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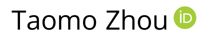
510 not found: The reterritorialization of Sino-Southeast Asian relations in the Chinese hinterland

Taomo Zhou 

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Most existing studies use 'reterritorialization' to describe the outward expansion of Chinese power in Southeast Asia. This paper, however, flips this familiar narrative. It examines Sino-Southeast Asian diplomacy hidden in the Chinese hinterland and embedded in the everyday. I focus on the landlocked province of Jiangxi, where the Chinese government created two enclaves for communist exiles and displaced diaspora respectively—both hailing from Southeast Asia. I argue that this domestic operation of foreign affairs helped absorb the impact of unfavourable foreign policy outcomes or drastic policy reversals. As post-Mao China re-engaged with the world, the PRC state's management of Cold War migrants enabled its reconstruction of geopolitical relations with Southeast Asia. With China's foreign policy reorientation and the progression of market reform, the state's governing strategy in the two study areas changed from one of privileged segregation to a strong push for economic self-reliance. Meanwhile, the entrepreneurial individuals from these two communities represented, repackaged and retooled an inconvenient past the state tried to erase for the elevation of their individual socioeconomic statuses and the development of their respective communities. Through their creative mediation, the history of PRC's Cold War engagement with Southeast Asia is reinscribed in new time-space contexts.

Keywords: Cold War, the Third Indochina War, China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Jiangxi

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Introduction: diplomacy inverted

In recent years, the best-selling books on China-Southeast Asian relations—*The Deer and the Dragon* (Emmerson, 2020), *Under Beijing's Shadow* (Hiebert, 2020), and *In the Dragon's Shadow* (Strangio, 2020)—have shared similar titles and concerns about the southward expansion of Chinese power. Geographers and anthropologists have used the concept of reterritorialization to delineate the process by which Chinese capital, technology and migration has transformed Southeast Asian physical and social landscapes. For instance, addressing the recent boom of Chinese investments in Southeast Asia, Nyiri (2012) shows how Chinese corporate business interests generated 'anomalous forms of sovereignty' through the provision of public services, organization of private security forces, and standardization of local time and currency in accordance with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Chinese-run Golden Triangle and Sihanoukvile Special Economic Zones (SEZ). On the hot button issue of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Lin and others (Lin *et al*., 2019; Lin & Grundy-Warr, 2020; Su, 2016) chart how the PRC's infrastructure building in Southeast Asia is 'respacing' the region according to a shifting geopolitical imaginary reflected in schemes such as the Greater Mekong and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar subregions. Meanwhile, scholars of Chinese migration critically analyse how the PRC mobilizes the overseas Chinese community for the realization of a 'China Dream' unbounded by territory (Suryadinata, 2017).

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Figure 1. *The 510 Office and the Seven-Colour Forest Village in Jiangxi, China.*
Source: Figure produced by Reuben Wang.

While anchored in the same concept of reterritorialization, this paper nevertheless flips the familiar narrative about Chinese outward expansion in Southeast Asia and inverts it back onto the PRC's territory, or more specifically, to two little-known enclaves in the landlocked province of Jiangxi in southeast China (see Figure 1). Located in the suburbs of the provincial capital city Nanchang, the 510 Office is a clandestine compound built in 1976 by the International Liaison Department (ILD) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to shelter more than 300 Southeast Asian communist exiles, the majority of whom were from Indonesia. Around 120 km from Nanchang, the Seven-Colour Forest Village—originally named 'Vast Forest Overseas Chinese Farm'—was set up by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council (*guoqiao ban* 国侨办) in 1982 to accommodate 361 ethnic Chinese from Vietnam displaced during the Third Indochina War.[1]

These two disarticulated communities, connected to Southeast Asia through the international communist movement and transnational ethnic ties, were part of a system of 'shadow diplomacy' within the PRC territory. This domestic operation of foreign affairs mainly concerned governance over 'liminal geopolitical actors' who were simultaneously insiders and outsiders, such as foreign citizens residing in China and repatriated Chinese diaspora (McConnell, 2017: 140; Ho & McConnell, 2019). Reterritorialization, in this context, refers to the strategies and technologies used by the PRC state to transform the spaces inhabited by these liminal diplomatic actors and to shape their identities. At the 510 Office and the Seven-Colour Forest Village, the PRC state erected walls, constructed housing, imposed restrictions on movements, carried out political indoctrination and surveillance, and created incentive structures through the provision of welfare and promises of privileges.

By examining the reterritorialization of Sino-Southeast Asian relations in Jiangxi, this paper unveils an often-neglected aspect of PRC diplomacy. Beijing could tap on its domestic authoritarian political infrastructure to absorb the impact of unfavourable foreign policy outcomes or drastic policy reversals. Beneath heated contemporary discussions about the southward spill of Chinese capital is the Cold War history of Beijing's active but complicated engagements with communist movements in Southeast Asia. During the period of 'high Maoism' in the 1960s and 1970s, China's commitment to revolutionary internationalism destabilized its diplomatic ties with Southeast Asian states (Lovell, 2019: 125). As post-Mao China re-engaged with the world, the PRC state's management of Cold War migrants enabled its detachment from the past, its pursuit of newly defined overseas interests, and its reconstruction of geopolitical relations with Southeast Asia.

This paper is about Sino-Southeast Asian diplomacy hidden in the hinterland and embedded in the everyday. Zooming into the daily aspects of the lives of the migrants is not only useful for studying how the Chinese state power was experienced on the ground by people in between the domestic and foreign spheres, but also for understanding how 'the points of encounter' between the Chinese state and its liminal political subjects were not clean cut but complex (Tynen, 2019: 98). I pay special attention to groups which I call 'bureaucratic entrepreneurs' —the Chinese caretakers of the Southeast Asian exiles at the 510 Office and the displaced diaspora and their descendants who became local representatives of the Party-state. Although they were agents of the state and thus responsible for promoting governmental projects, organizing surveillance, and enforcing social and political order, they remained 'deeply enmeshed in a variety of local networks from which they could never be completely separated' (Brown & Johnson, 2015: 3). As mediators between the state and these two unique communities, many of them advanced local 'particularistic interests' by appropriating state discourse (Brown & Johnson, 2015: 4). The bureaucratic entrepreneurs at the 510 Office and the Seven-Colour Forest Village represented, repackaged and retooled an inconvenient past the state tried to erase for the elevation of their individual socio-economic statuses and the development of their respective communities.

Why Jiangxi? Methodology and positionality

Numerous scholars of Sino-Southeast Asian relations have examined China's southeast coast, where a long tradition of migration contested the territorial boundaries upheld by modern nation-states (Hsu, 2000). Diasporic Chinese communities—either from afar or resettled in the PRC—significantly reterritorialized coastal South China through their transnational social and economic ties and hybrid religious, linguistic, architectural and culinary practices (Kuah-Pearce, 2011; Tan, 2010). By contrast, the total number of people with overseas connections amounted to 0.56 per cent of the entire provincial population in Jiangxi at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Wei, 2002: 549).

Rather than a cosmopolitan *Qiaoxiang* (侨乡home village of Chinese overseas) society, Jiangxi was known instead as a politically reliable and strategically secure bulwark for Mao's China. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, this inland province witnessed the launch of the Party's first armed resistance against its rival—the Kuomintang, also referred to as the Chinese Nationalist Party—and the establishment of a Soviet Republic. Due to its isolated location and much-celebrated revolutionary history, Jiangxi became the site of several military-industrial complexes during the early years of socialism. In Mao's tripartite division of the Chinese territory (see Figure 2), Jiangxi was

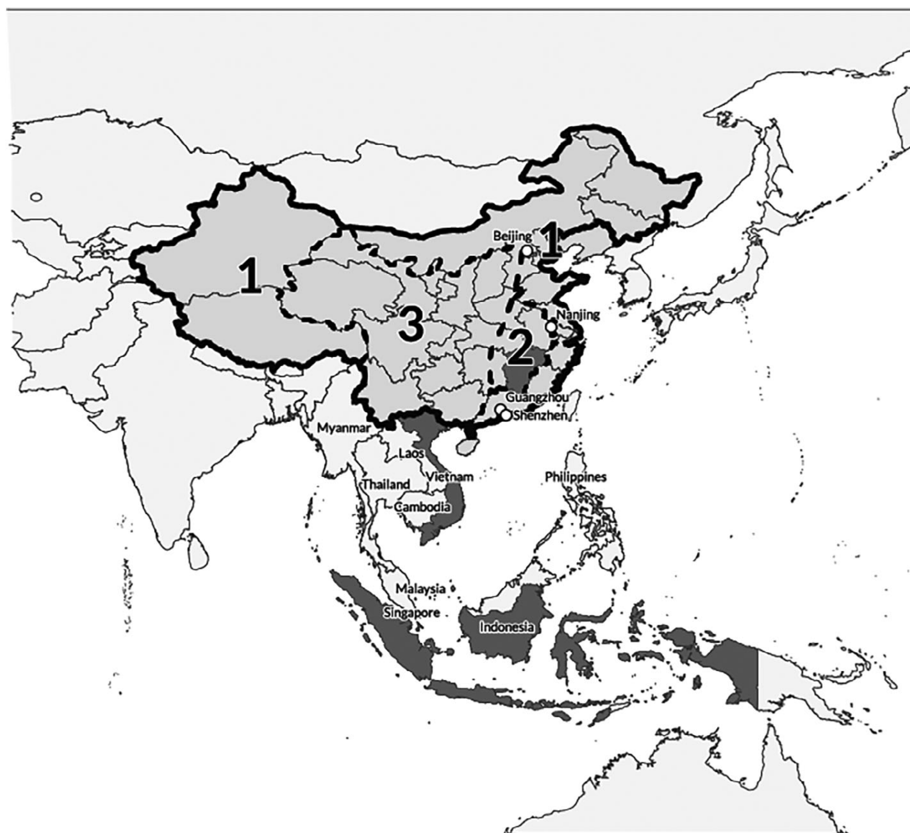

Figure 2. *Jiangxi (positioned at the 'Second Front' in Mao's tripartite division of China), Vietnam and Indonesia.*
Source: **Figure produced by Reuben Wang. Adapted from Meyskens, 2020: 5.**

positioned at the 'Second Front', sandwiched between the First Front on China's borderlands and the Third Front encompassing Guizhou, Sichuan, Gansu and Ningxia (Meyskens, 2020: 5; Lin *et al.*, 2019). In light of its rich rare-metal resources and the historical heritage of its military-use aviation industry, the province was tasked by the Central Government with tungsten production and aerospace engineering in the 1950s and 1960s (Wei, 2002: 124, 127).

I first arrived in Nanchang in 2013 to research the exiled members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), many of whom wrote about their experiences in Jiangxi in their memoirs. The biggest challenge I faced was censorship by the Chinese government on a topic deemed highly sensitive. My PRC citizenship and an upper-middle class professional family background gave me protection, connections in the local bureaucratic networks, and the opportunity to visit the 510 Office and to interview four remaining Indonesian exiles and several Chinese staff members. But the archival materials at the 510 Office were off limits.

When I returned in 2019 with the hope of accessing the archives at the 510 Office before its planned demolition, the tightened political control under Xi Jinping had instilled a pervasive fear among my contacts. The oppressive political atmosphere,

compounded with the passing of all the Indonesian exiles and one key Chinese staff member I had interviewed six years ago, made revisiting the 510 Office impossible. As my original research plans fell apart, my key government contact, a high-ranking official in the local propaganda department, arranged a tour to the Seven-Colour Forest Village for me. In the village, I observed the residents' daily activities and conducted informal oral history interviews with eight informants, equally distributed in terms of gender and generation—half were male and half female, half were migrants from Vietnam and half were their descendants. I also collected official accounts on county-level history, landscape, demography and economic development from the local gazetteer compilation office (*difangzhi bangongshi*, 地方志办公室) and the propaganda department as well as online press releases from the county and village authorities.

Sharing a similar liminal status to that of the 510 and Seven-Colour Forest communities, I myself—a Chinese citizen studying and later working outside of China—represented simultaneously an insider and outsider in Chinese society in the eyes of my informants. My 'betwixt and between' status mainly evoked sympathy in 2013 when the political atmosphere was more relaxed but ambivalence in 2019 when state control tightened (Ho & McConnell, 2019: 244). In 2013, my ability to speak *bahasa* Indonesia and my affiliation with a reputable foreign academic institution gave me credibility in the eyes of the Indonesian exiles; my perceived vulnerability as a young female overseas Chinese student serendipitously won me understanding from M, the director of the 510 Office at the time, who had a daughter of my age also studying abroad. However, during my fieldwork in 2019, I was instructed by my key government contact not to mention my overseas connections at the Seven-Colour Forest. I only revealed that I worked as an academic abroad to my informants privately, after we grew familiar. The village party secretary, G, facilitated my fieldwork but also monitored my movements. He introduced me to the informants for my oral history interviews, all of whom were 'progressive elements' (*jiji fenzi*, 积极分子) who assisted him in day-to-day village governance. His guarded attitude softened after he finished his term in village leadership and was promoted to a county-level government position in 2021. In our ensuing communication via Wechat, G became much more forthcoming.

In a way, my research experience mirrors my research subjects' leveraging 'being between the domestic and foreign' in their daily encounters with the power of the Party-state (Ho & McConnell, 2019: 250). I combine archival and ethnographical work to circumvent state censorship as much as one can. More a net than a blanket, state control creates loopholes for my research subjects while leaving fragmented traces of evidence and intermittent access to data for me, the researcher (Tynen, 2019: 19). By piecing together information gathered from Indonesian language memoirs, Chinese governmental documents and official media releases as well as my own ethnographic fieldnotes, this paper tells a story about the Chinese state's governing practices at two liminal diplomatic sites and the spaces of autonomy created by those being governed.

Historical background: China's diplomatic reorientation and market reform

The Indonesian communists and the diasporic Chinese from Vietnam arrived in China at two important inflection points in PRC diplomatic history. Beijing's offer of political asylum to the Indonesian communists signaled its ideological commitment to world revolution at the height of a phase characterized by militant anti-imperialism. In 1965–66, by initiating one of the largest and swiftest instances of mass killing and incarceration in the twentieth century, General Suharto crushed the PKI—the world's

largest non-ruling communist party at the time—ousted the left-wing nationalist leader Sukarno and established an anti-communist military-backed authoritarian regime (Robinson, 2018: 1). In the early 1960s, the PRC supported President Sukarno—who shared Beijing's outlook in international affairs—and the PKI, which sided with Beijing against Moscow in the escalating 'shadow Cold War' between China and the Soviet Union (Friedman, 2015). Vehemently denouncing Suharto, in the late 1960s, the PRC not only made long-term living arrangements for the existing Indonesian visitors in China but also opened its door to left-wing Indonesian expatriates worldwide. Beijing's accommodation of the exiles was often cited by the Suharto government as evidence of China's continuous attempts to export communist revolt to Indonesia, although existing evidence suggests that the PRC did not provide weapons for the PKI to seize state power by force (Sukma, 1999: 149; Zhou, 2019). Bilateral relations were suspended in 1967 and only resumed in 1990.

While the Indonesian communists were rendered stateless due to this anti-communist massacre in their home country, the ethnic Chinese from Vietnam were displaced by an intra-communist camp war between Beijing and its former 'brother plus comrade' Hanoi (Zhang, 2015: 1). Under Deng Xiaoping, economic growth gained priority over Mao-era ideological campaigns and the PRC looked to the capitalist world in seek for investments, managerial knowledge and technology. In light of Hanoi's increasing tilt towards Moscow, Deng calculated that anti-Vietnam, anti-Soviet policy would help strengthen China's ties with the United States (Zhang, 2015: 6–9). In 1979, provoked by the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, whose Khmer Rouge government had been close to Beijing, Deng Xiaoping launched an attack 'to teach Vietnam a lesson' (Ang, 2018: 179). In the few years before, from 1975 to 1979, between 430 000 and 700 000 ethnic Chinese left Vietnam under duress. Among them, around 280 000 arrived in the PRC and 160 000 were resettled on 86 overseas Chinese farms in provinces including Guangdong, Guangxi, Fujian, Yunnan and Jiangxi (Chang, 1982: 230; Han, 2014: 198; Kong, 2010; Quinn-Judge, 2006: 237).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, while its relations with Moscow and Hanoi deteriorated, Beijing began to approach non-communist Southeast Asian governments at the expense of its relationships with Southeast Asian communist parties (Ang, 2018: 197). Driven by fear of Vietnamese regional supremacy and attraction to new economic opportunities in China, the non-communist countries of Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, entered 'a marriage of convenience' with China against Hanoi and Moscow (Ang, 2018: 178). The opening of China under Deng attracted Indonesian business interests and direct trade between China and Indonesia resumed in 1985 (Sukma, 1999: 178). But for Suharto, the cornerstone for normalizing bilateral relations was the termination of China's 'dual-track diplomacy'—the maintenance of inter-communist-party ties while cultivating governmental relations (Sukma, 1999: 149). During his meeting with Suharto in 1989, Qian Qichen, the PRC Foreign Minister at the time, emphasized that China had no connection with the PKI (Qian, 2005: 93–4). A year later, Sino-Indonesian diplomatic relations were formally restored (Sukma, 1999: 3).

Starting from the mid-1980s, the PRC government cut financial support to the 510 Office and the Seven-Colour Forest Village due to changes in its foreign policy as well as the deepening of the market reform. While both communities received preferential treatment from the central government when initially established, they were later expelled from the protective shell of the state in China's post-Maoist transition. The following sections will examine how the reorientation of PRC foreign policy and

economic reform affected the everyday life of the migrants who traversed the borders between China and Southeast Asia during the Cold War.

The 510 Office: from privileged seclusion to deindustrializing suburb

The 510 Office was a highly securitized suburban compound, designed in accordance with the PRC's policy of 'privileged segregation' for managing foreigners (Hooper, 2016: 5). In the 1960s and 1970s, the Southeast Asian exiles residing inside, marked by their strong ideological commitment to communism and intellectual backgrounds, were categorized as honorable 'foreign guests of the Party' by the Chinese government. The Indonesian exiles, the majority of the 510 Office, consisted of PKI-affiliated writers, editors, translators and journalists visiting or working in China, high-ranking PKI leaders undergoing medical treatment, and students pursuing higher education (Hill, 2020).

The Chinese state's main governing strategy for these 'guests' was to isolate them from the general Chinese population and 'insulate them from the harsh everyday realities, which ran counter to the publicized images of "new China"' (Hooper, 2016: 5). The 'foreign guests' enjoyed privileges such as free food and housing, VIP medical care and all-expenses-paid holidays. But they were strictly prohibited from interacting with ordinary Chinese, their daily movements were closely monitored by their Chinese caretakers/minders, and their personal communications with the outside world were constantly under surveillance.

In the mid-1960s, Beijing's initial decision to offer asylum to the displaced Indonesians was motivated by a desire to boost its prestige in the international communist movement. China wanted to demonstrate its superior appeal to Third World revolutionaries in competition with the 'revisionist' Soviet Union (Hill, 2020). With its promise to help the remaining PKI members stage 'an armed agrarian revolution under the leadership of the proletariat' back in Indonesia, China became a meeting point for those who still dreamed of returning home and resurrecting the PKI (Adjitorop, 1977). In the late 1960s, the exiles gathered at the Nanjing Military Academy, a training centre for foreign radical groups from Asia, Africa and Latin America on Maoist-style guerilla warfare strategies (Lovell, 2019: 195). But Beijing made no plans to dispatch the exiles back to Indonesia. Faced with dim prospects for rebuilding the PKI's strength back home, the exiles directed their frustrations towards each other and became embroiled in internal ideological disputes (Hill, 2020: 355).

After US President Richard Nixon's historic visit to the PRC in 1972, Beijing started to detach itself from the communist movements in Southeast Asia. In 1974, the ILD transferred the exiles from Nanjing, which was on the First Front in Mao's tripartite division of the PRC territory, to a 'May 7 Cadre School' in Gao'an, Jiangxi. Officially, the goal of the relocation was to protect the exiles from ever-increasing threats from the Soviet Union. In reality, Beijing wanted to keep the exiles out of public view as they had become an embarrassment to their host.

The exiles' first settlement in Jiangxi, 'May 7 Cadre School' in Gao'an, was situated in a converted labour camp at a remote rural location. Named in honour of the date in 1966 on which Mao wrote to Lin Biao stating that 'the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was a great school', May 7 Cadre Schools were set up in many parts of China to reeducate and rusticate cadres through manual labour (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006: 160). However, the Gao'an May 7 Cadre School was built exclusively for the Southeast Asian communist exiles and was equipped with advanced infrastructure unavailable to

most Chinese peasants and sent-down cadres. The land it occupied was under the direct control of the Jiangxi Military authorities and its gates were guarded by PLA soldiers (Compilation Committee of the History of Xiangcheng County, 2017: 799).

As the Cultural Revolution ended and May 7 Cadre Schools across China were being demolished, the ILD transferred the exiles from Gao'an to the suburban of Nanchang in 1976. Like the May 7 Cadre School in Gao'an, the 510 Office was a closed compound on a territory managed by the PLA. Compared with Gao'an, the 510 Office offered the aging exile population easier access to high-quality medical facilities in the provincial capital. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, 510 still received abundant funding from the ILD. The exiles could fulfil their daily needs within its walls, as the compound had a built-in canteen, clinic, offices, residential buildings and an auditorium (see Figures 3 and 4). Chinese staff members either cooked Chinese food or did grocery shopping for the exiles if they wanted to cook Southeast Asian cuisine themselves. Interpreters accompanied them to hospitals for medical services if needed. The exiles stayed at rent-free apartments equipped with household electronics that were rarely seen in China at the time, such as Made-in-Japan refrigerators and air conditioners. Moreover, they were entitled to annual vacations involving luxuries unfathomable to the vast majority of Chinese—rides on airplanes, stays at exclusive hotels, and feasts featuring signature dishes and fresh produce at their destinations (Aidit, 2006: 39–40).

Starting from the mid-1980s, the shift in China's geopolitical strategy changed the dynamics within the high walls of 510. To facilitate the normalization of its diplomatic relations with Indonesia, the PRC pressured the PKI exiles to leave by downgrading their official status from 'foreign guests of the Party' to 'residents of foreign origin' and drastically reducing the comprehensive services they enjoyed. Those who stayed had to become naturalized PRC citizens. They needed to be economically independent and make their own financial calculations based on personal income. Due to a lack of Chinese language proficiency and marketable skills in China's new economic environment, many exiles had few employment opportunities in China. China's policy changes thus triggered a tide of outward migration among the exiles, mostly to Western Europe (Hill, 2020: 360).

The exiles' identities changed in response to the CCP's governing practices and varied in accordance with their individual ideological inclinations and pragmatic considerations. A minority left before the cancellation of privileges due to disillusionment with Chinese communism, particularly the radicalism during the tempestuous Cultural Revolution. Utuy Tatang Sontani, an accomplished Indonesian playwright who underwent medical treatment in China, left for the Soviet Union in 1971 to escape from the suffocating environment (Hill, 2020: 359–60). The majority of the exiles stayed on and adapted to the comfortable but confined environment in the 510 compound. Like the communists from Western countries living in the PRC under Mao, some of the exiles might have 'their faith in Chinese communism shaken', but 'moving elsewhere did not always seem a viable option for economic or political reasons' (Hooper, 2016: 48).

Although those who stayed usually made their decisions based on 'the sheer practicalities of day-to-day living', their choice usually reinforced their political allegiance to the PRC (Hooper, 2016: 48). Some even transformed into devoted advocates of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', as epitomized in Deng Xiaoping's developmentalism. Suar Suroso and his wife, who arrived in China from Moscow in 1967, chose to stay in Nanchang because both had stable jobs at a local university and hospital respectively and they wanted to stay close to their children, who grew up speaking Mandarin Chinese as their first language and were fully assimilated in the Chinese society. Suroso

Figure 3. *The entrance to the 510 Office. The plaque reads 'The 510 Office, the Foreign and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of Jiangxi province 江西省外事侨务办公室五一零办事处'.*
Source: Photograph taken by the author in Nanchang, 2013.

held high hopes for China's future under the CCP. In his retirement, Suroso published in *bahasa* Indonesia on Deng Xiaoping's modernization agenda and Xi Jinping's BRI scheme (Suroso, 2015; 2016). When he presented gift copies of his books to the ILD leaders, they responded by encouraging him to 'rest more, work less and focus on his health' (M, pers. comm., Nanchang, 19 July 2019).

In comparison with this horizontal variation among the exiles, the identities of the Chinese staff members at the 510 Office show vertical, generational differentiations. L, the first director of the 510 Office, was a revolutionary veteran born in Indonesia in the 1930s. Inspired by her father, an Indonesian Chinese entrepreneur active in the overseas branches of the CCP in Indonesia, L left Indonesia for the PRC in 1959 and entered Jinan University in Guangzhou, an institution for overseas Chinese education. After her graduation, she worked as an interpreter for the ILD, the Guangzhou Military District and the Intelligence Bureau of the General Staff of the PLA. From 1967 until her retirement in the 2000s, L assisted the Indonesian exiles in their daily lives while closely monitoring their activities, serving as their translator, caretaker and minder for

Figure 4. *The auditorium of the 510 Office*.
Source: Photograph taken by the author in Nanchang, 2013.

more than three decades. Her dedication was underpinned by her lifelong loyalty to the CCP.

Whereas L was promoted to the directorship of the 510 because of her language skills and revolutionary credentials, her successor M rose to her position due to her business talents. Born in the late 1950s, M was raised in a PLA family and married to a PLA officer. In 1991, having worked as an accountant at a military factory in Zhejiang Province, she was transferred to a newly established public relations department at the 510 Office. By then, China's marketization had triggered rounds of restructuring and downsizing at state-owned enterprises (SOE) and governmental agencies, including the ILD. The reception of foreign visitors, a sector which used to consume a significant amount of the ILD's manpower, was outsourced to private travel agencies (Editorial Team ILD, 1992: 483). As a result of the reform, the basic salary for 510 employees was set at a low 300–400 RMB per month by the Foreign Affairs Office of the Jiangxi provincial government. The 510 Office itself was responsible for generating enough revenue to issue much-needed bonuses. An elegant and entrepreneurial woman, M soon became the 510 Office's number one salesperson. In the early 1990s, most apartments within the 510 compound were emptied and converted into guest rooms. The

exclusivity of 510 was attractive to governmental departments looking for a retreat venue with privacy as well as to special groups that needed isolation such as Public Security and teachers who wrote the National College Entrance Exam. Although its 1970s-style décor was modest, the lush forests and migrating birds made the natural environment of 510 very appealing. M proactively reached out to government sectors with conferencing needs and targeted those with special security considerations. Her savvy marketing strategies brought a brief period of prosperity to 510 in the 1990s.

However, M was unable to revive the 510 Office in the long run due to institutional constraints at the ILD and deindustrialization in the Qingyunpu District, one of Nanchang's suburbs. Unlike the SOE reforms, the restructuring of the ILD's subsidiary agencies, such as the 510 Office, did not follow a systematic roadmap for generating profit. M made repeated attempts to attract fiscal support from the ILD leadership and private investment to upgrade 510's infrastructure, which would increase its competitiveness as the Chinese hospitality industry developed. But her fundraising endeavours were unsuccessful as the political sensitivity surrounding the 510 Office prohibited its complete transformation into an economic enterprise. Meanwhile, the Qingyunpu District, the suburb where the 510 Office was located, underwent deindustrialization and accompanying economic decline. Between the 1950s and 1970s, Qingyunpu was the home of one of the PRC's major military-use aerospace engineering bases (Wei, 2002: 127) and the birthplace of the PRC's first domestic-made motorcycle, light-wheel tractor, airplane and coastal defense missile (*Nanchang Daily*, 2016). However, starting from the 1990s, the socialist-era military industrial complexes were gradually privatized and relocated out of Nanchang. Today, the suburban restructuring and renewal at Qingyunpu is still progressing slowly and the district struggles to find a new model of economic growth.

The declining 510 Office functioned as a springboard for B, born in the late 1960s, to launch a new career in the post-socialist era. B joined the PLA at age 19 and was demobilized three years later. Upon the recommendation of his brother who worked at the Foreign Affairs office of the Jiangxi provincial government, B entered the 510 Compound as a procurement clerk for its canteen. Although at the time, the 510 Office was no longer an appealing work unit, procurement jobs at governmental agencies were still highly coveted. During China's early reform era, a procurement clerk could easily leverage on price differences between the market and planned systems for economic gain. Furthermore, although B did not know any other language besides Mandarin Chinese and rarely interacted with the exiles, his 'international exposure' at 510 qualified him for a high-level managerial position at a Nanchang-based 'international exchange service center' (*guoji jiaoliu fuwu zhongxin* 国际交流服务中心). The company offers its customers assistance with visa applications and study abroad; it is a business enterprise but enjoys special status as a public institution (*shiye danwei qiye guanli* 事业单位企业管理). Compared to study-abroad services or travel agencies, it has more credibility and promises expedient processing of travel documents due to its affiliation with the Overseas Chinese and Foreign Affairs Office of the Jiangxi Provincial Government. B thrives at this liminal economic space between the public and the private sectors.

Seven-Colour Forest: from overseas Chinese farm to model multiethnic village

When I last met M in Nanchang in 2019, she lamented the dilapidated physical environment and languishing, lifeless atmosphere at the 510 Office, where 29 Chinese

Figures 5a. and b. *Identical three-story, cream-colour brick houses with blue rooftops cluster neatly along the village main road, leading to a 'returned overseas Chinese history and culture corridor' (guiqiao lishi wenhua zoulang 归侨历史文化走廊) decorated with bright paper windmills.*
Source: **Photograph taken by the author in Seven-Colour Forest, 2019.**

employees were still technically serving the only surviving Indonesian exile, who was under palliative care at a Nanchang hospital. In contrast, the Seven-Colour Forest Village has an energetic vibe. Occupying 622 *mu* (亩) [one *mu* is equivalent to 666.7 km^2] of land on a fertile plain next to a national highway, the Seven-Colour Forest Village consists of 101 households and 410 residents as of 2018. The 'seven colours' refer to Han and six minority groups—Yao, Jing/Kinh/Vietnamese, Dong/Kam, Dai/Tai, Zhuang and Miao/Hmong (see Figures 5a and b).

Despite its much-celebrated ethnic diversity, the village population, which entirely consists of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam and their descendants, has been a tight knit group sharing the same language, cultural roots and experience of forced migration. The lingua franca at Seven-Colour Forest is Hakka, or Ngay (艾话) as commonly known in Vietnam, which is different from the local Jiangxi dialect (Han, 2013a: 26; Kong, 2008: 31). The eldest generation (mostly born in the 1940s and 1950s) at the Seven-Colour Forest are ethnic Chinese from rural regions in the northern parts of Vietnam. Having crossed to the Chinese side of the border between 1975 and 1979, they were initially sheltered by the Chinese government at the Baise Overseas Chinese Tea Farm in Guangxi Province. In 1982, they were resettled at the newly built Vast Forest Overseas Chinese Farm in Jiangxi. Some of the villagers were from the same lineage or had been neighbours back in Vietnam, others had been familiar with each other during their time at Baise.

The PRC state categorizes these migrants from Vietnam as 'returnees' (*guiqiao* 归侨). The state 'sees' them as 'repatriating' to their ancestral homeland even if they had not lived in mainland China before. Returnees embody liminal political subjectivities and the returnees at the Seven-Colour Forest have multiple rather than singular, ambivalent rather than unequivocal, evolving rather than static, cultural and political identities (Ho & McConnell, 2019: 242). During my conversations with the first-generation returnees at the Seven-Colour Forest in 2019, most of them expressed a

mix of bitterness towards and nostalgia for Vietnam. These returnees were culturally distinct from the neighbouring Jiangxi local villagers by their daily use of Vietnamese-influenced Hakka and Southeast Asian culinary practices, such as the liberal use of fish sauce. They maintained ties to Vietnam and organized regular trips to the Sino-Vietnamese borderland to sweep ancestral graves. However, most returnees held grudges against the Vietnamese government due to past mistreatment.

The returnees' sense of political belonging to Vietnam were weakened by traumatic experiences of discrimination and displacement. Like in some Southeast Asian countries, the Chinese diaspora were characterized by nationalist Vietnamese politicians as economically influential but politically disloyal (Chang, 1982: 195). After the merger of the North and South under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, people with Chinese ancestry were disproportionately affected by Hanoi's attacks on the bourgeoisie. Under the shadow of intensifying geostrategic rivalry between Hanoi and Beijing, restrictions on Chinese economic activities soon escalated to the confiscation of property, frequent police harassment and forced relocation. Military skirmishes at the China-Vietnam borderland triggered Hanoi's campaign to 'purify' the provinces adjacent to China by expelling the ethnic Chinese (Chang, 1982: 203). The subsequent refugee crisis further deepened the enmity between the two countries. Beijing and Hanoi ultimately entered a short border war in 1979, which in turn exacerbated the exodus of Chinese from Vietnam (Quinn-Judge, 2006).

During the border war of 1979, the PRC state mobilized the displaced diaspora for military operations against Vietnam. At the Seven-Colour Forest, four men from the first-generation returnees—the two W brothers and two X brothers—had served in the PLA's intelligence units. Born in the late 1950s and early 1960s, all were fourth-generation ethnic Chinese from Vietnam's Quang Nih Province and had received elementary-school or junior-high-school levels of education there. Their command of the Vietnamese language and familiarity with the borderland environment made them desirable candidates for interpreters and guides for the PLA. In November-December 1978, shortly before the actual border war in February-March 1979, the PLA started recruiting young and fit male ethnic Chinese displaced from Vietnam at the Baise Overseas Chinese Tea Farm in Guangxi. The W and X brothers were enlisted. To protect them from being exposed as 'traitors', the PLA dispatched the diaspora soldiers to regions some distance away from their native places in Vietnam. According to the younger W, diaspora soldiers technically did not engage in combat missions, although some did die on the battlefield. After receiving some basic training on the Baise Farm, the younger W was transferred to Vietnam's Cao Bang and Ha Giang provinces. There, he was responsible for the troops' communications with the Vietnamese, including declaring the PLA's peaceful intentions towards the civilians, acquiring food from the locals and interrogating the prisoners of war. When recounting his war experience, the younger W lamented how 18 and 19-year-old new PLA recruits 'sacrificed their lives in large numbers and in vain'.

After their demobilization from the PLA, many returnees with battlefield experience were promoted to leadership positions at their new settlements in the PRC. The elder X became Vast Forest's first returnee Party Secretary; the elder W, who was awarded a third-class merit by the PLA, worked as the director of the county's Foreign Affairs Office. Their incorporation into the local bureaucracy helped solidify state control over the migrant community.

During the early dates of their resettlement, the returnees forged an 'imagined community' through their collective memory of war and displacement as well as the state's

preferential policies (Kong, 2010: 43). Between the 1950s and late 1970s, for the purpose of demonstrating its 'co-ethnic fraternity' with the global Chinese diasporic communities and shoring up its international prestige, the PRC created overseas Chinese farms to accommodate the 'counter-diasporic' migrants—mostly ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia (Ho, 2018: 2, 18). The farms were initially administered and funded directly by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council as well as their corresponding provincial branches. However, starting from the mid-1980s, the central government reduced financial aid to the farms and demanded that local authorities take over their management (Han, 2013b: 38–40).

The Vast Forest was among the 40 new overseas Chinese farms established in the late 1970s to accommodate the returnees from Vietnam. Upon their arrival, the returnees were offered employment opportunities at a state-owned orange orchard, with a stable income and a wide range of benefits including free medical care, low-cost housing and a pension. But Vast Forest lost its special administrative status and accompanying economic benefits in the mid-1980s. The orange orchard—the pillar of Vast Forest's economy—underwent ownership structure reform. With the gradual exit of state capital from the orchard and nation-wide decontrol of consumer goods prices, the income of the returnees decreased and fluctuated with the supply-and-demand situation in the market. The orchard also scaled back its welfare provision to the returnees and stopped offering employment to their adult children. The Vast Forest's subsequent experiments with the market economy, including a juice company built with equipment imported from Italy and a garment factory with Taiwanese investment, failed. Aging trees made orange cultivation unsustainable while the drain of youth to the cities rendered labour-intensive industry unviable. In 1992, a snowstorm that caused severe damage to local agricultural production became the last straw for 200 people—half of Vast Forest's total population at the time—and prompted them to leave for the more prosperous Guangdong.

Between the late 1980s and early 2000s, overseas Chinese farms across the PRC experienced economic stagnation, leading to social discontent, collective action, and remigration to more developed locations in China and abroad (Yao, 2009; Han, 2014). As the only group of returnees with internationally recognized refugee status, some displaced ethnic Chinese from Vietnam attempted to enter Hong Kong illegally after their initial arrival in the PRC, with the hope of migrating further to Western countries (Chen, 2007). The remaining returnees residing in regions with poor infrastructure and limited economic development potential, such as the mountainous regions of northern Guangdong, also tended to emphasize their refugee identity as a bargaining chip in their negotiations for better welfare from the state (Kong, 2010: 44).

At the Vast Forest, the returnees embraced an identity other than 'refugee'. In the 1980s, the first party secretary of the Vast Forest, a local Han Chinese, helped the returnees 'rehabilitate their statuses as ethnic minorities' (*huifu shaoshu minzu shenfen* 恢复少数民族身份). While most of the Hakka speaking returnees from Vietnam were classified as Han, at Vast Forest and another farm in Ji'an, Jiangxi Province, they were recognized as ethnic minorities from upland Southeast Asia. The Yao, Vietnamese, Dai, Zhuang and Hmong were indeed among the refugees who resettled in China in the late 1970s. Yet the languages of these six ethnic minorities have rarely been used at Vast Forest. Ethnic classification has been a conflict-ridden process in the PRC, often resulting in gaps and ambiguities (Mullaney, 2011). It seems more likely that the Vast Forest people were Hakkas tangentially linked to these minorities.

The historical contingency of refugees becoming 'minoritized' significantly contributed to the village's success in the 2010s. In 2008, the Vast Forest Overseas Chinese Farm renamed itself the Seven-Colour Forest Village. This title change revitalized the local economy in two ways. Firstly, by branding itself as a 'concentrated area of ethnic minorities' (*shaoshu minzu juju qu* 少数民族聚居区), the reborn Seven-Colour Forest became eligible for special subsidies reserved for non-Han groups. Secondly, by displaying themselves as exotic minority subjects and 'commodifying ethnic culture', the villagers managed to develop tourism (Litzinger, 2000: 231).

The second-generation returnees—who grew up witnessing the official status of their community changed from returnees to ethnic minorities—leveraged on the double label to achieve upward social mobility. Culturally speaking, the second-generation migrants, mostly born in the 1980s, were fully assimilated into the local society. The mass majority speak both standard Mandarin and fluent Hakka. Most only have impressionistic understandings of Vietnam, gained from brief trips to ancestral graves organized by their parents. Although Southeast Asia seems distant and exotic in their minds, their state-designated status as minorities from highland Southeast Asia brings real-life advantages, such as additional points in China's hyper-competitive national university entrance exam.

For second-generation migrants, the top-down preferential policies significantly improve their chances at higher educational attainment; meanwhile, the bottom-up nation-wide networks among the returnees from Vietnam increase their economic opportunities. The community of migrants from Vietnam distinguishes itself from other returnees by its large size and strong communal ties. Many members of the same Vietnamese Chinese neighbourhood or villages stayed together when resettled in China; members from the same clan keep in touch and regularly exchange information if resettled at different locations (Han, 2014: 209). Many Seven-Colour Forest villagers have relatives living in the Guangming Overseas Chinese Farm of Shenzhen, China's first and most successful SEZ. Due to this strategic location, the standard of living at Guangming is the highest among all the returnee communities in China. Throughout the dissolution of the state farm system between the late 1980s and early 2000s, Shenzhen was a popular destination for outbound migrants from the Seven-Colour Forest; the special connection between the two places through diasporic ties accelerated the drain of young people. Yet in the 2010s, as the labour market in Shenzhen became more competitive, this network encouraged the flow of highly skilled labour, capital and managerial knowledge from the frontier of reform back to the hinterland.

G, Seven-Colour Forest Village's party secretary between 2011 and 2021, personifies the second-generation returnees' multifaceted identities and their creativity in transforming the legacies and networks of the returnee community into an economic resource. Born in the late 1980s to parents who left Vietnam in their early teens, G's given name has strong connotations of Chinese nationalism—an expression of his parents' gratitude towards the PRC government. His official Yao identity granted him preferential treatment in university admission. After he graduated with a bachelor's degree in computer science, G was recruited by his uncle, a returnee who initially settled at the then Vast Forest but later became a successful entrepreneur in Shenzhen. G's uncle intended to revive the economy of Vast Forest with his new wealth. He hoped that G, with his educational background and exposure to the business culture of the SEZ, would return to lead their home village. In 2011, 23-year-old G was elected as the party secretary of the Seven-Colour Forest Village. With his uncle's venture capital, G promoted eco-friendly tourism featuring agri-entertainment activities such as blueberry

Figure 6. *Billboard with the slogan 'be similar to pomegranate seeds and hug tightly together' (xiang shiliuzi nayang, jinjin baozai yiqi 像石榴籽那样，紧紧抱在一起) at the Seven-Colour Forest Village. This CCP propaganda line originates from Xinjiang, as pomegranates are 'Chinese symbols of the exoticism of the region'.*
Source: Tynen, 2019: 19. Photograph taken by the author.

picking and barbecue. Inspired by the Splendid China Folk Village (*jinxiu zhonghua minsu wenhua cun* 锦绣中华民俗文化村) of Shenzhen, China's first ethnic cultural theme park, G also organized an annual 'ethnic minority folk culture festival' at the Seven-Colour Forest, attracting hundreds of thousands of photography enthusiasts eager to capture the villagers in elaborate ethnic costumes against the picturesque backdrop of orange trees (*China Jiangxi Net*, 2018).

The multicultural activities at the Seven-Colour Forest created business opportunities and a valuable political currency at a time when the Chinese state was increasingly anxious about ethnic tension. In the eyes of the state, the Seven-Colour Forest villagers were reliable stakeholders in its nation-building project and ideal agents for promoting its vision of ethnic harmony. In contrast with its draconian control and violent repression targeting frontier minority groups such as the Uighurs in Xinjiang, the state channeled generous top-down fiscal support to upgrade rural housing and communal infrastructure at the Seven-Colour Forest (see Figure 6). State media also showered positive attention on this model of 'returned overseas Chinese ethnic minority specialty village' (*guiqiao shaoshu minzu tese cunzhuang* 归侨少数民族特色村庄) (*China Jiangxi Net*, 2018). In response, the returnee community demonstrated ethnic diversity and unity in accordance with state rhetoric. To celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 2019, a flash mob in eye-catching ethnic clothing was staged at the township central square and performed the popular patriotic song 'My Motherland and Me' (*wo he wo de zuguo* 我和我的祖国) (see Figure 7). The video recording of this event went viral on Sina Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, and the mobile app 'Study and Strengthen the Nation' (*xuexi qiangguo* 学习强国), the Xi-era flagship digital

Figure 7. *Flash mob multiethnic performance at Seven-Colour Forest to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the PRC, March 2019.*
Source: **Still from video; Seven-Colour Forest Village History Exhibition Hall. Photograph taken by the author.**

propaganda platform (Sina Weibo, 2019). During the most recent village committee election in February 2021, ballots were cast against the backdrop of folk music and dances; voters were offered 'seven-colour cakes' and 'hundred-flower tea' at booths decorated with ethnic handcrafts. Seven-Colour Forest made headlines in the CCP organ *The People's Daily* as leading 'the hottest ethnic trend' (*zui xuan minzu feng* 最炫民族风) in Chinese rural politics (*China Jiangxi Net*, 2021).

Conclusion

The PRC constructed the 510 Office and the Seven-Colour Forest Village as geographical solutions to historical issues. Both were domestic 'state spaces'—where populations were open to order, planning, surveillance and control—created for foreign policy purposes (Scott, 1998: 4, 191). The power shifts in Asia-Pacific geopolitics in the 1970s resulted in new spatial arrangements and a reorganization of social life in hinterland China. The two places allowed the PRC to 'prescriptively forget' its debacle in Indonesia and war with Vietnam and launch new diplomatic initiatives in Southeast Asia (Yin & Path, 2021: 11). Despite, or even because of, their inland location, both the 510 Office and Seven-Colour Forest functioned effectively as inconspicuous settlements for migrants from abroad and as safe social spaces to suppress memories of ideological conflicts, ethnic disputes, and military confrontations in the international arena, so that Beijing could start afresh with Southeast Asia as the Cold War thawed.

As 'liminal diplomatic spaces' (McConnell, 2017: 143) concealed deep in the Chinese hinterland, the 510 Office and Seven-Colour Forest Village were products of state reterritorialization, 'a deeply material and embodied process' (Yeh, 2013: 5) that involved the transformation of both the Jiangxi landscape and the subjectivities of the Southeast Asian migrants. Sensitive to their 'in-betweenness and ambiguity', the state carefully regulated both places as zones of exception with clearly marked boundaries and exclusive membership (McConnell, 2017: 146). In terms of spatial governance, the state managed the 510 Compound and the then Vast Forest Overseas Chinese Farm

directly as administrative units 'carved out of local territories' (Han, 2013b: 38); in terms of population control, the state restricted people from outside the exile and returnee communities from settling into these two enclaves. This policy of exclusion was tied to preferential economic policies especially reserved for the Southeast Asian migrants. In the early years of their respective establishment, the 510 Office and then Vast Forest Overseas Chinese Farm had been 'quasi-welfare institutions' chronically depending on state financial support (Han, 2013b: 38–9).

The PRC's regulatory regimes at the 510 Office and Seven-Colour Forest Village made the exiles and migrants 'think of themselves in new ways' (Yeh, 2013: 69). By the mid-1980s, the bond among the Indonesian communists at the 510 Office transformed from a common ideological belief to a depoliticized identity forged by shared living experiences of both material abundance and a curtailment of personal freedom. On the Vast Forest Overseas Chinese Farm, the PRC created an incentive structure consisting of political promotion for diaspora veterans, stable employment for diaspora employees at the SOEs, and better higher education opportunities for their descendants. This reward system helped cultivate the returnees' political allegiance to the Chinese state and solidify state control of the migrant communities.

With China's foreign policy reorientation and the progression of market reform, the state's governing strategy in the two study areas changed from one of privileged segregation to a strong push for economic self-reliance. By the mid-1980s, the PKI exiles in China had become the main obstacle to the resumption of Sino-Indonesian diplomatic ties and state financial support to the 510 Office dwindled. Originally built to shelter Southeast Asian revolutionaries, the 510 compound was ironically used by many Indonesian communist exiles as a springboard for migration to the capitalist West and by its Chinese staff members to strategically position themselves between the disaggregating planned economy and the emerging market. Some entrepreneurial Chinese employees took advantage of the infrastructure at the 510 Office to profit from China's burgeoning hospitality industry; others started new careers at liminal organizations between the public and private and the domestic and foreign sectors, such as travel agencies and passport processing centers affiliated with the government.

Between the late 1980s and early 2000s, the state cancelled aid packages for returnees to accelerate the overseas Chinese farms' integration into local societies and the market economy. Some disgruntled returnees strove to defend their interests as internationally recognized refugees through confrontation with the state. In contrast, the Seven-Colour Forest residents benefited from being co-opted into the state system as model ethnic minorities. Inadvertently recognized as minorities from highland Southeast Asia by the PRC state, the Hakka Chinese from Vietnam and their descendants instrumentalized their ethnic identities to access special benefits from the government. The self-representation of the largely homogenous returnee community as ethnically diverse served as ideal propaganda material for the 'stability-hungry' state facing rising ethnic tensions (Tomba, 2014: 42). The Seven-Colour Forest returnees astutely used their unique migratory trajectory as social capital to bargain for preferential government policies and develop tourism. The returnees' descendants—with technological savviness, entrepreneurism and political acumen—'invented ethnic traditions' by organizing exhibitions, festivals and cultural performances and infusing everyday rural political economy with ethnic elements.

In sharp distinction to the BRI's conspicuous presence in Southeast Asia today, the Indonesian exiles' and Vietnamese Chinese's quiet settlement in Jiangxi inspire us to redefine reterritorialization and interrogate the conventional dichotomies between

hinterland and coast, domestic and foreign, state and society. Compared with the more open and permeable societies in coastal China, Jiangxi is a unique frontier of Sino-Southeast Asian interactions (Pomeranz, 1993: 24). This seemingly secluded interior offers us a fresh perspective from 'the limits, the edges, and the margins' (Pholsena, 2012: 164). Perhaps the most unexpected result of the reterritorialization of PRC diplomacy in Jiangxi is the self-reinvention of the Chinese cadres at the 510 Office as travel agents and of a new generation of rural elites at the Seven-Colour Forest as ethnic minorities. Without having lived abroad themselves, these bureaucratic entrepreneurs only have secondary connections to Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, their indirect international experiences were indispensable for the elevation of their economic and political statuses within China. As agents of the state, they subscribed to the PRC's governing practices in the two enclaves while 'developing their agency in the process' (Tomba, 2014: 18). Through their creative mediation, the history of PRC's Cold War engagement with Southeast Asia is reinscribed in new time-space contexts.

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Endnote

1 Except for the 510 Office, Suar Suroso and Utuy Tatang Sontani, all the other names of places and individuals that appear in this article have been anonymized.

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