

# Reciprocity and Mediation Between the State and Society: An Overview of Chinese Business Associations in Chile

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**ABSTRACT:** This article analyses present-day Chinese business associations in Chile in terms of their different territorial origins and types of membership, how leadership is created, and how the associations relate to the Chinese and Chilean states and their respective societies. We propose that (1) new forms of cohesion are putting tension on traditional connections between territorial relationships and areas of origin; (2) monetary and symbolic debts connect individuals and institutions, creating and legitimising leaders; and (3) Chinese business associations in Chile develop mechanisms for mediating the interests of their members, Chinese state policies, and accommodation within the Chilean social and political structure.

**KEYWORDS:** Overseas Chinese associations, entrepreneurship, Chinese migration in Chile, Overseas Chinese, power.

## Introduction

China has become Chile's leading trade partner, taking the place that traditionally belonged to the United States.<sup>1</sup> In the capital city of Santiago, Chinese immigrants and their goods are concentrated in the Unión Latinoamericana neighbourhood, an old business district located next to the city's main train station. Their presence has transformed the social relationships and public space in the

area (Chan, Ramírez, and Stefoni 2019: 1456; Chan 2021: 106), now a major goods distribution hub for Chile's central zone.

While the Chinese represent only 5% of all immigrants in Chile, their numbers have grown significantly in the past two decades.

1. Aduanas Chile (Chilean customs), "Importaciones por continente y país" (Imports by continent and country), 2020, <https://www.aduana.cl/importaciones-por-continente-y-pais/aduana/2018-12-13/172431.html> (accessed on 7 January 2021).

The 2002 census<sup>2</sup> registered only 1,653 Chinese immigrants with permanent residency compared to 13,533 in 2020.<sup>3</sup> While there are no statistics on their regional origins, onsite research suggests two main areas: Guangdong and Zhejiang Provinces (Moraga 2018: 133). The “old migration” of primarily Cantonese<sup>4</sup> immigrants who ran Chinese restaurants and hegemonised the collective (Chou 2004: 155) has begun to be displaced by “new Chinese” belonging to these transnational business networks. Both groups are concentrated mainly in the Metropolitan Region of Santiago (67%). Importantly for our purposes, 28.5% declare themselves business people, a sharp contrast with the 1.4% of immigrants of other nationalities who declare that occupation.<sup>5</sup>

Some attribute this business dynamic to a capitalist habitus dating back at least a thousand years in China (Gates 1996: 270). In Zhejiang, it is tied to a supposed business ethos symbolised in one of its main cities, Wenzhou. Since the end of the twentieth century, the “Wenzhou model”<sup>6</sup> has been considered a prototype of the market economy and an example of capitalism. Zhejiang is home to the main distribution centres for goods destined for developing countries and Latin America. These include the city of Yiwu – the world capital of low-cost goods (Tsai 2007: 45; Lin 2010: 271) – and Ningbo, a major export port. When explaining the boom of these business networks, it is important to remember that one characteristic of post-Mao reform and opening up policy was the recognition and encouragement of social practices that legitimised individual liberty as well as its place within a framework of kin relationships and family-based loyalty.<sup>7</sup> In Chile, businesspeople from Zhejiang Province represent global networks of small and medium-scale merchants with renowned symbolic and economic weight (Luo 1997: 43; Lin 2011: 203; Wu et al. 2016: 51).

Chinese business associations in Chile are primarily located in Santiago and Iquique. Santiago, the country’s capital, is a major Latin American business hub, while Iquique, a port located on the fringe of the Atacama Desert, is home to a duty-free zone that receives the largest flow of Chinese goods into Latin America. These two cities are home to Chile’s most significant concentrations of Chinese immigrants, who administer extensive business networks and platforms for the distribution and sale of these products.

Over the last decade, Chinese business associations have become a significant social phenomenon in Chile. Although their most common manifestation, chambers of commerce, is characteristic of Overseas Chinese associations worldwide, the structures that legitimise their practices and the reasons for their creation have been scarcely analysed.<sup>8</sup> Despite their long history, Chinese business associations are fairly recent in Chile and little to nothing has been said about them. The first Chinese association in Chile, the Sociedad de Beneficencia de la Colonia China – the Chinese Benevolent Society – commonly known as Chung Wha, is a charitable society founded in 1893 for the Chinese colony in Chile. It has existed for more than 120 years but has no significant relationship with today’s business community from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (Chou 2004). This first association, which has experienced considerable decline in Santiago and has practically dissolved in Iquique, has little impact on today’s events, at least in economic terms.

Comprised of newer migrations to Chile, today’s business associations sign major agreements, establish a public presence, and emphatically pursue recognition from both citizens and authorities in their host country. They are the cornerstone of intermediation between their respective civil societies and the Chinese and Chilean states. In this context, these Chinese business associations sign agreements with ministries, municipalities, the police, and residents of various neighbourhoods in Chile. All of them, to a greater or lesser extent, strive to appear on the guest lists at the most prominent official PRC gatherings, such as the National People’s Congress of China or the annual meetings of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, which convene Overseas Chinese who are most relevant to the power of the PRC.

This text offers an account of the realm of Chinese business associations in Chile as expressed in present-day transnational Chinese entrepreneurship. For this purpose, we will analyse a corpus of in-depth interviews conducted in the first half of 2018 with the presidents and vice-presidents of 13 Chinese business associations based in Chile’s capital, Santiago, and six association leaders, business leaders, and key sources from the Duty-Free Zone of Iquique.<sup>9</sup> The information gleaned from these interviews is complemented with ethnographic observation in the main Chinese business districts in Santiago and Iquique between 2018 and 2021.

### *Small entrepreneur policies and the creation of business associations*

At a global level, the origin of Chinese migratory waves can be traced to the different migration policies that the Chinese state has established in its attempt to control movement “from below.” Consequently, there is a certain continuity to the networks that originate in places with high concentrations of migrants, referred to

2. INE (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, National statistics institute), “Censo de población y vivienda 2002” (Population and housing census 2002), 2003, <https://www.ine.cl/estadisticas/sociales/censos-de-poblacion-y-vivienda> (accessed on 25 February 2022).
3. DEM (Departamento de Extranjería y Migración de Chile, Department of Foreign Affairs and Migration of Chile), “Estadísticas migratorias: Registros administrativos del departamento de extranjería y migración” (Migration statistics: Administrative records of the department of foreigners and migration), 2021, <https://www.extranjeria.gob.cl/estadisticas-migratorias> (accessed on 15 May 2022).
4. Damir Galaz-Mandakovic Fernández, “Inmigración china en Tocopilla” (Chinese immigration in Tocopilla), *Tocopilla y su Historia* (Tocopilla and its history), 2012, <http://tocopillaysuhistoria.blogspot.com/2012/08/migracion-china-en-tocopilla.html> (accessed on 20 April 2020).
5. DEM, “Estadísticas migratorias (...)” (Migration statistics (...)) op. cit.
6. In the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), the pragmatism theory (*shigong xueshuo* 事功學說) from the Yongjia school of thought was already encouraging a type of government that had one of its bases in trade (Cai 1999: 28).
7. Outside the cities, rural reform began with an experiment in the village of Xiaogang, Anhui Province. Villagers dismantled agricultural cooperatives and set up a household contract responsibility system, which established a production and work quota for each family. Under the deal, families agreed that any production in surplus of their commitment to the state could be sold privately and the profit kept by the family who produced it. The model was successful and was quickly scaled to the national level (Huang 2013: 299). In the cities, licenses for self-employment or small family businesses, called small entrepreneur (*getihu* 個體戶) were granted. The model went from being an exception to “integrate failures” to being considered the “great invention” of the Chinese people and government. (Hsu 2007: 128)
8. Overseas Chinese associations tend to be classified into three broad categories: those based on territories of origin, those based on criteria of blood relations or lineage, and the most current, on commercial and business interests (Wang 2011: 40–3).
9. The interviews were conducted with simultaneous translation from Spanish to Mandarin Chinese. The interpreter in charge was Gong Lilicheng 龔立力成.

as emigrants' hometown (*qiaoxiang* 僑鄉). Small entrepreneurs in Chile tend to come from provinces that have historically been the homelands of emigrants, such as Fujian, Zhejiang, and Guangdong. For example, the first Chinese came from a town in Guangdong called Heshan. The new wave of migration, mainly comprised of the Zhejiangese, arrived in Chile from Europe in the first decade of this century, primarily fleeing the economic crisis in Spain (Moraga 2012: 217, 2018: 135; Moraga and Invernón 2020: 80). Globally, this migratory wave can be traced back to President Deng Xiaoping's 鄧小平 1978 reform and opening up, which gave rise to the *getihu* in urban areas (Hsu 2007: 122).

These reforms marked a radical change in the state's stance on Chinese emigrants. In this way, the Overseas Chinese, reviled for much of the twentieth century, were now exalted as patriots. Emigrants went from being considered bourgeois traitors to the homeland to establishing a place for themselves as political players at the forefront of the new ethos of national production (Beltrán Antolín 1996: 133-6, 2003: 147). The shift was even more drastic because the Chinese government was encouraging Overseas Chinese "to serve their country from abroad" rather than "come back and serve the country" (Yang 2011).

When thinking about Chinese presence abroad, the study of their associations is one area that could emerge as central. However, most studies on the topic focus on Southeast Asia or North America. Early studies addressed several pre-World War II periods (Skinner 1957: 90, 1958: 41, 1979: 58; Freedman 1960: 25). Then, a global increase in Chinese migrations in the 1970s gave rise to a new wave of studies (Zhou 1996: 98; Nyíri 1999; Pieke et al. 2004: 37) in which the emphasis began to shift to the leadership and power structures underlying the social role of the new organisations (Li 1995, 1999; Benton and Pieke 1998; Nieto 2007: 175).

The increased interest in Overseas Chinese that began in the 1980s was also apparent in Latin America. It was a true revival of their emerging importance and connections to China, which "offered an example of simultaneous processes of globalization and localization" (Portes and Armony 2016: 12).

Despite scarce research on the issue in Latin America, the existing studies highlight the critical role of associations in developing connections and networks with players in China and destination countries. In Peru, Tamagno and Velásquez note that the associations are more than local networks and constitute "the primary channel for the flow of Chinese support for different projects" (2016: 156). Grimson, Ng, and Denardi describe how Chinese organisations in Argentina actively engage with representatives from the executive and legislative branches regarding issues such as cultural activities, business opportunities, customs issues, and immigration (2016: 70-1). Finally, the importance of these relationships, particularly personal loyalty (*guanxi* 關係), in the expansion of Chinese economic investment in destination countries has also been noted in Mexico (Hearn, Smart, and Hernández 2011: 140).

This emphasis on the connection and relationships through which Chinese social networks expand brings us to the notion of reciprocity. Recall that Mauss introduces the idea of creating social ties through the obligation to give-receive-return gifts. Upon analysing the circular nature of these relationships, a debt is created for the recipient, and the gift places the giver in a superior hierarchical position, giving rise

to an agonistic relationship (2008: 148). This discussion has extended over time and across different disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, and political philosophy (Godelier 1996; Lévi-Strauss 2008; Karsenti 2009; Sahlins 2011). This study aims to broaden our understanding of these associations' relationships with different state agencies in Chile and China and the various social and interest groups in these countries.

This study expands discussion to Latin America, specifically Chile, and aims to analyse current Chinese business associations in Chile by considering how they are formed, the institutionalisation of hierarchy, and the legitimisation of practices before the Chinese state as well as before the Chilean state and society.<sup>10</sup>

Today, Chinese associations in Chile are beginning to compete for status conferred through recognition by both the Chinese and Chilean states. A new powerful player has emerged in the hegemony of Chinese associations: the businessperson with significant investment capital from the Chinese state, represented by the recently formed Association of the Chinese Automobile Industry in Chile and the Chamber of Chinese Companies in Chile (CECC for the Spanish acronym, created in 2020).

Until ten years ago, there were no major hegemony disputes among Chinese associations; the Cantonese community was widely represented in Chung Wha, the oldest overseas association in Chile. The association was not exempt from conflict over the issue of hegemony, however. The arrival of Hakka<sup>11</sup> groups at the top levels of the association was met with surprise and even rejection from other groups with ties to Guangdong.

In the wake of this Cantonese hegemony and the arrival of the twenty-first century, province- and trade-based chambers of commerce came onto the association scene in Chile. The precursor to these groups, the Chilean-Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism (CHICIT) has been operating since 1977. It is supported by the PRC Embassy in Chile and includes 11 companies and corporations from both countries and transnational companies. Its current honorary president is the PRC Ambassador to Chile. That organisation was followed by the Chinese Entrepreneurs Guild Association in Chile (2009), the Wenzhou Chinese Chamber of Commerce (2009), the Chile-China Trade and Economic Development Association (2010), the Fujian Business Association in Chile (2012), the Beijing Overseas Association (2013), the Zhejiang Chamber of Commerce (2015), the Fujian Trade Association (2016), the Hebei China Chamber of Commerce (2017), the Yiwu Chamber of Commerce (2017), and the Chamber of Commerce of Guangdong-Chile, among others. Importantly, not all groups effectively represent their communities. Some project the interests of their leaders and/or families instead.

Beyond the chambers of commerce, associations arose based on other national policies, such as the One China Association

10. Historical and current studies on the Chinese collective in Chile have been undertaken in recent years. Highlights include those that address relations between the Chinese community in Chile and the Catholic Church in the first half of the twentieth century (Palma and Montt Strabucchi 2017: 143), work relationships in the Unión Latinoamericana neighbourhood in Santiago, Chile (Chan, Ramírez, and Stefoni 2019: 1456), and the identity negotiations and insecurity in the same area (Ramírez and Chan 2018: 2764). A look specifically at Chinese associations in Chile is found in Saavedra (2018: 198), which is the only academic study on the issue to date.

11. The Hakka are a historical group with a presence mainly in Guangdong and other southern provinces of China.

(1998)<sup>12</sup> and the Corporation of Chinese Women Residing in Chile (2011). Despite the absence of a declared economic profile, the associations' overarching structural similarities make it possible to explain the interrelated networks between the political and economic spheres, both in China and the host country. Finally, some business associations represent specific industries or guilds, such as the Association of the Chinese Automobile Industry in Chile (2017) and the Chinese Gastronomic Association in Chile (2018). The latter – an attempt by the former Guangdong colony to participate in the new business-based trends backed by the Chinese government – existed very briefly but involved a significant portion of the Guangdong restaurateur community. On the other hand, the Automobile Association consists of an openly official leadership handpicked by Beijing, which is to say, without community participation.

### *Chinese business associations in Chile*

Chambers of commerce, the most common business association model, play a fundamental role in creating business networks of entrepreneurs from a given province. They share information on suppliers, investment opportunities, and other matters while acting as a general support network for entrepreneurs and immigrants from the respective Chinese provinces. This takes different forms, including legal aid from lawyers hired to instruct members and immigrants from the province on labour, intellectual property, and immigration laws; Spanish classes; and sports and recreational activities. Rather than a gratuitous form of solidarity, this role as a support network institutionalises relationships of dominance that manifest through symbolic and material debts within the collective. On this point, it is important to remember that the structures of *guanxi* and “face” (*mianzi* 面子) are the main mechanisms for building and accumulating the social capital that forms the basis of the hierarchy among Chinese immigrants. The term *guanxi* refers to different types of personal “relationships” and their respective reciprocity norms. In the classical discussion of Chinese anthropology, its correlate, *mianzi*, is defined as “face” or “mask,” which refers to the symbolic capital accumulation through which an individual obtains a prestigious position in the eyes of the group (Moraga 2018: 133).<sup>13</sup>

Two leaders currently play this “political” role most prominently in Chile: Beijing's Wang Hexing 王何興, president of the Chinese Entrepreneurs Guild Association in Chile; and Qingtian's Xu Yiping 徐一評, who leads the Chinese Culture and Trade Industry Association in Chile. Though the former is the oldest business association in Santiago, its relevance has gradually declined relative to more powerful groups such as the latter, which brings together the community from Qingtian and Lishui (Zhejiang).

Groups of people often come to Xu's office to resolve personal disputes. The leader listens to the testimonies and generally helps the parties come to an agreement, which is written down, signed in his presence, and formalised with the association's seal.

Almost all agreements between Chinese people are verbal. There is nothing in writing, explains Xu. The words are then forgotten, or misunderstandings arise. They come here so I can fix their problems. I listen to them and help them reach fair agreements. The problems are generally business-related. (Interview with Xu Yiping, 14 March 2021)

From a classic study of Overseas Chinese associations, Crissman (1967: 185) proposes that these communities are not homogeneous but divided into subcommunities or segments. These distinctions of provenance are based on territories ranging from large areas, such as provinces and districts, to smaller localities, such as towns and villages (ibid.: 190). This segmentation transfers to Chile, manifesting as admission criteria for membership in the chambers of commerce. The main exceptions to this membership rule are the Yiwu Chamber of Commerce, the Beijing Overseas Association, and the Hebei China Chamber of Commerce in Chile. The city of Yiwu operates as a platform for export, particularly to developing countries where merchandise from various Chinese regions is sold. Consequently, the city is also home to merchants from different regions, and membership in its association in Chile reflects this. For the Beijing association, accepting members from other areas is more a matter of principle. In practice, it has few members other than its president. The Hebei association is in a similar situation.

On the internal dynamics of these associations, Crissman points out that “the chambers of commerce and secret societies, while soliciting wide membership, are headed by a small group which holds all the power, making them equally exclusive in regard to leadership” (1967: 197). Examples can be found in the chambers of commerce founded in Chile if we consider the size of their boards relative to their membership and the way they select their authorities.

We have more than 120 members and more than 30 members on the board of directors. (...) The first directors volunteered on their own. Later, those who stood out for their skills and [some of the] chamber's original members were added to the board. Obviously, they don't start as vice presidents. First, they are just members and those who stand out become members of the board (...). (Interview with a board member of the Wenzhou Chamber of Commerce, 21 November 2018)

Despite the above, the territory-based membership requirement is ambiguous. On the one hand, a portion of these chambers of commerce require their members to come from the appropriate province; on the other hand, the need to establish *guanxi* associated with business networks makes acceptance of extraterritorial criteria essential. Today, overcoming territoriality as the sole criteria for association has given rise to new phenomena, such as election of authorities by vote and de-territorialised membership.

There are more than 100 of us from Yiwu living in Santiago, and Yiwu is a small city. But our policy is interesting because Yiwu is a small but very international city. So, we are not restricted only to people who come from Yiwu. In other words, if the person or company has an affinity with Yiwu, even if they are not from there, they are still welcome (...).

12. The One China policy is the official position of the People's Republic of China regarding the administration of the territories of mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, all under the regime of Beijing.

13. Both structures reflect a logic of the gift, the obligation to give-receive-return that characterises reciprocity relationships (Mauss 2008: 145). Among the abundant literature on *guanxi*, see: Jacobs 1979: 237; Butterfield 1982: 43; Hwang 1987: 946; Alston 1989: 26; Beltrán 1996: 294; Bian 1997: 366; Guthrie 1999; Fan 2002: 543; Tsui et al. 2004: 133; Hsu 2007: 181. On *mianzi*: Hu 1944: 45; Alexander and Knight 1971: 75; Ho 1976: 867; Jacobs 1979: 237; Alexander and Rudd 1981: 83; Hwang 1987: 944; Earley 1997: 134.



We have a board of directors and the directors are financing the association. So far we are seven. (...) We don't pay much attention to the formality of the vote, or I don't vote. More than anything, Chinese history or philosophy has always been based on conversation and reaching an agreement of greater wills. (Interview with a board member of the Yiwu Chamber of Commerce, 5 December 2018)

Interestingly, in the Yiwu Chamber of Commerce, one of the associations that de-territorialise their membership according to flow of capital, a discourse that appeals to the deep essentialism of history or Chinese philosophy has arisen. Presumably, those elements would be an incentive to favour specific agreements among the directors over a voting structure. Likewise, the membership criteria for the Hebei China Chamber of Commerce in Chile reflect the same movement toward de-territorialisation caused by flow of capital.

Beyond membership criteria, of particular interest are the characteristics that association leaders list as requirements for board membership, generally: solidarity, sacrifice, or giving to the community. When we investigated what the values of "giving to the community" involve, in practical terms, it was a question of having large sums of money to fund the association's activities. The name officially given to these Chinese business associations, voluntary associations (*shetuan* 社團), distinguishes them as non-benefit seeking (Li 1995), which is particularly interesting considering the tacit requirements for leading such an organisation. As we will show, the implicit requirements of donating large sums of money guarantees the donors certain rights over the recipients even though, like any other gift, it appears to be selfless (Karsenti 2009: 35).

The response to the Covid-19 pandemic is an example of the chain of debts that leaders create with the Chinese community and Chilean authorities. Upon learning of the high number of cases in the community (more than 600 cases in Santiago's Chinese population, which barely exceeds 12,000),<sup>14</sup> Xu Yiping's association began importing Chinese medicinal herbs to treat the sick. Each 500-gram package of herbs costs approximately USD 50, including the cost of transportation and importation from China. However, they were distributed at no cost to those who requested them and showed a doctor's note or positive Covid test. Extending *guanxi* to Chilean authorities, the association donated 100,000 masks to the municipality of Santiago for distribution at street fairs, public health centres, and to the police force.

Thus, the leadership of the communities, from the villages and towns to the trade associations and the entire Chinese community, is based on wealth. "Overseas Chinese communities are, in short, plutocracies in which wealth breeds prestige and power. The elite of Overseas Chinese society is almost exclusively based on wealth and its derivatives, the only other basis being education in the language of the official government, which is an added asset for some highly placed leaders" (Crissman 1967: 199).

Regarding the dynamic of domination through debt that these associations create, we discern different levels, but a common strategy is that the present or gift is always expressed in charitable terms. It is not by chance that the first Chinese association in Chile was the Chinese Benevolent Society. The leaders establish a dynamic of indebtedness with the association's members, the overseas

community at large, and the host society. In cultural contributions and events open to Chilean society, charity is always at the forefront. In their relationship with Chilean society, Chinese business association discourse always refers to events such as the Telethon (an annual national charity event that raises funds for children with physical disabilities), and donations to people who lost their homes to fires.

We don't just help the members of the chamber. We also help anyone from Wenzhou who needs us. We have done a lot and we have given a lot of kindness. For example, when someone died or had a stroke, though these people were not members, they came to us and we helped them just the same. Normally the members also contribute, as well as board members, and the president. Depending on their position, some contribute more and others less. Obviously, the president contributes most, contributing more than others every time. (Interview with a board member of the Wenzhou Chamber of Commerce, 21 November 2018)

From the shopping centre rent paid to the municipality of Santiago, which is earmarked for a charity for people with disabilities, to helping a Chinese person from the region reestablish his business after a fire, the Chinese business associations' relationships – with the Chilean state and members of the Chinese community – are based on pursuing recognition through monetary donations. The leaders of these groups use the gifts to attain a social position within their communities, the host society, and in their relationships with both states.

The building of this social position is related to the Chinese tradition of putting forward *mianzi*. For business associations, it empowers those with the most assets and money – generally the presidents – to act as judges to settle civil disputes in the immigrant community (regardless of association membership). These disputes may range from business disagreements to family conflicts:

When they have conflicts, they generally take their complaints to the organisation. The chamber of the province, the chamber of commerce of their province, calls them to sit down to talk and solve their problems. Since they are community leaders, it is like a trial. They offer recommendations so that we do not end up in conflict. (...) Thus, the community leaders just have to see both sides of the family in person. We offer some guidelines so they can see the situation more clearly and solve the problem amicably, so it does not end up in court. (Interview with a board member of the Chinese Gastronomic Association in Chile, 10 September 2018)

These "trials" underscore the institutionalisation of a hierarchy based on *mianzi* within the immigrant group. Consider that one of the main ways to acquire such standing is to be on the board of an association that is officially registered in both countries and to donate large sums of money. The acceptance of business associations as a support network then implies, as in the consent of any other gift, that the donor "exercises certain rights over the recipient" (Godelier 1996: 70).

The peculiar scope of this political authority over an immigrant group has already been confirmed by Gladys Nieto (2007: 67) in reference to Chinese associations in Spain. Nieto's observation of

14. DEM, "Estadísticas migratorias (...)" (Migration statistics (...)) op. cit.

the situation in Spain reveals a much more deeply rooted position of authority, given that the associations have been active there for many more years. In Spain, association leaders control the institutions that the Chinese collective uses to disseminate national declarations overseas, mainly via newspapers and schools (in addition to the associations themselves). Although Chinese business associations in Chile are more recent than in Spain, there are signs of an incipient interest in establishing these types of institutions in Chile. On 5 July 2003, the Chinese Benevolent Society founded the Chinese School to teach Chinese language and culture to new generations (Sociedad de Beneficencia de la Colonia China 2013: 123). Likewise, in 2016, the President of the Chile-China Trade and Economic Development Association, backed an initiative to teach Mandarin Chinese at the Pedro de Valdivia School in Santiago's municipality of Providencia.<sup>15</sup> In the same sense, Chile's only Chinese newspaper, 智利中文網 *Zhili zhongwen wang* (Chinese trade journal in Chile), is edited online by Xu Yiping's association. It highlights the leader's meetings with Chilean authorities, such as the mayor of Santiago or Interior Ministry representatives. He historically demands increased police presence to fight crime, which is high in the district where Chinese stores are located (Unión Latinoamericana neighbourhood). In a sign of the power of its *guanxi*, and confirming the intermediary role that the associations seek, the Chinese Culture and Trade Industry Association in Chile established private security for the neighbourhood. Twenty-four private security officers patrol the area in black uniforms, armed with bulletproof vests, walkie-talkies, and tasers. Operating with authorisation from the municipality of Santiago, the security force is funded through donations from Chinese business people. Coverage of the USD 23,000/month cost is a testament to the power of the Chinese community in the area.

One example of the mechanisms the associations use to establish political legitimacy is their lobbying of the municipality of Santiago to create an official Chinatown in the same area. Plans for the neighbourhood included pedestrian spaces, gardens, and the installation of Chinese archways on one of the main streets. During the negotiations, the associations invited most city council members on a trip to China. The formal purpose of the invitation was to learn about neighbourhood planning experiences in China, but the council members' political rivals considered the invitation a bribe. In addition to this personal invitation, the associations donated to the municipality of Santiago four Chinese electric police vans, which are deployed in different parts of the municipality. Nonetheless, the years of negotiations to establish a Chinatown failed, in part due to the social unrest Chile experienced in October 2019, followed by the district's near complete closure during the most difficult period of the Covid-19 pandemic (June 2020-July 2021). However, the project remains on the table, and current leaders do not rule out resuming lobbying efforts at a more propitious moment.

Commenting on the matter, a director from the Wenzhou Businesspeople's Association complains about the complications his countrymen experience when negotiating with Chilean authorities:

We do not understand that an authority does not have the power to decide something alone. Here in Chile, everything has to be discussed with many people. For example, you have to participate in bidding processes and make public offers.

There is a very rigid legal framework. Chinese people consider that an obstacle. However, like everywhere in the world, there is also lobbying. You have to give gifts and make sure people like you to get something done. That is what happened in the negotiations for the Chinatown permit with the municipality of Santiago. (Interview with the director of Wenzhou Businesspeople's Association, 4 April 2021)

In summary, it was about the ambivalence in a social space such as Chile's, which formally operates under the rule of law; however, in practice, there are legitimacies related to the *particularist debts* that are characteristic of the logic of the gift mentioned above.

### *The new Chinese state-capital associations*

While not representative of the overall spectrum, some Chinese associations play a distinct role of intermediation between specific Chinese economic interests and Chilean institutions. These chambers of commerce and trade associations represent the interests of large Chinese investment funds or Chinese state companies and seek to expand their *guanxi* in the form of business networks. Remarks by a Chile-China Trade and Economic Development Association board member clearly illustrate the Chinese business associations' intermediary role:

The Chinese Government implements many projects abroad. The government leads the initiative but does not take part in the prior negotiations. It is not as if the ambassador himself takes part in the preparations. The government presents the initiative; we conduct the negotiations. If they go well, the ambassador or the government joins in when the documents have to be signed. Basically, we help the government carry out trade and economic negotiations, or the pre-negotiation market studies and data analysis. (Interview with a board member of the Chile-China Trade and Economic Development Association, 21 December 2018)

Chinese business associations, initially organised around the figure of the small *getihu*-type entrepreneur, were gradually restructured by new Chinese state policy. The first hints of such policy changes became apparent with the Association of the Chinese Automobile Industry in Chile, but this state policy is not, in fact, new. Instead, it dates back to both the Going Global policy of the early 2000s and the Belt and Road Initiative of 2013.<sup>16</sup> However, this latest economic

15. M. Bustos, "El programa educacional que impulsa el aprendizaje de chino mandarín" (The educational program that promotes the learning of Mandarin Chinese), *La Tercera*, 27 February 2016, [www2.latercera.com/noticia/el-programa-educacional-que-impulsa-el-aprendizaje-de-chino-mandarín](http://www2.latercera.com/noticia/el-programa-educacional-que-impulsa-el-aprendizaje-de-chino-mandarín) (accessed on 3 July 2023).

16. The Going Global policy was officially launched by Premier Zhu Rongji 朱鎔基 in his report to the National People's Congress in 2000. Under the tenth five-year plan (2001-2005), investments by Chinese companies outside of China were one of the keys for the Chinese economy to adapt to the trends of globalisation. In 2004, Premier Wen Jiabao 溫家寶 defended that policy in his speech at the Tenth National People's Congress, when he argued that China should accelerate implementation of the strategy and more effectively coordinate and guide Chinese investments abroad. Companies should be encouraged to invest in their operations outside of China and thereby expand their participation in foreign markets. In the last ten years, that policy has been widely applied. Therefore, instead of *getihu*, an increasing number of Chinese companies go out into the world to do their business in different sectors. This has also promoted the establishment of trade federations by sector or by industry in Chile.

initiative is currently China's main effort to consolidate its leadership within the global geopolitical realm as it aims to stimulate economic integration among regional and nonregional countries through construction of major infrastructure (Yu 2017: 356). This worldwide boom has been widely reported in different investigations (Zhang 2000; Zhuang and Wang 2010: 174; Wong and Tan 2018).

The Belt and Road Initiative takes its inspiration from the Silk Road, the extensive network of sea and land trade routes, which until 1600 established economic and cultural exchanges between China and other Asian countries, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Beyond the historical connotation that the Chinese government wants to give the policy, this initiative aims primarily to strengthen China's political influence through economic integration with other countries worldwide. To that end, on 24 October 2014, China created the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), of which Chile has been a (nonregional) member since 13 May 2017.<sup>17</sup> One of the most recent expressions of this new form of association, which combines large capital investment funds with what is essentially state representation, is the 2020 creation of the CECC. Members include the China Construction Bank, the Bank of China, the China Railway International Group, and the Huawei technology company.<sup>18</sup>

Some analysts argue that the Belt and Road Initiative is a Chinese version of the Marshall Plan, through which the United States helped rebuild Western Europe after World War II. However, it should be noted that while the Marshall Plan had a uniquely European regional scope, this renewed version of the Silk Road is global in nature. It spans 60 countries along planned routes in Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa, giving it a much greater international scope (Yu 2017: 360).

Even though the Beijing Overseas Association is not part of these new industrial associations, comments by one of its board members clearly reflect the new direction in which Chinese state policies will seek to circumscribe business associations in Chile:

In reality, our role is... with the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative to more than 70 countries, the strategy of our country is to make companies go out into the world. How do these companies that go out into the world organise with local society? They need an institution that guarantees logistics. When a company enters the Chilean market, it needs financial and legal support as well as a supply of information. We provide all these things. (Interview with a board member of the Beijing Overseas Association, 23 October 2018)

Industry-specific associations and guilds, such as the aforementioned Association of the Chinese Automobile Industry in Chile, emerged under this new Chinese state policy. The nature of these new industry and infrastructure associations is very different from previous chambers of commerce. They no longer seek to raise awareness of Chinese culture, much less establish themselves as arbitrators among members of the immigrant community. Economic exchange is the foremost and sole objective of this new political player in the business association realm:

Before we publicised the daily life of Overseas Chinese. Before, we asked the Overseas Chinese to love their country, their homeland. Now we say that the most important thing is

no longer to return to China to live (their lives). Actually, China does not need them to return. It is not like that anymore. What we really want is that they lay down roots abroad and position themselves well in local society. Even now, be it the events that we have held, or the presentations that we put on every year, or promotion of Chinese culture, these are things that basically help other countries understand China. Regardless of the type of promotion, everything ultimately has to achieve results in the economic sphere. (Interview with a board member of the Association of the Chinese Automobile Industry in Chile, 3 November 2018)

Nevertheless, one clear difference between these new industry-based business associations and the preceding chambers of commerce is the obsolescence of the provincial nature. The new associations are completely de-territorialised. There are no longer memberships based on a particular province or platforms to resolve conflicts between members. These new business associations represent industries and their goods. Like those goods, after production they have no territory other than a continuous transnational flow of capital.

Another reflection of the transition between these two policies is that many chambers of commerce had to create a second association to reconcile the roles of support network (along with the inherent hierarchy) and trade guild representation. The chambers of commerce fulfil the role of support network for their peers and as mediator with the local political and economic players. Likewise, trade associations, initially created as abstract lobbying structures, have had to establish parallel associations to serve the needs of the local Chinese communities.

Jurisdiction bestowed by the state and the need for recognition by the Chinese state is one operational aspect of these associations that will probably transcend the two policies analysed herein. They are requisites for achieving legitimacy within their respective collective, positioning themselves before the respective authorities and obtaining benefits. In the words of the Vice-Consul of China in Iquique:

As a consulate, we host some meetings with the representatives of each association. For them, it is an opportunity to meet, and I also believe they can forge commercial ties. For example, if my business is to lease stores and yours is footwear, you lease a store from me, and we have a bond. (Interview with the Vice-Consul of the PRC in Iquique, 5 June 2018).

Almost categorically, the new business association profile leads the associations toward business management and lobbying while initially downplaying territorial considerations. However, we see the latter repeatedly reemerge as a source of legitimacy, along with the need to publicly demonstrate some community ties to their fellow countrymen in Chile.

17. "Bachelet sella en China el ingreso de Chile al Banco Asiático de Inversión" (Bachelet seals Chile's entry into the Asian Investment Bank in China), *La Tercera*, 13 May 2017, [www2.latercera.com/noticia/chile-banco-asiatico-china](http://www2.latercera.com/noticia/chile-banco-asiatico-china) (accessed on 3 July 2023).

18. Sergio Sáez F., "El sigiloso poder gremial que levantan las multinacionales chinas en Chile" (The stealthy union power that Chinese multinationals are building in Chile), *La Segunda*, 16 November 2020, [https://www.litoralpress.cl/sitio/Prensa\\_Texto?LPKey=lef1n0v/6.R5.I.Q81/Wd92g.Eh.Rh.N/rI.Jj.Sdfb.G.S.Hj.X.Tl.M.%C3%96](https://www.litoralpress.cl/sitio/Prensa_Texto?LPKey=lef1n0v/6.R5.I.Q81/Wd92g.Eh.Rh.N/rI.Jj.Sdfb.G.S.Hj.X.Tl.M.%C3%96) (accessed on 3 July 2023).



## Conclusions

Chinese business associations in Chile exist in response to two macro policies of the Chinese state: firstly, President Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening up, and secondly, sustained emphasis on insertion into global capitalism, as expressed in Hu Jintao's 胡錦濤 Going Global and Xi Jinping's 習近平 Belt and Road policies. The first of these macro policies led to the migration of self-employed entrepreneurs, who primarily associated in Chile through chambers of commerce.

This first group of associations plays two main roles: facilitating the construction of *guanxi* and enabling board members, through their monetary donations to the rest of the immigrant group or host society, to capitalise on social position or *mianzi*. This capitalisation empowers the presidents of some provincial chambers of commerce to settle civil disputes between Chinese immigrants from the respective provinces, regardless of their membership status in the chambers of commerce.

Board decisions are only sometimes put to a vote. To be eligible for a board position, applicants must have the president's approval and, as a fundamental criterion, money to donate. That is also an essential requirement for the position of president, who almost exclusively funds all the association activities, e.g., cultural events, Spanish classes, and even legal aid for members. Similarly, when an association makes donations, the president always donates more than other board members. In addition to these internal dynamics, these associations play an indispensable role as intermediaries between state agents and individuals in Chilean society. The directors' and presidents' networks of contacts are keys to legitimising their internal authority. As we have seen, this rationale of social relations based on gifts and favours that require reciprocity has been identified as characteristic of the Chinese world in numerous theoretical approaches. These dynamics can be analysed as characteristic of a logic of gift (Mauss 2008: 145).

Province-based chambers of commerce required members to have emigrated from the respective province. Exceptions to this rule are the Beijing Overseas Association, the Hebei China Chamber of

Commerce in Chile, and the Yiwu Chamber of Commerce. As we have seen, these chambers of commerce are now tending to de-territorialise their membership.

The second group of associations, based on the Belt and Road and Going Global policies, are the Association of the Chinese Automobile Industry in Chile and CECC. While the latter is not among the strategic industries named in these policies, its creation is a nod to them. These associations completely de-territorialise their memberships. Provenance-based associations have been replaced with industry- and trade-based associations. Notably, their ability to lobby before the Chilean state and private agencies, paving the way for optimum deployment of Chinese capital, is a central characteristic of these associations.

Finally, we observe that the rationales of *guanxi* and *mianzi* remain operational in the construction of business networks in Chile, which could shed light upon similar structures in the host society. The modern space in which entrepreneurship operates in Chile is attributable to the transparency of the abstract rules of the law and the market as well as individual, trust-generating relationships. In a more general manner, this dynamic attests to the embeddedness of the economy in social relations.

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