motivate Overseas Chinese to visit their hometown as a root tourism activity (China News 2023 n.p.). At the same time, the local government has been implementing place branding strategies and making use of natural resources to attract domestic tourists (Bofulin 2021:11). The prefecture city government of Lishui invested significantly in building a tourist resort in Beishan Town (北山镇). The development of Qianxia Lake (千峡湖) is described with the concept of overseas Chinese culture, along with other trends of eco-tourism and European style. In the Lishui Plan, Qianxia Lake may seem insignificant compared to others, but the description mentions migrant heritage being used as a storytelling concept for development.

"...relying on the unique mountain and water resources and profound cultural heritage, following the development concept of "nature, ecology, humanities, leisure, and fashion," with the connotation of Overseas Chinese culture and European style..."

...依托独特的山水资源和深厚的文化底蕴，按照“自然、生态、人文、休闲、时尚”的开发理念，以侨乡文化和欧陆风情为内涵... (LCDRC 2022b:35).

During the implementation of the Lishui Plan for the 2020-2024 period, the plan placed a strong emphasis on the promotion of Overseas Chinese culture, which was to be interpreted and integrated with elements of Western culture and modernity.

The reinvention and reconstruction of diasporic heritage in Qingtian County exemplify a strategic approach to place branding and urban development. Qingtian leverages its cultural legacy to foster growth and create a distinctive identity through infrastructure projects, economic initiatives, and tourism development. These efforts not only benefit the local economy but also strengthen the bond between the Overseas Hometown and its diaspora, ensuring a sustainable and inclusive future for the region. The Qingtian Global Trade and Business Hub and the Qianxia Lake Ecological Tourism Resort aim to attract foreign investment and tourism while creating new business opportunities and enhancing the region's economic sustainability. Key projects demonstrate how local governments leverage the financial and cultural capital of the diaspora to drive economic development. The Lishui Plan's focus on building highways and improving transportation links is essential for integrating rural areas with urban centers, facilitating trade, and improving access to services. However, the essence of diasporic internationalism and modernity are unnatural and problematic due to its aggressive and artificial Westernisation, which replaces traditional, local authenticity (Liu 2022:

212, 209-227). Diasporic internationalism harms other aspects of culture and heritage that are not categorized, yet possess great value for community and individuals.

4.3 Ancestors Hinder Urban Development

Cooperation between cities, counties, and small townships could increase the general competitiveness, population capacity, and land use efficiency by building roads between (LCDRC 2022:4,8,11,49). The communication and construction projects are planned and realized under the "One Belt, Three Zones" initiative (一带三区, hereafter BTZ) (LCDRC 2022:4). A significant amount of funds has been allocated: the National Highway 330 Qingtian Wenxi to Chuanliao Section Reconstruction Project, with an investment of 88.50 million RMB, aims to build 31.5 km of high-speed road, being the highest total investment for Qingtian County. Its purpose is to connect Qingtian with Wencheng and Leqing.

The construction work is divided into smaller parts between the counties, with each county having limited responsibilities and budget to achieve a communication net. Particularly in Lishui, Qingtian County is presented as the south wing of the belt. Meanwhile, Qingtian and Jinyun plan to integrate into Jinyi's new district and Wenzhou (LCDRC 2022:2,11). There are a few challenges in the realization of this plan. The land designed for construction works is occupied. Therefore, the "National Highway 330 Qingtian Wenxi to Chuanliao Section Reconstruction Project" causes "the demolition of more than 100 acres of land and relocation of more than 200 graves and 20 houses" (Qingtian Government 2023b n.p.). The authorities have shared a notice with a detailed construction plan for the relocation and resettlement area of Tanxia village. The land collection and relocation of graves and compensation for land clearing have been completed. The official grave relocation procedure follows a standard protocol of publishing a "Notice of Grave Relocation" (迁坟启事 or 迁坟通知) in the local press (Mullaney 2019 n.p.). There are three other notices demanding grave relocation.

1. the renovation of the area, graves from the Shiguo Shang and Xia old villages (石郭上、下村旧村) (Qingtian County Broadcasting and Television Station Official Account 2024n.p.).
2. To accommodate the construction needs of the industrial platform project, graves are to be relocated from Dongyuan Village (东源镇东源村) (Qingtian County Dongyuan Town People's Government 2024 n.p.).

3. To make space for constructing a sports center in 2011 (Qingtian County Youzhu New District Management Committee 2011 n.p.).

Accordingly, residents must comply within a short period and should move the graves to another cemetery or may choose to make their arrangements. The tomb will be considered unclaimed if relocation is not completed by the deadline. While improved infrastructure facilitates the movement of people, goods, and services, thereby enhancing residents' overall quality of life, such construction projects may also have ethical issues and contradict the cultural values of ancestry. The legacies of ancestors, many of whom traveled away from home and later returned as loyal contributors to their hometown's prosperity, have now become obstacles to urban development after their passing. Notably, graves hold significant importance for people, serving as a source of place attachments and adding value to familial farmland. Considering that villages and Overseas Hometowns are inhabited mainly by the elderly and children, as well as the high costs and tight deadlines involved in relocation, compliance with development orders is likely challenging for many families.

5. Conclusion

The conceptualization of heritage in urban space-making in the homelands of the Chinese diaspora is evolving along with the urban and tourism development processes. By examining Qingtian economic and urban development narratives, this research analyses urban policies through the lens of place branding. The concept of an Overseas Hometown, as a defining characteristic of these native places of international migrants, has long impacted their sustenance, development, and economic climate (Yow 2007; X. Zhang 2007). The migration legacy has been adopted by diaspora policies to create a place of attachment (Overseas Chinese Barabantseva 2005). Later, migration legacies were integrated into urban planning to create diasporic urban spaces, or, as Liu describes, a process of diasporic place-making (J. Liu 2022). The strategic use of diaspora heritage has significant socio-economic implications, embodying transnationalism, internationalism, and modernity while maintaining a strong connection between diaspora and China. Place branding is one perspective to examine China's strategy to leverage its diaspora for domestic development. Bofulin argues that diaspora policies are not simply passively implemented by local authorities in the county but also undergo a process of experimentation and innovation (Bofulin 2022b). Local and regional governments compete with other local and international markets by shaping how potential consumers perceive their

place (Evan Cleave and Gilliland 2016; Pasquinelli 2013). Thus, place branding theory can help explain how diasporic legacies are implemented in China's urban policies. The Lishui Plan emphasizes comprehensive development and implements characteristic township or thematic branding for specific places (LCDRC 2022; LCDRC 2023).

Diasporic values, or more accurately, labels and features, are strategically integrated into various policies related to urban place branding. Diasporic culture once referred to the international sojourner lifestyle, involving annual visits to the hometown, sending donations, and maintaining cultural identity and a sense of belonging. However, these values are now changing. The reinvention and reconstruction of collective identities are processed under the need to adapt to a modernized and globalized competition-oriented economy, in which local characteristics act as authentic features. However, these authentic features are reconstructed as Western, international, modern, and flexible. In essence, the ideal of Overseas Hometown development is closely tied to young international descendants of Chinese migrants returning to China. These returning overseas Chinese are encouraged to learn from their host countries, remain competitive, represent the state, capitalize on their cultural heritage, and ideally return to their ancestral homeland to contribute to the nation-building process. The small county is given an identical goal to grow and develop for its competitiveness.

More importantly, this study highlights the aspirations of a small township striving to blend urban sophistication with rural resources. The concept of an Overseas Hometown envisions a place that offers modern lifestyles, products, services, infrastructure, and communication networks, all within a natural park. This creates a garden city characterized by unique industries and a collective identity sustained by loyal residents.

The ongoing state-led internationalization of the county, which involves the construction and materialization of diasporic values, serves as a rationale for Westernisation within a broader process of modernization, striving towards an ideal urbanized, civilized, and capitalized society.

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Appendix A

Project title	Budget in 100 million RMB	Share of budget	Economic sector
Qingtian Global Trade and Business Hub, 青田环球商贸聚集中心	10	2.70%	trade
Qingtian County Old City Core Area Renovation Project, 青田县老城核心区旧城改造项目	80	21.60%	infrastructure
Qingtian County Xiaoxi Water Conservancy Hub Project, 青田县小溪水利枢纽工程	14.55	3.93%	infrastructure
Qingtian County Pumped Storage Power Station, 青田县抽水蓄能电站	70	18.9	infrastructure
Qingtian Rehabilitation Hospital, 青田康复	2.52	0.68%	healthcare

医院			
Qingtian County Third People's Hospital (Central Hospital), 青田县第三人民医院 (中部医院)	4.4	1.19%	healthcare
Qingtian to Wencheng Expressway (Qingtian Section), 青田至文成高速公路 (青田段)	88.5	23.89%	communication
Leqing to Qingtian Expressway (Qingtian Section), 乐清至青田高速 (青田段)	45	12.15%	communication
National Highway 330 Qingtian Wenxi to Chuanliao Section Reconstruction Project 330 国道青田温溪至船寮段改建工程	45.7	12.33%	communication
Qingtian County Vocational and Technical School Expansion Project, 青田县职业技术学校扩建工程	4.8	1.30%	education
Qingtian County Sanxikou Middle School New Construction Project, 青田县三溪口中学校新建项目	4.8	1.30%	education
Total:	370.27		

Table 1: Investment budget for development projects in Qingtian county. Author's table based on data from LCDRC [2022b:50-70](#)