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**Beyond Local State Corporatism and Entrepreneurial Political Selves:**

**A Governance Assemblage Perspective on the Management of Foreigners in a Chinese County**

Ka-Kin Cheuk

**Abstract**

This chapter explores the possibilities of conceptualizing the shifting geography of Chinese policymaking through a governance assemblage perspective. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork since 2010, the chapter presents two cases involving the management of Indian traders living in a county-level district in China’s eastern Zhejiang province. In doing so, it argues that existing theoretical paradigms, namely local state corporatism and entrepreneurial political selves, are inadequate to capture the county-level governance of transnational issues such as international migration to China. The chapter illustrates how a governance assemblage perspective can elucidate the significance of various players and forces, as well as their multiple interactions, in shaping the management of foreigners. This perspective can also bridge scholarly theorization with actual Chinese governance practice through the vernacular Chinese term *lizi* (example), which holds potential as an effective form of policy storytelling in China and beyond.

**Keywords**: migration management, Indian diaspora, assemblage thinking, governance, China

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In China, the everyday dynamism of county governance—as well as the governance of lower levels of administration—has received a good deal of scholarly attention in studies of Chinese policies, politics, and governance. Having limited policymaking capacity, county-level governments have faced a unique set of challenges in formulating their agendas, priorities, and strategies for effective local governance. The challenges are even more imposing when the issues at stake for local governments involve higher levels of government. This means that, while local governments need to mobilize their limited resources and power to deal with these issues, they cannot contradict the policy framework that has been firmly set by the administrations above them, especially those set by the central government. This is probably the major reason that many scholars are interested in studying the governance in county-level settings, considering these settings the most likely to exhibit innovative thinking about local governance—particularly those that cannot be simply explained in terms of the official language of policymaking—that can be found and analyzed through fieldwork-based research. In the scholarly literature in English, such settings have become one of the main incubators for theorizing about local governance in China, with many conceptual terms being created to capture the shifting Chinese geographies of policies at the county level (see, e.g., Blecher & Shue, 1996; Oi & Goldstein, 2018; Shue, 1988).

One of the most influential concepts for theorizing about Chinese county governance is local state corporatism (e.g., Oi, 1992; see also Duckett, 1998) or, in more recent years, what Hsu and Hasmath (2013) see as Chinese state corporatism. This generally refers to the observed tendency of some local governments’ practices—largely revealed by leading cadres’ words and non-leading cadres’ everyday actions—to be more similar to corporate actors in the business world than to socialists executing the bureaucratic logic of state-led policies. Local state corporatism usually means that the attitudes of local government officials are flexible and lenient and thus largely strategic and pragmatic. This enables them to pragmatically deal with contentious issues of local governance, such as promoting the development of the local market economy while not overriding the ideological apparatus of Chinese state socialism (Oi, 1992). In other words, the power contradictions within the state bureaucratic structure are skillfully bypassed so that local interests, which might otherwise not be able to develop, can also be protected.

Such corporate-like practices open a new space for scholars to conceptualize how state and non-state players, particularly those in the business and NGO sectors, could build up mutually beneficial connections which improve local governance on certain issues such as economic development, welfare provision, and social management (Hsu & Hasmath, 2013). On the other hand, closely related to local state corporatism, a body of scholarly literature is focused on the informal role of non-state actors in influencing state-society relations within the setting of local governance. These non-state players are usually powerful private entrepreneurs (e.g. Heberer & Schubert, 2012; Heberer & Schubert, 2018) and leaders of local business associations (e.g. Alpermann, 2006) whose entrepreneurial selves contribute to their largely hidden yet impactful political participation in local governance. Usually, they fill the policy gap, which refers to the social functions that local governments are unable to perform by themselves. This line of conceptual thought can be grouped into an examination of what I call entrepreneurial political selves, given its focus on unpacking the informal process by which such entrepreneurial individuals, who are not members of the party state, become the critical intermediaries in shaping the way in which the county officials govern in key areas.

The deployment of these two conceptual terms—local state corporatism and entrepreneurial political selves—has been productive in generating county-focused analysis, but there is little doubt that in recent years their explanatory power, in terms of scholarly knowledge production and relevance to policy, has continued to decrease. Since Xi Jinping became the leader of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012, the central government has clearly been tightening its grip on many aspects of local governance, particularly those that concern the party state’s ideological unity on political loyalty, national security, and social stability. As a result, it has become less possible for counties to cultivate their corporatist or entrepreneurial policy innovations, if any, using what Oi and Goldstein (2018) call “adaptive governance” in China. This is especially the case when such cultivation would easily conjure up the nerve-racking impression of attracting “foreign power interferences” (外部势力干涉) (Tan, 2022, p. 115–116). One remarkable development is the enforcement of the Overseas NGO Management Law in 2017, which has made it much more difficult for international NGOs to operate in China (see Holbig & Ling, 2022).

Moreover, it is now harder for scholars to apply the concepts of local state corporatism and entrepreneurial political selves when offering policy recommendations, regardless of how applicable they still are in theorizing the observed complexity of county-level policies and governance. Indeed, such scholarly approaches that present the interconnections between the state and non-state sectors in a local setting have become increasingly unspoken and at worst not tolerated in public discussions of politics within China. The ongoing anti-corruption campaign, which started in 2013 under Xi’s administration, has made unofficial connections between the local governments and non-state players, especially those in the business sectors, appear more suspicious in the view of the central state authorities (see Carothers & Zhang, 2023). In this circumstance, it becomes almost impossible to frame the actions of local officials and cadres in scholarly terms such as corporatism and entrepreneurialism. If one of the key purposes of producing scholarly knowledge is to have an actual impact on governance and policy knowledge transfer, it is urgent for scholars to explore other possible ways in which to approach studies of county-level policies and governance in China.

This chapter attempts to respond to this need by conceptualizing the latest development of Chinese policy geographies through the lens of the governance assemblage perspective (GAP), a conceptual term that I have developed mainly through engaging with Briassoulis’s assemblage thinking (AT) (Briassoulis, 2019; see also Briassoulis, 2017). This is essentially a conceptual experiment based on my long-term and ongoing ethnographic engagement with the Chinese county-level district of Keqiao (柯桥) in eastern Zhejiang Province, where the local governance of international migration—one of the most politically contentious issues in China in recent years—has been continuously reconfiguring the geographies of Keqiao’s county-level policies and governance. The chapter chiefly draws on the fieldwork that I, as a social and cultural anthropologist, started in 2010 in Keqiao, which has one of the world’s most vibrant international trading economies in low-cost textile products and has been the business base for many foreign traders, particularly traders from South Asia and the Middle East (Cheuk, 2017). Considering China’s centralizing and tightening control on international migration in recent years (Pieke et al., 2019), settings such as Keqiao—as this chapter will show—make corporatist and entrepreneurialist players in local governance at best minor and at worst irrelevant as factors in understanding the changes in the county.

This chapter also illustrates that the GAP, a more inclusive conceptual perspective that neither assumes nor privileges the agency of any particular group of players or forces in a given analysis, provides a wider and more dynamic view for capturing the larger significance of Keqiao in its county setting. By exploring two ethnographically grounded examples of the everyday management of foreigners in Keqiao, the chapter explains that the GAP does not just help us to capture a fuller picture of the local county governance. More importantly, it can also facilitate a global transfer of (hidden) policy knowledge by bringing a little-known story of governance achievement into wider circulation as a *lizi* (example). Thus, this approach may inform new policy possibilities and imagination through a creative form of storytelling.

The chapter is organized as follows. It begins with a brief methodological note about my long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Keqiao. It is followed by a critical discussion of the GAP in which I explore how and why it makes a unique contribution, not just by providing a theoretical rethinking of Chinese policies and governance but also by creating a new space for vernacular policy knowledge transfer, which offers the potential to reach a wider audience in China and beyond. Two ethnographic cases of the management of foreigners are presented to further explore the ways in which the GAP helps capture and communicate the shifting geographies of county-level policies and governance.

**Methods of Study**

This chapter is part of a long-term research project I have been conducting on Indian diasporic traders in Keqiao. I conducted ethnographic field research in Keqiao between 2010 and 2012 and between 2016 and 2018, as well as made several follow-up visits in other years between 2010 and 2024, all of which involved in-depth interviews and open-ended conversations with local cadres and officials as well as Indian and other foreign traders and their business partners in Keqiao’s fabric marketplaces. The data presented in this chapter are mostly based on participant observation; whenever I had a chance, I spent a whole day in the government offices or other places where Chinese cadres and officials met with Indian and other foreign traders, places where I could talk to the cadres and officials in depth. From 2009 to the present, I have collected a wide range of secondary materials related to foreign migration to Keqiao, including government publications, yearbooks, discussions on Chinese social media, online commentaries, and media reports.

Interlocutors appearing in this chapter are either anonymized or have been given pseudonyms for the purpose of privacy protection and confidentiality. Furthermore, the use of pseudonyms and anonymization serves a strategic and creative purpose. It shifts the focus away from individual identities and towards the “spirit” of assembled stories, thus offering the potential to open up new forms of policy legibility, in line with anthropologists who have experimented with “writing opacity” in their recent ethnographic writings (Peacock, 2024).

**Seeing Keqiao through the GAP**

My view on the GAP is deeply influenced by Briassoulis’s AT (Briassoulis, 2017; Briassoulis, 2019). Having published extensively on environmental policymaking and ecological governance (e.g. Briassoulis, 2017), Briassoulis has been advocating AT as an attempt to radically change the ontology of conceptualizing research in policy studies and related interdisciplinary fields. To accurately understand what Briassoulis means by AT, I quote her here at length:

AT-based approaches are experimental and processual, starting from the *multiplicity of issue-related assemblages* in a socioecological milieu. AT-based analysis rejects taxonomies and binaries, and, thus, the separation between problem and context, problem and solution, problem and governance, types of actors, goals, outputs and outcomes, formal spatial and temporal levels, stages of the decision process, formal and informal governance. They are all coconstituted and determined in the space of the *emergent assemblages*. (Briassoulis, 2019, p. 446, emphasis added)

Informed by Deleuze and Guattari (1988) and many scholarly explorations surrounding their work, Briassoulis promotes AT to critique the unexamined ontological assumptions of previous policy research, such as what policy successes and failures are, which have thereby (mis)led researchers, mostly unintentionally, to only look at one specific factor—be it a group of players or a top-down institutional force—as ultimately deterministic in the policy analysis. As Briassolulis (2019) argues and articulates, governance—broadly conceptualized as a socioecological problematic that is much more complex than any predefined language, such as policy planning, can contain—is actually an existing multiplicity, which means that the observed policy-related process can be complete, multidimensional, nonlinear, emergent, contingent, inconsistent, and unpredictable. Thus, an ethnographic exploration of the AT perspective would most benefit from case studies that do not fit the conventional and official views on policy and governance, while in the meantime different groups of state and non-state players and forces are entangled in the bottom-up, unevenly distributed formation of innovations, reconciliation, contradictions, disjuncture, and, above all, possibilities in what has been done and undone in the day-to-day process of local governance.

The management of foreigners in Keqiao provides an intriguing case study for experimental thinking about assemblage for the above reasons, which I will further elaborate on with three interrelated observations. First, the local management of foreigners in Keqiao is not politically and bureaucratically teleological, which means that people’s experience of governing and being governed—during a period when thousands of foreigners have visited and settled in Keqiao—cannot be translated into a preset goal to be achieved and made into transferable policy knowledge. This is to say that Keqiao’s government has not actively sought to publicly promote and present its way of managing foreigners as a policy model for other Chinese counties, even though for over two decades the local situation has not been regarded as a problem that has needed to be reformed. Nevertheless, Keqiao would have much to share about quiet yet effective county-level governance in the Chinese context. This is in stark contrast to comparable cases in the county-level city of Yiwu in Zhejiang Province (e.g., Cheuk, 2017, p. 42–43) and in Guangzhou (e.g., Lan, 2017; see also Zhou, 2016), in which the local management of foreigners from the Global South are sometime portrayed as a potential threat to public security and order in the media and online discussions. Therefore, an assemblage-based inquiry into the largely still unknown situation of Keqiao could help us not to presume a dominating factor when describing the rather unique non-modelling policy geographies.

Second, my ethnographic engagement with Keqiao over the last 14 years has given me a long-term, ongoing assemblage view on the shifting local governance of foreigners. My initial fieldwork (2010–2012) chiefly focused on the formation of the Indian diasporic community in Keqiao, so the local geographies of policies and governance were only my side interest. In 2016, I joined Leiden University’s EU-China interdisciplinary research team Immigration and the Transformation of Chinese Society,[[1]](#footnote-1) which aimed to study foreigners in China through an immigration policy perspective. Since that time, the local management of foreigners has become one of the central focuses of my fieldwork. This rather inconsistent development of my ethnographic engagement has enabled me to make sense of the fragmentary policy-related data (see the importance of “fragments” as anthropological data in van der Veer, 2014, and a similar discussion on “debris” in Stoler, 2013; see also Cheuk, 2023, p. 88) that I collected in my initial fieldwork and to connect the data with my subsequent, much more policy-focused explorations in recent years. Moreover, my earlier focus on non-state players and my later focus on local state players and their related forces, which were not predetermined choices of my research development, have helped me not to privilege one factor over the other in making the analysis. This provided me with a critical moment of “serendipity” in my fieldwork (see Pieke, 2000) when I begin to appreciate the potential of rethinking my ethnography through the lens of assemblage, which is largely about investigating different forms of agency in an uneven distribution (see also Allen & Vollmer, 2018).

Last, the assemblage view of Keqiao enables me to articulate the larger significance of my ethnography, which is about what I call the possibilities of creative storytelling of policy, or, in the context of the Chinese language, the vernacular story drawing on the *lizi* of local policies and governance. Compared with the AT proposed by Briassoulis (2019), my assemblage approach is not so much interested in making a policy or a mode of governance more applicable to policymaking. That is why I call my thinking about assemblage the GAP instead of directly borrowing the AT from Briassoulis. Here, it should be noted that I do not go as far as Briassoulis, who advocates an ontological reorientation for all kinds of policy studies through incorporating the material and non-material, as well as human and non-human, factors into the field-based analysis. To me, such a fundamental reorientation may work better in studies of ecological and environmental governance but not necessarily in the case of my research, which deals more with the multiple encounters of human players from different groups.

Indeed, instead of working toward an AT for all, I am more interested in taking advantage of the concept by making my ethnographic data more communicable to the wider world, particularly those data that are intrinsically complex, largely hidden, and easily disappearing yet perhaps uniquely valuable in offering alternative insights. That is how I see GAP—not as a kind of scholarly theorization such as local state corporatism and entrepreneurial political selves, in which the goal of theorization is to build up an analytical framework and an explanatory model. Rather, to a certain extent it can be said that the GAP is anti-theory in that its ultimate goal is not about creating a new way of theorizing policy and governance in academic research. Rather, it is more about cultivating a perspective that enables us to assemble vernacular stories about local policies and governance, making them presentable, circulatory, and not easily diminished despite the growing centralizing power of the Chinese party state as a countering force.

As such, my thinking on assemblage is closer to that of Huang (2020), who uses assemblage to reconstruct how ephemeral intercultural encounters, instead of any intended development plans, cobble together a beautiful story that powerfully celebrates the success of international aid in Bangladesh, regardless of the fact that no long-term workable development aid was actualized. I am inspired by Huang to look at how a particular kind of local story about policies and governance is transiently assembled and therefore has a social life of its own. Yet, my emphasis on what stories can convey is slightly different from Huang’s. While I also reconstruct the stories by assembling fragmentary ethnographic data, I try to be even more experimental. What I mean is that in the text I let the stories speak for themselves, without imposing too much analysis.

In the next section, I am trying to assemble a kind of vernacular storytelling of a *lizi* that is presented as it is by itself or, in other words, just tells the stories without explicitly detailing the theoretical and methodological processes of how I have assembled them during my ethnographic fieldwork. This is meant to make the stories approachable to as many people and institutions as possible, including the party state, in order to enhance the stories’ communicative power and thus facilitate alternative thinking on Chinese politics. The chapter seeks to invite more audiences to pay attention to the mundane details of ordinary stories and the compelling examples that at first glance appear only loosely related to policies. In so doing, it experiments with the extent to which such a creative storytelling approach can generate alternative insights among the readers. It also experiments with how this unconventional approach may complement transferable policy models and “exemplary centers” (Bakken, 2000) of policy achievement in local counties, considering it is now becoming more difficult to create such models due to the tightening institutional force from the central state in recent years. I follow Højer and Bandak (2015) in their proposal of “the power of example” in anthropological analysis, given its potential to destabilize the ontological divide between “examples” and “exemplars” and thus to create opportunities to cultivate new and alternative thinking regarding the ethnographic findings.

**Assembled Story 1: Foreigners’ Business Associations**

Foreign traders in Keqiao have founded several business associations, and they provide the key platform where government officers and foreign community leaders meet and directly communicate, especially during times when they each need the other side’s timely support on certain matters. Committee members of these associations, particularly the presidents, are some of the most well-known foreigners in Keqiao. All the government bureaucrats I have met at least know the names of these foreign community leaders. Indeed, when I started my fieldwork on Indian traders in 2010, it was my Chinese friends in the local government who connected me with former and current leaders of the Shaoxing Indian Business Association (SIBA), which was founded in 2003 as one of the very first Indian organizations in contemporary China. Indians first settled in Keqiao in the late 1990s and they founded SIBA shortly thereafter. SIBA has been active in organizing events for the local Indian community and was later rebranded as the Shaoxing Indian Business Association-Indian Community in Keqiao (SIBA-ICK). The founding of SIBA in 2003 is remarkable considering that Indians in Yiwu, who also first settled in China in the late 1990s, did not manage to establish their business association until 2015.

On the development of this kind of *waiguoren shanghui* (foreigners’ business association), the case of Keqiao was quite different from other parts of China in the 2000s. This is because, at that time, Keqiao’s government adopted a rather flexible and proactive approach to managing these associations, making it the exception compared to, say, places where the rules and regulations were followed strictly. On paper, gaining official permission to run a foreigners’ business association is usually difficult if not entirely impossible, mostly due to the challenging process required to complete all the paperwork. There is no ordinance governing the application process for a foreigners’ business association, but the Interim Provisions on the Administration of Foreign Chambers of Commerce (外国商会管理暂行规定; order number 36 of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, June 14, 1989), until its minor revision in 2013, required foreign applicants to apply for permission from government bodies on both the local and central levels, with the latter including the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade (对外经济贸易部).[[2]](#footnote-2) The procedural complexity deterred foreigners in places like Guangzhou from applying for formal status for their business associations; instead, most foreign associations there only sought informal recognition from local officials, which inevitably exposed them to the constant threat of crackdowns (Jia & Tang, 2012, p. 66; Castillo, 2016, p. 299–300).

Rather than enforcing the interim provisions, Keqiao did things quite differently. The local government, of its own volition, created a feasible alternative for the foreign traders—to let them form their associations under the umbrella term “clubhouse” (俱乐部会所). It is much easier for foreign traders to join a clubhouse than to establish a business association because the county-seat government is solely responsible for its authorization and management. Clubhouses are designated to facilitate “social gathering and recreation” (联谊联欢) for all foreign traders, regardless of their nationality (*Shaoxing County Yearbook 2011*, 2012, p. 114). Keqiao’s government requires all foreigners’ business associations to share one clubhouse membership, and it also entrusts to the clubhouse’s core members, who are long-standing leaders of their respective foreign groups, the task of organizing communal events, including religious festivals such as Diwali, for their own national communities. The organizers are allowed to use the original names of their own business associations (e.g., the SIBA) instead of the name of the clubhouse, and Chinese officers are occasionally invited as guests of honor to these events. On the whole, those are ways in which foreign business leaders display the trust and support they have exclusively received from the local government.

On the other hand, the existence of the clubhouse enables the government officers to develop direct contacts with the foreign community leaders. These contacts have proven to be reliable and useful, especially whenever the local government requests a prompt response from the foreign communities in Keqiao. For instance, government officers rely on the clubhouse leaders to mobilize foreigners’ participation in government-led activities, particularly events that promote multiculturalism in the public arena. Around 10 events are organized for foreigners every year, including cultural events of the following types that are featured in the local newspapers: foreigners making Chinese *zongzi* (sticky rice dumpling) in the Dragon Boat Festival, joining a series of organized village tours to Keqiao’s countryside, and attending the Chinese New Year banquet (*Shaoxing County Yearbook 2009*, 2010, p. 135). As it turns out, the sustained working relationship between the leaders and officers is productive in bridging their disparate agendas, with the clubhouse granting the legitimacy for any ad hoc communications among them.

The establishment of the clubhouse makes Keqiao distinct from nearby cities, and this is widely regarded as a success in striking a good balance between foreign traders’ demands and the local government’s stake in the management of foreigners. This approach, which was described as exploratory and pioneering, received praise from the city-level government above Keqiao (Shaoxing Municipal Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, 2010). However, despite the official endorsement from above, there was no further institutionalizing of the clubhouse as a transferrable policy model. In other words, Keqiao’s government did not translate its success into an expansion of bureaucratic capacity in the management of foreigners. That also means that foreign business leaders cannot be given more formal roles than those that already exist in the clubhouse.

In comparison, the institutionalization of Chinese migrants’ business associations in Keqiao—with 16 organizations housed in the same office building and under the collective management of the local government’s Federation of Industry and Commerce (工商业联合会)—has led to the political empowerment of Chinese business leaders beyond the confines of their own associations. Such empowerment matters greatly to these leaders and the local government, given that a number of them have since accepted appointments in the National People’s Congress and the People’s Political Consultative Conference in Keqiao (Tao & Lou, 2011, p. 32).

The contrast is no less stark when the situation of Keqiao is compared with that of Yiwu. Most foreigners’ business associations in Yiwu, such as those run by traders from the Middle East, remain unregistered a decade after their founding (Guo & Sha 2011, p. 70). Still, the absence of institutionalization has not prevented Yiwu from asking foreign business leaders to directly assist with foreigner management. As early as in 2003, a select number of foreign business leaders were invited to attend Yiwu’s annual assembly of the People’s Congress, which was unprecedented in China (Standing Committee of Beijing Municipal People’s Congress, 2016). In 2013, 13 foreign business leaders were appointed by the local court as arbitrators, and more have been appointed since then; well-known as “foreign uncles” (*yang niangjiu*),[[3]](#footnote-3) the foreign arbitrators play a government-sanctioned role in mediating international trade disputes, especially those involving persons from their own country in Yiwu and beyond (Wang, 2018). In contrast, only in August 2018 did Keqiao’s government start to do the same––following in the footsteps of Yiwu rather than making a new policy of their own––by appointing foreign business leaders as arbitrators (see Shaoxing Gongan Qunlanxing, 2023). This can be seen as long overdue in Keqiao, given that local officers had already worked with these foreigners for a decade or even longer.

**Assembled Story 2: Absence of Indians in Public Discourse**

Branded as a flagship event, the China Shaoxing International Textile Expo (*zhongguo shaoxing guoji fangzhipin bolanhui*) is a state-level biannual textile fair that the Keqiao county government uses to showcase the high level of internationalization (*guojihua*) of the local textile economy. The Shaoxing Expo was first convened in 1999, and since then the scale has continued to expand, alongside the rapid development of the county’s textile economy. By presenting the number of foreign merchandisers attending the expo and the total trade volume, official Chinese publications, such as the pamphlet distributed for the 2012 expo in April, explicitly show that there is a strong foreign presence, which is an indicator of the remarkable success of the county’s export economy.[[4]](#footnote-4)

I have gone through all the pamphlets and promotional materials I collected from the April 2012 expo as well as the official reports and news updates published on the internet and social media by the expo’s organizer. Having read all of these soporific materials as texts, I found the expo repeatedly used celebratory yet insipid language, for example, describing the Shaoxing Expo as “one of the top domestic textile professional exhibitions” (China Keqiao International Textile Expo, n.d.). In reality, the popularity of the Shaoxing Expo is far behind that of other state-level textile fairs in Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou in terms of local participation as well as the number of exhibitors and visitors. Certainly, it is difficult to gauge the Shaoxing Expo’s impact on the global textile markets by only referring to the numbers and descriptions presented in these materials. As it turns out, I became more intrigued with exploring other snippets of information revealed by these materials—for example, the pictures posted online that feature the foreign buyers in the Shaoxing Expo, especially when I could pick out familiar faces.

In particular, one picture on Weibo caught my attention. That picture was posted by the event’s organizer as one of the official live updates from the April 2012 expo. Four persons are depicted in the picture: one dark-skinned foreign man on the left, using both hands to examine a pile of fabric samples scattered on a table, a Chinese woman sitting next to this foreigner, busy talking on a mobile phone, and two Chinese men sitting on two other sides of the table, one of whom was probably explaining details of the fabric samples to the foreigner. Part of the picture’s caption reads, “a high quality of one-to-one connection between buyers and suppliers … meeting the buyers.” When I came across this picture on Weibo, I recognized that the foreigner was one of my Indian interlocutors, Ravi, and that the Chinese woman was his office assistant, Daisy. Ravi had lived in Keqiao for five years as a middleman agent. In fact, Ravi, even though he was a foreigner, had not played the role of a direct overseas buyer in Keqiao. In other words, the description of him in the picture’s caption was not accurate, if not entirely incorrect.

Not long after the expo, I showed the image to Ravi and told him that there was an inaccurate description of him on Weibo. Just as I expected, Ravi told me that he had not done any business at or through the fair. In fact, Ravi almost forgotten he had been at the Shaoxing Expo. Nor could he recall whether someone had informed him that his picture was taken at the expo. Giving the picture a quick look, Ravi burst out laughing with two hands on his belly. “I look very good in this picture, don’t I?” he said. I asked how he felt about being wrongly described as a foreign buyer instead of, for example, a more accurate description such as “an Indian export agent based in Keqiao.” Ravi bluntly told me that he was puzzled by my question. “Why you have to worry, my friend? They always take good pictures of us. They want to show to the world that we are good people, and we do good business in Keqiao,” Ravi said, still laughing. Besides asking me to send him the picture, Ravi reiterated that he was happy to be included in the picture despite the wrong caption. “Of course, they know that we’re Indians! I tell you, my friend … they did it on purpose, not by mistake! It’s just to show the Chinese government likes us Indians very much. This is very good to know that we can do something for the Chinese government.” Ravi raised his voice as he made this final remark. Unexpectedly, Ravi’s many mentions of the “Chinese government” in this outspoken way permeated the whole conversation—a subject I had not intended to bring into the conversation.

The logic that Ravi used to formulate his comments on the picture has stuck with me throughout my field research in Keqiao. This is not because Ravi personally did not feel bad that his identity was misrepresented on a picture posted online—something he obviously had no control over. Instead, this is because of Ravi’s final remark—that he firmly asserted that his “Indian face” was deliberately vaunted in a misleading way by the Chinese state authorities and that he liked later discovering his “contribution.” Ravi’s statement reveals that he viscerally imagined “the Chinese government” as an all-in-one entity with foresight that could take control of even small matters such as an online picture. Ravi also did not differentiate between the central state and the local state when formulating his understanding of the Chinese government, despite the fact that the picture was produced by the local state. Even though I told Ravi that it was impossible to ascertain whether posting the online picture could be entirely viewed as a deliberate action by the Chinese state, Ravi believed that the Chinese state from above had in fact been in charge of it. As such, with his proclivity to have the powerful Chinese state in mind at all times, Ravi assumed that the caption was deliberately inaccurate because the Chinese state consciously wanted to safeguard its good image of treating foreigners well.

Interestingly, this Chinese state-centric proclivity did not seem to result in Ravi’s having a heightened need to self-police his expatriate life in Keqiao. As he clearly asserted in his final comment, Ravi would rather see himself, an Indian living in a foreign Chinese land, as actually in a “good” position within the powerful Chinese state, given that he was able to “do something” for “the Chinese government” in the ways he was inclined to imagine. As these lines indicate, Ravi was not only aware of the Chinese state; he was also preoccupied with it, as it came readily to his lips. In that light, Ravi did not feel it ironic to live between the powerful host state and his Indian, outsider status within the small Chinese county. As I see it, the state’s effect on Ravi seemed to be more self-enabling than self-policing.

There are two intertwined reasons that I paid attention to Ravi’s narratives of the Chinese state. The first reason is my initial interest in further pursuing the contextual meaning that Ravi’s case might imply. The second reason is my aim to explain the broader significance of this pursuit. First, I demonstrate that Ravi’s narratives shed light on the peculiar ways that Keqiao’s Indian traders imagine a pervasive Chinese state, regardless of the fact that many of them do not have direct contact with any Chinese working in the local county government. At the outset, I was shocked and deeply puzzled that the thought of a pervasive Chinese state would slip out of the mouth of an Indian like Ravi, especially when I had examined Ravi’s individual life experience in depth. Based on my interviews and other conversations with him, Ravi was not connected to any Chinese state official or bureaucrat. Indeed, Ravi told me that he did not know anyone in the Chinese government. Nor did he intend to do so in the future. “I do business on my own, not with any government!” Ravi, during the interview, emphasized his support for state-free independence as an export agent in Keqiao.

Except for a few Indian elites whose trading businesses are well established and long-standing in Keqiao, a majority of Indian traders, including Ravi, are not capable of developing strong and strategic social relations with frontline civil servants and leading cadres in the local government of Keqiao. Without access to knowing the Chinese state through meeting state agents, Ravi had only heard about the Chinese state from his Chinese business partners, his Indian friends, the television, the internet, and what I had told him. In fact, less well-to-do Indian traders such as Ravi were very reluctant to foster any person-to-person relationship with the local Chinese officials as they were afraid of unwanted attention from the Chinese state on their informal economic practices and transient migrant status (see Cheuk, 2022b). As I see it, Ravi and other Indians have forged a strong imagination of the Chinese state from other less obvious experiences of state engagement in Keqiao but not necessarily a well-crafted interpersonal strategy of building up intimate forms of relationship with, for example, agents of the Chinese state as close friends, long-time business partners, and daily consultants.

So, what are these other experiences? As the case of Ravi reveals, Indians’ day-to-day engagement with the Chinese state in Keqiao is often anonymous; it is designed to be indirect, involves intermediaries, and lacks public presentable social relations. As such, the search for these experiences has to be directed at particular subtleties of Indians’ local practices in which the interactions between the Indian traders and the Chinese state are the most cryptic and yet the most robust. A comparison with Yiwu will further illustrate this point. Much of the economy of Yiwu and Keqiao leverages the long-time contributions of foreign traders, particularly those from South Asia and the Middle East (Cheuk, 2022a; Cheuk, 2022b; Marsden, 2017; Marsden & Ibanez-Tirado, 2018; Osella, 2022). Over the last three decades, foreign traders in both places have been playing a crucial role by serving as international trade brokers between overseas buyers and Chinese suppliers in the exporting of low-budget global commodities (e.g., fabric, clothing, toys, and stationery), which has been the pillar of local economic development. On the one hand, most of these foreigners are sojourning traders whose commercial survival largely depends on their transnational business networks, which need to be created, reproduced, and strengthened by frequent international travels and multi-sited business operations. As transnational mobility continues to characterize much of their social life, they have little incentive to settle down permanently in China (see Cheuk, 2019). On the other hand, the constant presence of people from various countries, including frequent visitors and long-time residents, creates an everyday need for multicultural governance in the two places.

The general approach that the government of Yiwu adopts in multicultural governance is very different from that of Keqiao. Yiwu has thus far received much more scholarly, media, and public attention, not only in China but also in the world (e.g. Marsden & Ibanez-Tirado, 2018). Yiwu’s government has been actively seeking to upgrade its administration, such as by getting promoted to a county-level city with quasi-provincial status to enforce a pro-trade, foreign trader–friendly business environment (*Renwinwang,* 2009). For instance, Yiwu’s government is the first in China that has (1) its own visa processing facilities (*Zhongguowang,* 2003); (2) a foreign service center (Shewai Guanli Fuwu Zhongxin), (3) a translators association (Fanyi Xiehui), (4) an officially endorsed business arbitration center specifically for foreigners, (5) its own custom clearance facilities for export activities, (6) the authorization for local courts to handle cases involving foreigners, (7) the appointment of foreigners as street inspectors, and (8) a foreign arrival registration booth in the train station (see Figure 4.1). All of these local initiatives were designed to create more incentives for foreigners to live and do business in Yiwu without changing the existing laws and regulations. Yiwu’s government celebrates the success of the above pioneering initiatives as its own. There is no formal mechanism for Yiwu to export their governing practices to other counties and cities with similar settings of demography and economy. But Keqiao’s government—usually a few months after sending its cadres on short trips to learn (*xuexi*) and study (*kaocha*) the new practices in Yiwu—has adopted most of these practices, regardless of the fact that Keqiao had come up with many similar ideas even before Yiwu did (Shaoxing County People’s Government, 2015). But, as mentioned before, Keqiao could not transfer any of its innovative policy ideas to other counties.

[insert Figure 4.1 here]

Figure 4.1. The foreign arrival registration booth in Yiwu’s train station. Photo by author (2016).

Despite the differences between the governments of Yiwu and Keqiao, they nonetheless are similarly silent on the presence of their Indian populations in the public discourse, such as on Chinese state TV programs. In recent years, a number of CCTV programs have featured Yiwu’s very successful foreign traders who are from Africa and the Middle East (see, e.g., Huang, 2021), but till today there is still a lack of representation from the Indian communities in Yiwu as well as those in Keqiao. When there are programs about Indians in China, the interviewees are Indian students and Indian chefs in places other than Yiwu and Keqiao. These TV programs, as critiqued by scholars, are not inclusive and comprehensive enough to capture the foreign populations of Yiwu and Keqiao, considering that most of the Indians in the two Chinese countries are precarious workers and traders (see also Cai, 2023; Gan, 2023). They do not fit the representations of “high-skilled” and “talented” foreigners that the Chinese state seeks to promote (Cheuk, 2019), which are often complicit in celebrating the global racialized discourse of white privilege and the hierarchy of human capital. One Chinese official in Keqiao told me that the non-representation of Indians in Yiwu and Keqiao could be related to the fact that India has not joined the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative (cf. Marsden, 2017; see also Sen, 2023) and that this is a notable exception, considering that many of India’s neighbors are OBOR members. So, any attempt to represent Indians in China on state media could be potentially embarrassing and even misplaced, therefore making their absence from the state public discourse politically sensible. Furthermore, this official also suspected that the perennial border conflicts between China and India (Yoder & Bajpai, 2023), which often escalate the diplomatic tensions between the two nations, was a crucial factor in discouraging the Chinese state media to produce TV programs about Indians in Yiwu and Keqiao.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed how the growing popularity of the idea of assemblage and of a storytelling approach in recent publicly engaged scholarship––if both are adopted in a long-term and ongoing ethnographic study––can help generate new and alternative thinking about the geographies of local policies and governance in China today. This is not to say that existing scholarly concepts, namely local state corporatism and entrepreneurial political selves, should be entirely discarded in analyzing county-level policies and governance. But, as the chapter illustrates, it has become increasingly difficult for this type of scholarly approach, which explicitly seeks to promote an exemplary policy model or an effective governance approach from the lower levels of government, to find its way into becoming part of policymaking language accepted by the central state authorities. Given the party state’s centralizing grip on local policies and governance in recent years, the chapter offered a thought experiment to see to what extent the vernacular presentations of the stories of examples––stories that do not express a strong desire to change or reform the status quo of current policies and governance––opens a new way of understanding the everyday creativity of county-level policies and governance, particularly regarding issues deemed politically contentious in a local setting, such as the management of foreigners in a particular county.

Indeed, vernacular knowledge and informal expertise on local policies and governance—if they are not conceptualized as assembled fragments and are presented as stories of examples as in this chapter—would be hard to “rescue” (to borrow a term from Duara, 1995; see also Cheuk, 2023, p. 78) in China. Without the GAP intervention, the stories of these examples would be easily forgotten or dismissed as nonessential in terms of policymaking. Such stories of examples, as they are serendipitously assembled through long-term and ongoing ethnographic engagement from below, are certainly not the same as the party state’s top-down global storytelling, which is carefully curated and lopsidedly presented as glorified stories of China, thus serving China’s diplomatic interests and, to certain extent, its propagandist agenda (see, e.g., Brown, 2020). Indeed, it is the task of publicly engaged scholars to keep assembling and exploring the potential of these vernacular stories of examples at the grassroots level, which will critically diversify our understanding of local Chinese policies, politics, and governance in their continuously changing and globalizing configuration.

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1. For more information about Leiden University’s research team, see <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/research/research-projects/humanities/immigration-and-the-transformation-of-chinese-society>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The 2013 revision (order number 645 of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, July 12, 2013) simplified the application for foreigners’ business associations, eliminating the requirement to register with the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade. This revision, however, did not make much difference in the case of Keqiao, where foreigners’ business associations, with special permission, have been organized in a different way since the 2000s. The details are given in the following paragraphs in the main text. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Within the setting of a traditional Chinese family, the mother’s brother (*niangjiu*), who is seen as the most dispassionate in the family, is always called in to mediate disputes. The name foreign (*yang*) *niangju* is used analogously to praise foreigners who are skillful arbitrators because they are trusted by both sides. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, e.g., the China Keqiao International Textile Expo’s *Official Pamphlet* (n.d.). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)