

## Imported commodity city: A new model for the development of China's emigration hometowns?

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### **Abstract**

The present article contributes to the research on emigration from the People's Republic of China and the relations between emigrated Chinese and their hometowns. Focusing on the investment project Emigration Hometown Qingtian's Imported Commodity City highlights the intersection between the Chinese consumers' patterns and the local indigenous emigration practices that produce a particular model of local development predicated on the mobility of people and objects. As this development aims to transform the "emigration town" from an exporter of labour to a regional tourism centre offering visitors a cosmopolitan and internationalised experience of "Europe in China", the in-depth analysis of policy documents, participant observation, and expert interviews reveals that this is a precarious model for which changed global and national conditions can strongly jeopardise its viability and success.

**KEYWORDS:** China, emigration, hometowns of overseas Chinese, qiaoxiang, cosmopolitanism, diaspora

## Introduction

This article examines a specific investment project in a small rural county in southeast China called Emigration Hometown Qingtian's Imported Commodity City (ICC), to highlight the most recent transformations in connection to the emigration from the People's Republic of China (PRC). While there has been considerable research on the economic and social development of areas of strong emigration or so-called "hometowns of overseas Chinese" (*qiaoxiang*) (Douw et al., 1999; Tan, 2007; Li, 2013), the new impetus given by Xi Jinping's policies of the "Chinese Dream" and the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and their implications for the development of emigration areas (primarily situated in south-eastern China) have not been sufficiently addressed. The analysis of these changes through a particular case study of one investment project that was made possible by diasporic resources (be they discursive, financial or cultural) is theoretically situated within the study of diasporic ties and engagements between PRC and localities with strong emigration or so-called *qiaoxiang* literature (Douw et al., 1999; Tan, 2007; Yow, 2013). Much of this scholarship is devoted to the business ties of emigrants or their descendants with their locations of origin (Douw et al., 1999; Ren & Liu, 2021), and a primordial tie to the "motherland" is often implied (Huang, 1998). However, there has been an increased use of a socio-constructivist approach that addresses the development of these emigration locations as a result of dynamic and changing negotiations between the emigrants and their communities of origin that include economic calculations, the search for development opportunities, and even the desire for self-identification and modernisation (Yow, 2013; Liu, 2020).

This article thus contributes to this strand of research by highlighting the interplay of local uses of emigration legacies with wider contemporary social processes (e.g., consumerism patterns) in defining the vision and the path for local development. In addition, it provides insight into the mechanism of the local-level governance of diaspora engagement, an aspect of diaspora studies that is largely neglected due to the state being a primary unit of analysis in much of the diaspora scholarship (for a critique, see Alonso & Mylonas, 2019).

One of the major changes in the Chinese state's management of emigration from China in the previous decade has been the revival and the overhaul of policies targeting the return of emigrated Chinese, regardless of their formal status as citizens of the PRC. The primary focus is on attracting back "talents", meaning people with "professional skills and advanced mindsets" together with "international views" and experience of working abroad (Wang, 2013). The baseline for these policies is China's National Talent Devel-

opment Plan of 2010, which addresses the emerging lack of skilled persons in China and the growing number of students returning home after graduation abroad in recent years (Wang 2013). National-level policies on returnees (be they entrepreneurs, researchers, or investors) trickle down to provincial and local levels in a myriad of initiatives and strategies that use local resources and a distinctive local type of place-making connected to a century-long emigration.

In Qingtian, a small emigration hometown in Zhejiang province in the southeast of China, this type of place-making has been characterised as diasporic (Liu, 2020). Under the analytical lens of social constructivism, these places cannot be seen as naturally cosmopolitan or internationalised but rather as the desired outcome of a deliberate process by local actors that build on the emigrant resources (Liu, 2020) and imagined cosmopolitanism (Schein, 2003). It is in these circumstances that a project like ICC can emerge as a leading socio-economic vision of a town's development path; one that addresses economic priorities of attracting investments and returnees and simultaneously re-emphasises the town's migration-related cultural identity in the direction of China's neoliberal and consumerist development priorities.

However, the realisation of ICC requires a broader structural demand for products it offers. The Chinese consumers' preferences for foreign goods, especially among urbanites, have been well documented (Zhou & Hui, 2003; Schein, 2013), and it is precisely this vast group that is targeted as customers of Qingtian's new "commodity city". It is this intersection between the national-level consumers' patterns and the local indigenous emigration practices that this article elucidates to highlight how mobility can be instrumentalised for developmental purposes in contemporary China.

The data for this article were collected during one-month-long fieldwork in Qingtian in 2019, preceded by a decade-long research involvement in this area. The data are based on the local policy documents (especially the local level policies and documents tackling administrative aspects of return migration, the local development priorities, and official governmental proclamations from their official online websites), reports (e.g., Qingtian county yearbook), media articles (local print tourism and branding brochures and magazines as well as online local and national news portals), and on five interviews with local government representatives from the county-level diaspora engagement infrastructure. In addition, I have carried out participant observation by regularly visiting the commodity city and talking with employees, customers and other locals about the role and characteristics of this huge investment project.

In the following subchapters, I first describe the ICC, a new and (to-date) the most ambitious local development project of Qingtian county. In the next part, I contextualise the role of emigration in the county's development and analyse the particular role foreign products have in China on the one hand and in this specific emigration hometown on the other. In the final parts, I discuss the viability of the "imported goods cities" development model at the intersection between emigration and "imagined cosmopolitanism".

### **Emigration Hometown Qingtian's Imported Commodity City—shopping mall as the epicentre of the new local emigration economy**

In 2013, Qingtian county Bureau of Commerce conceived ICC (*Qiaoxiang Qingtian jinkou shangpin cheng*) at the outskirts of the small village of Youzhu ten kilometres from Qingtian's county seat. This remote and underdeveloped location does not convey the grandeur and ambitiousness of the project; the first phase of the enormous, 339.000 square meters large shopping cum entertainment centre was built in just four years. It currently consists of four specialised markets, with plans for opening another specialised market, exhibition and convention centre, business service centre and leisure tourism centre. The existing markets comprise a seemingly infinite row of shops placed within a faux classicist facade under high blocks of flats. These shops carry more than 50,000 products from 60 countries worldwide (QTICC, 2021). Here one can find the most desirable items from Europe, Japan, and South Korea. By far the most popular and the most numerous are wine shops offering wines from well-known producer countries like France, Spain, or Italy, and smaller and upcoming countries like Portugal, Serbia, or Romania. Also popular are shops with home cleaning products and cosmetics, mainly bought in European drugstores, such as Drogerie Markt, Watsons', or Rossman. It is not uncommon to spot the original price tags from the mentioned stores in various currencies pointing to the origin of the goods in European countries.

There is also a wide variety of stores offering famous food items from all corners of Europe: Spanish *Jamon Iberico* and *chorizo*, Italian *prosciutto* or *Parmigiano-Reggiano*, Greek *Kalamata* olive oil, Belgian chocolates, and other products that embody European craftsmanship or have enthused emigrated Qingtianese living in Europe who later brought them back to Qingtian as presents. Another large group of shops is the so-called "mother-baby" shops (*mu ying dian*), where the popularity of powdered milk and diapers reflects the long-standing craze for foreign powder milk and diaper brands in China (Bofulin, 2016; Martin, 2017). They also sell high-end baby items like Stokke cribs or Bugaboo strollers. Due to this wide variety of imported goods from the West and the

East, the shopping malls was dubbed *the world's supermarket* (*shijie chaoshi*) (Author's fieldwork notes, 2019).

As much of this merchandise is perishable, this shopping mall also has bonded warehouses and in-house customs services. The field offices of the prefectural customs office and entry-exit inspection and quarantine bureau facilitate fast processing of customs duties, as well as swift repackaging and sorting (QTICC, 2021). This level of service is at least partially enabled by the fact that ICC is a fully state-owned company under the ownership of the local county government (QTICC, 2021). According to the company's presentation materials, the county government was following several development strategies by initiating this project; the August Eighth (88) Strategy<sup>1</sup> of provincial development, the provincial policy The Return of Zhejiang Merchants,<sup>2</sup> and The Belt and Road Initiative<sup>3</sup> (QTICC, 2021). On a more practical level, this commercial space is also the local government's main mechanism to provide emigrants and their family members with investment possibilities and jobs after they return and settle in the county.

To boost brand recognition within and beyond the province, Qingtian imported goods city engages in the organisation of equally ambitious and large-scale commercial events. The flagship event is the Qingtian Imported Wine Fair, first conducted in 2018. The event was organised together with the Emigrants' Imported Commodity Exhibition. Both events attracted 105,000 visitors and almost one thousand exhibitors (QTICC, 2021). Drawing on the strong presence of Qingtianese migrants in some of the world's leading wine-producing countries (France, Italy, Spain), these events want to establish Qingtian as a centre for selling imported goods, especially wine. Hence, the oft-repeated phrase in Chinese media that there is not a drop of wine being produced in Qingtian, despite it being one of the centres of the wine business in China (Lishui government, 2021).

Besides the shops, ICC offers restaurants, bars, cafes, and bakeries, many of them specialising in Western food items. Often, the owners owned or worked in Chinese restau-

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<sup>1</sup> The "August Eighth (88) Strategy" was promoted by Xi Jinping, the current General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, in 2003 when he was the Secretary of the Zhejiang Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China. The strategy proposes eight measures for the future development of the province Zhejiang that build on the existing advantages of the province (The People's Government of Zhejiang Province, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> The "Return of Zhejiang Merchants" has been the top priority initiative by the Zhejiang Provincial Government since 2012. It aims to reconstruct Zhejiang's economy by building on the existing advantages of the province, especially its massive diaspora community (Zhejiang Government's Official Web Portal, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> The "Belt and Road Initiative" is the Chinese long-term strategic program proposed by Xi Jinping in 2013 aiming for infrastructural development and acceleration of economic integration of countries along the route of the historic Silk Road (Belt and Road Initiative 2021).

rants in Europe in the past but have also learned how to prepare steaks, pasta, pizza, pastries, and excellent Italian-style coffee. In an interesting twist, they are again offering “exotic” food as part of the ICC cosmopolitan experience. Next to catering, other services signal the quest for modernity in the small rural county. One such example is the children’s store by the renowned Danish brand Lego that sells the famous blocks and offers regular extra-curricular activities for children under the strict supervision of Lego-branded instructors. As part of the integrated shopping experience, parents who bring their children to these activities can, while waiting for the class to finish, do their weekly groceries of foreign goods or relax with an Italian cappuccino (Author’s fieldwork notes, 2019).

Qingtian inhabitants have conflicting views on whether the huge investment proves as successful as authorities claimed. As evidence of failure, they often mention that the streets between the shopping mall buildings are empty and that only a few shops generate actual revenue. Others point out that most commerce is e-commerce, by which customers order and get their goods delivered home, a widespread shopping mode in China (Author’s fieldwork notes, 2019). In the absence of accessible visitor data, it is difficult to weigh on this, but as I will show in the following subchapters, the function and the objective of the ICC surpass a simple rational cost-benefit analysis based solely on the visitors’ numbers or revenue turnover.

### **Building local development model on emigration ties**

The qiaoxiang “emigration towns” are places with a high number of emigrants, their dependent family members as well as returned emigrants. While of the earlier origin, the use of the term increased after the economic reforms initiated in 1978 and the waves of emigration that followed. It features strongly in the local governments’ documents and strategies that aim to associate the emigration from these localities with the local development models (Yow, 2007). The indiscriminate use of qiaoxiang implies similar development paths of these localities, but as Cheun Hoe Yow (2007) has shown, this is not the case as migration trajectories, migrants’ inspirations, and state policies have interacted amid expanding global capitalism and have generated different degrees of impact in emigration towns. His analysis unveils how some emigration localities gradually become “detraditionalised”, that is, losing active ties with emigrated populations and pursuing modernisation goals on non-emigration-related bases, while others actively continue to build on these transnational connections (Yow, 2007).

In the case of Qingtian, the latter applies. With more than half of the inhabitants leaving the small rural county to settle, temporarily or permanently, in Europe, South America, and Africa (China Overseas Chinese Network, 2018), the remaining population is heavily reliant on remittances, donations, and investments from abroad. The local government thus strategically builds the development model on these return flows of finances and aims to engage diaspora members to participate in local modernisation. The local agencies that deal with the emigration (primarily local branches of The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO) and the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (AFROC) but also other bureaus of the local government) have been actively engaging with the emigrants since the 1980s. In 2001, they devised the “Project of Overseas Chinese<sup>4</sup> as the Key Element to Return Flows” (*Huaqiao yaosu huiliu gongcheng*), which promotes emigrants’ capital investments into the county (Zhang, 2007). Since 2013, the local government, encouraged by the national strategies of the Chinese Dream and the Belt and Road Initiative, began the process of mainstreaming of diaspora engagement measures that resulted in a myriad of initiatives aimed at bringing emigrated members even closer to their “hometown” and unlocking the potential of their transnational ties and achievements abroad. These initiatives have several aims; they want to position the PRC as the caring state vis-a-vis the emigrants (e.g., introducing online services to support emigrants in carrying out administrative procedures and other needs, or establishing service centres abroad to help emigrants in dealing with their issues in China or countries of settlement), support local development and provide returnees with the opportunities to return and settle in the county by attracting emigrants’ investments, skills, and connections (Bofulin, 2021).

Traditionally, most Qingtianese emigrants have dreamt of retiring to Qingtian. This kind of mentality is reflected in the traditional saying “fallen leaves return to the roots” (*luoye guigen*). As the largest wave of emigration from Qingtian occurred in the 1990s, many of those who emigrated started to return to Qingtian after 2010. While some of the European countries were hit hard by the economic crisis of 2008, many emigrants were drawn back to China and its many economic opportunities. In addition, the central government’s policies increasingly supported the return of “talents”, which would further invigorate Chinese development and economy. To boost the return of capital and people, the local government initiated a string of concrete actions to improve returnees’ access to social security, housing, and children’s education and created economic opportunities they could tap into (Zhejiang government’s service platform, 2018).

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<sup>4</sup>“Overseas Chinese” (*huaqiao*) is the official term for Chinese emigrants in China.

In terms of the latter, one of the essential measures was the establishment of the Overseas Chinese Investment Projects' Trading Center in 2017 to attract emigrants' investments and improve investments' transparency and navigation in the often very complex Chinese investment environment. This online platform that currently lists 1,227 different investment projects aims to provide information on project analysis, bank loan availability, and project approval. It is "tailor-made for overseas Chinese investors" (Overseas Chinese Investment Projects' Trading Center, 2017). Under the motto "Those who would like to return, can return. After the return, there are opportunities", the prospective Qingtianese emigrants can now review possible investments virtually before returning to Qingtian (Yao & Chunlong, 2019). Furthermore, another significant project approved in 2018 (i.e., the Zhejiang (Qingtian) Overseas Chinese Economic and Cultural Cooperation Pilot Zone") is claimed to be one of the Zhejiang province's top ten measures for opening out to the outside world and an important contribution from the Qingtian county to the Belt and Road initiative (Chuchu, 2019). The pilot zone merges several ambitious projects (e.g., the World Red Wine Center, The World Overseas Chinese Imported Commodity Expo, Imported Wine Fair) with the central feature—ICC. Here, the prospective investors can invest in more complex products (such as the World Red Wine Center) or simply open a small shop with foreign products to supplement their incomes in China or Europe. However, while the economic incentive for incorporating the returnees into the economic and social tissue of hometown is important for the local decision-makers, the practical and symbolic value of the ICC goes beyond the returnees' needs towards a complete urban and economic restructuring of the county. In this, the local government pursues its long-standing goals, where emigrants and their financial flows might not be the base of the economy but are certainly "the driving force that can assist in triggering the economic take-off of the Qingtian county" (Zhang, 2007, p. 80).

### **Consuming foreign products as imagined cosmopolitanism**

Four decades of economic and structural reforms in China have produced an economic miracle and lifted an unprecedented number of people out of poverty but also resulted in high levels of income inequality (Milovanovic, 2021). This socio-economic context contributed to the prevalence of consumerism and conspicuous consumption, as described by the sociologist Thorstein Veblen (Jin et al., 2014). When consumers focus on the signalling value rather than the functional value of the commodity, then consumption becomes a tool of creating one's social value and the improvement of reputability and social status (Jin et al., 2014). Moreover, the newly available commodities gave rise



to “imagined cosmopolitanism”, which is a feeling that even window-shoppers have a sense of participation in a global commodity culture (Schein, 2013, p. 226).

Foreign products are highly desirable as they symbolise global or affluent Western consumption. They may extend from conspicuous products (prestigious brands) to inconspicuous products of foreign origin (mundane, everyday use products) (Zhou & Hui, 2003, p. 51). Besides being conscious of the symbolic meaning of the foreign products, Chinese consumers may also harbour a certain level of mistrust in the domestic products’ safety, especially regarding children’s items due to the past safety risks (e.g., the tainted milk scandal<sup>5</sup>). While many foreign brands have factories in China that cater specifically to the Chinese market, middle-class consumers prefer products bought abroad and shipped to China. The phenomena, known as the *daigou trade*,<sup>6</sup> started with baby milk formula and diapers a decade ago but reached unprecedented levels when Chinese students and migrants established e-commerce networks spanning different continents. The importing and selling of diapers and milk formula have been supplemented by a wide variety of products, especially cosmetics and other drugstore products, dairy products, and prestigious items like designer bags and clothes sold by highly mobile Chinese individuals through their social media accounts (Bofulin, 2018; Martin, 2017). The consumption of these items was so high that stores in Japan, UK, Australia, and New Zealand limited the number of items one could purchase (BBC, 2013; Australian Associated Press, 2015), while in Hongkong, a law was passed in 2013 that limits the purchase of milk formula to 1.8 kilos per person (Sun, 2017). That eventually led to the complete crackdown of the activity by the Chinese customs authorities (Hancock & Xueqiao, 2018).

In Qingtian, given the inhabitants’ extensive and long-standing transnational connections, the *daigou trade* started earlier and was less an economic transaction than a form of family and community-making. Emigrated members of the Qingtianese community have been sending parcels to their family members and friends from abroad or brought them back when they returned for visits and holidays. This particular type of consumption can be seen as an act of caring across borders, which attempts to emulate care within family members living in propinquity (Bofulin, 2018). Due to their widespread character, the foreign products brought or sent from abroad became part of every household

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<sup>5</sup> The tainted milk scandal refers to one of China’s largest food safety incidents. The large milk powder producer Sanlu added toxic melanin to the milk formula, injuring more than 300.000 babies and killing six, mainly in the impoverished Gansu province (Huang, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> *Daigou* could be translated as “buying on behalf of somebody”.

in Qingtian and, as such, a mundane and banal symbol of transnationalism rather than a signifier of social status.

It was this local “tradition” that the local government chose to build upon when establishing the “Emigration Hometown Qingtian’s Imported Commodity City” and envision the county’s economy in general as part of the already mentioned “diasporic place-making”. As part of this diasporic place-making, emigration locations in China are infused with stereotyped *diasporic* elements and marked allegedly distinguishable from non-diasporic places (Liu, 2020, p. 4). This particular form of place-making also aims to stimulate exotic tourism and leisure consumption while projecting Western-oriented imaginaries of modern lifestyles to catch up with other purportedly more cosmopolitan locations amid China’s urban “internationalisation” frenzy (Liu, 2020). It is thus precisely why the ICC is featured prominently in the first edition of travel magazine *You Qingtian* (Traveling in Qingtian) (2017). While inviting travellers to visit the shopping mall, it also points to the unique feature of this particular shopping experience as well as the town itself:

So, what is worth buying in Qingtian, the emigration hometown? Food, accommodation, travel, shopping, and entertainment, as the necessary elements of a tourist city, are becoming more sophisticated in Qingtian. Yongqing Ye, director of the Qingtian County Tourism Committee, believes that the “Qingtian imported commodity city” amplifies the shopping aspect in Qingtian with its more than 40,000 European and American products so that you can indeed have a perfect and beautiful experience. (You Qingtian, 2017, p. 9)

Despite more than the decade-long debate addressing the diminishing appeal of foreign goods in China (Zhou & Hui, 2003; Matsuda, 2021), the products sold in these markets are imbued with the aura of authenticity as these are not foreign products produced for the Chinese market but rather goods that were brought to China from abroad through emigrants’ transnational networks. This might be the reason that new versions of the ICC model are popping up across China. One such development, also in the province of Zhejiang, is Pinghu International Imported Commodity City founded by a prominent emigrant who lives in Portugal and China. In his message at the opening ceremony, he emphasised the emigrants’ habit of gift-giving and the change in conditions for the import of foreign goods:

I have lived in Europe for more than 20 years. Every time I returned to my country, I brought gifts to relatives and friends. Everyone was pleasantly surprised. Young and old loved the gifts, from food and drink to clothes. I recognised the

massive potential of China's imported products market. With the continuous raise of the income level in our country, the Chinese people have a stronger desire to pursue safe and healthy products. Due to the changes in the tariffs this year, the procurement cost of foreign products has been reduced, and they are no longer luxury goods. For this reason, I have decided to return and invest in an international import commodity city and so follow my father's philosophy of "letting Chinese people eat" and let Chinese people live better! (Imporium City, 2021)

The "internationalisation" frenzy that Jiaqi Liu (2020) mentioned, together with the trade agreements that considerably lowered the tariffs of imported products, seems to be triggering more such imported commodity city development projects. One such example is the planned imported commodity city in Meihekou in the province of Jilin in the north of China. The Meihekou investment documents list further reasons for investing in the imported goods cities: the additional products safety screening by Chinese customs and the average profit margins of imported goods; according to their estimate, there is a 40% profit on imported goods compared with only 15–20% profit margin on domestic goods (Provincial government of Jilin, 2021). The government's investment plan of Meihekou town next to the Korean border, the important transportation hub, explicitly mentions the good example of ICC as an inspiration for the development of such project in the province of Jilin (Department of Commerce of Jilin Province, 2021).

### **The precarious future of the imported commodity city model**

The interplay between local strategies and initiatives and the broader, national trends and conditions brings forth ambitious projects such as ICC. Beyond being an economic and infrastructural investment, the "city" is also intended to function as a driver of future economic and urban transformation through internationalisation (e.g., by putting up various large-scale events, one of them being the Qingtian wine fair or tourism campaigns Travel to Qingtian). While firmly building on the transnational ties, the small county is restructuring its economy in the direction of the service industry, notably tourism. By implementing the most recent diaspora engagement strategies, the local government uses the resources provided by emigration flows to transform the town's economy from exporter of labour to the touristic hotspot for domestic tourists seeking "cosmopolitanism at home". From "European streets" to "Western" wine and dine and finally, an immersive experience of shopping for "authentic" Western products, this new economy offers a "Europe in China" that can be conveniently visited in a short getaway.

However, just how sustainable this model of development is? The “imported commodity city” model is premised on a variety of highly dynamic conditions and is subject to global and national political and economic factors. One crucial prerequisite for the model’s survival is the continuous and regular provision of goods from Europe. As mentioned, this largely depends on the trade and tariff agreements between China and other countries. For some time now, the PRC has been steadily lowering or even cancelling import tariffs on various consumer goods, especially food, medicines, and information technology. These measures aim to expand the free trade areas in China further and to meet the growing domestic demand for imported consumer goods (State Taxation Administration, 2020). However, while the current tariff regime is beneficial for the development of the imported commodity cities, there is no guarantee that the trend in tariff reduction will continue or that tariffs will not be increased again, especially given the growing complexity of the post-pandemic economy on the one hand and the trade war between the US and China on the other.

Disruptions caused by Covid-19 can affect the ICC in various ways. Most importantly, together with transport delays, the mobility regimes have been fundamentally changed. The “shock mobility” and the “reaction immobility” (Xiang, 2020) strongly impacted the transnational mobile lives of Qingtianese. Many wanted to return to China due to the loss of income in the countries of settlement but were discouraged from doing so by the Chinese state and public as they were seen as potential importers of the virus (Bofulin, 2020; Gao, 2021). This disruption in the mobility regimes strongly affects those with transnational lives, regularly moving back and forth between places of origin and (multiple) places of settlement. This fact may also affect the regular flow of products from Europe as it is heavily dependent on the person-to-person connections within Qingtianese transnational spaces rather than on impersonal trade among business subjects. In particular, Qingtianese wine merchants have regularly circulated between wine-producing regions in Europe and Qingtian to offer the best deals to the World Red Wine Center’s consumers. The end of this circulation could jeopardise the recently established centre and the annual Qingtain Imported Wine Fair, where the presence of guests from abroad ensures the authenticity of the event and emphasises the internationalisation of the county.

Lastly, the consumers’ preferences are also very dynamic and are price- and politics-sensitive. While Western products and goods can symbolise freedom, cosmopolitanism, and new experiences, the research by Tian and Dong (2010) also finds various other, more negative, narratives connected to Western brands in China; Western brands as symbols

of Western oppressors or as tough market competitors, which, if defeated by Chinese domestic brands, will redeem China's past colonial humiliation in the eyes of the world, recovering China's role as a world leader. This variety of approaches makes consumers' choices concerning imported goods much more volatile. There is also pressure from various campaigns advertising nationalism in consumerism, especially when there is a dispute among Western countries and the PRC (Shepard, 2016; Brant, 2021). If this nationalism gains strength among Chinese consumers, ICC may very well lose its attractiveness among many potential customers. For now, the market surveys reveal that Chinese consumers are led primarily by practical matters such as value for money and quality. In these fields, the domestic brands outperform foreign brands, except in the areas where trust or quality are of utmost importance (powder milk, cosmetics, wine) (Zipser, 2021). Additionally, research among Chinese consumers shows that they do not distinguish well among the domestic and foreign brands, as foreign brands have become strongly localised and adapted to the Chinese market (Zipser, 2021). This is beneficial for the imported commodity city model as it builds on Western products that are not localised at all, not even by instruction labels using the Chinese language.

To conclude, the imported commodity city model, Qingtian's pioneering product, is a precarious development model with several factors affecting its viability and success. While it is impossible to forecast whether the global (post-pandemic mobility regimes) and national (tariffs) conditions will continue to be to its advantage, the Qingtianese transnational networks on which this project builds have shown great adaptability and resilience in the past. Hence, the survival of ICC is much more secured than that of other "imported commodity cities" not immersed in the emigration town type of economy.

## **Conclusion**

The creation of ICC, a large shopping and entertainment project focusing on selling foreign products at the outskirts of the small rural town of Qingtian, reveals a new approach to the decades-long local engagement with past and present emigration flows. In this approach, the local government's development vision is no longer that of a local economy built on outward-directed labour export and inward-directed financial flows (e.g., remittances, foreign investments) but rather one predicated on the cultural resources of emigration that enable the development of vibrant, unique, and cosmopolitan service industry. The case study of one of the largest investments to date in a well known emigration hometown of Qingtian highlights how past legacies of emigration are utilised to construct a unique place endowed with European style to be used as an au-

thentic backdrop to innovative products serving the local economy. This world's supermarket aims to fulfil several requirements; as a short-term strategy, it represents the local government's response to investments' desires or employment needs of returned emigrants and their re-integration "home", but as a more long term strategy, it signals the complete urban and economic restructuring of the county. In this restructuring, the primary targets are no longer emigrants themselves, but rather co-nationals with consumer practices that favour (authentic) foreign products and cosmopolitan shopping experience "at home" and without the need to go abroad.

However, can this unique interplay between the local resources and the national consumer trends be a winning combination for the local development? While many locals doubt this development model attracts large numbers of customers and point to the empty shops without customers, this is harder to confirm due to the lack of data, denial by the shopkeepers and the prevalence of e-shopping practices in contemporary China. Nevertheless, other, more structural reasons may impede the success of the "commodity city" in the future: the potential increase in import tariffs, disruptions in mobility regimes and logistics due to Covid-19, a trade war between PRC and USA and the change in the consumer preferences perhaps brought about by consumer nationalism.<sup>7</sup>All these can severely jeopardise the viability of the Qingtian's world's supermarket and the overall development vision that builds on the real and imagined exchange with Europe.

The case study of the imported commodity city is thus a nuanced examination into governance and place-making of localities that have been characterised by strong emigration of their inhabitants and have decided to use this as a resource for the development. Following the socio-constructivist approach in the analysis of such localities, the article first gives more insight into the local level of diaspora engagement that has not yet received much attention, despite being often hailed as a crucial level of diaspora policies (Agunias, 2010). It also corroborates the scholarship that understands the development of such localities due to the dynamic interplay among actors in the diaspora field (national government, local governments, emigrant associations, locals, etc.) and their economic pursuits rather than their economic pursuits the effect of the primordial ties. At the same time, it expands this argument by underscoring the use of emigration legacies as a (cultural) resource rather than purely financial for economic and urban restructuring of the places of origin. While the long term viability of such endeavours may be

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<sup>7</sup> Consumer nationalism was defined by Castelló and Mihelj (2018) as a subtype of political consumerism that involves consumer choices driven by nationalist beliefs.

questionable, presently, Qingtian's commodity city model seems to be worth emulating. Future research should be conducted to see whether this model is transferable or limited by the "authentic" emigration experience.

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## **Povzetek**

Članek je prispevek k raziskovanju izseljevanja iz Ljudske republike Kitajske in odnosa med izseljenci ter njihovimi območji izvora na Kitajskem. Z osredotočenjem na Mesto uvoženih izdelkov emigracijskega okraja Qingtian članek razkriva preplet ekonomskih razmer in vzorcev potrošnje na nivoju kitajske države z lokalnimi značilnostmi izseljevanja, ki skupaj omogočajo razvojni model, ki temelji na neprekinjeni mobilnosti ljudi in objektov. Medtem ko je cilj lokalnih oblasti skozi "emigracijsko mesto" transformirati kraj iz izvoznika delovne sile v regionalni turistični center, ki obiskovalcem ponuja kozmopolitsko in mednarodno izkušnjo "Evrope na Kitajskem", poglobljena analiza politik in drugih dokumentov, opazovanje z udeležbo in intervjuji s strokovnjaki razkrivajo, da gre za tvegan model s številnimi dejavniki na nacionalni in globalni ravni, ki lahko ogrozijo njegov uspeh in preživetje.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Kitajska, izseljevanje, območja izseljevanja kitajskih migrantov, qiaoxiang, kozmopolitizem, diaspora

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