

Looking Beyond Ruins

From Material Heritage to a Grassroots-based Modernity in Southern China

废墟以外

从物质遗产到南中国由基层为本的现代性

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Abstract

Many *qiaoxiang* in southern Fujian and Guangdong appear derelict, but documenting the material heritage and interviewing people about its social significance reveals another image. The homeland of Overseas Chinese was not only found to be significant for the diaspora but serves as an enduring reminder of a grassroots-based modernity in rural China. The *qiaoxiang* effectively became a transnational legacy of migration from southern China that has undergone the following stages of transformation: exodus-led emergence of a remittance landscape, sudden abandonment, and sometimes revival. Today, it has become a “repository” or “living museum” where tourists and scholars alike can visit and ponder how humans adapted to post-rural life.

Keywords

qiaoxiang – material heritage – modernity – post-rural life

摘要

许多闽粤侨乡尽管外表衰败，但从记录它们的物质遗产及采访其社会意义，能呈现侨乡的另一面貌。华侨的故乡不仅对海外侨民意义重大，而且对乡土中国由基层为本的现代性具有标志性的意义。侨乡实际上是南中国的跨国遗产，通常经历连续的

变化阶段:汇款格局及侨乡景观出现、然后突然废弃、偶尔复兴。今天,它已经成为一个让游客和学者都可以参观的「知识库」或「活」博物馆,以反思人们如何适应后乡村生活。

关键词

侨乡 – 物质遗产 – 现代性 – 后乡村生活

1 Beyond Negligence

It is widely thought that the Chinese are no different from people elsewhere in that they view their home as a symbol of safety, security and family life. Nevertheless, in southern China, I was horrified to find many houses in the home villages of Overseas Chinese that were not only unoccupied but had long been abandoned. Nature had already reclaimed them (see figure 1). The ancestral hall—that venerable ritual space, which was to my understanding the pride of the village (see also du Cros and Lee 2007; Faure 1986)—was like the family estates, neglected and sometimes re-purposed. A tainted image of the ancestral hall serving as a chicken pen instead of a place for honoring ancestors stuck in my head. Instead of agonizing over such loss, it was more sensible to ponder how the heritage of migration can be better appreciated.

One of the challenges faced in protecting the transnational heritage of migration, as shown here, is that it matters most to people outside China, such as emigrant families. Since migration from southern China is centuries old (see McKeown 2010), and there are an estimated 40 million Chinese migrants or their descendants in the diaspora worldwide (Tan 2013), international migration from China is both numerically and historically significant. Meanwhile, as suggested by Amareswar Galla (2012) in his enlightening edited volume, *Heritage Beyond Borders*, conservation of heritage in China could benefit from the input of the diaspora and also from the international community. Co-management of heritage in China, so far, has been rather limited (Chan and Cheng 2016), but this may change with international collaboration (Voss, Kennedy, Tan, and Ng 2018).

It must be noted that the issue of heritage protection is complicated by the historical development of China, especially in the past century. Living memories of political and social turmoil in the twentieth century, for example, have discouraged emigrant families and descendants from returning. Moreover, the



FIGURE 1 An abandoned ancestral home of an emigrant family in Doumen (斗门), Zhuhai, Guangdong
PHOTO BY AUTHOR, 2017

recent worrying news of forced evictions from and demolition of listed “heritage sites” for the sake of tourism (e.g., Channel News Asia 2018; Murowchick 2009; SCMP 2017) may make some people wonder if things have changed for the better. After the 1980s economic reforms, more money than before has gone into protecting heritage, but only if people want that to happen. There is also a greater risk than before of losing to urban expansion and so-called “progress”—more extensive buildings, such as shopping malls, wider streets and new development with arguably less local character—heritage and all it potentially represents. These concerns are not new to those who have observed with consternation that inherited village landscapes in China “are too often seen as a burden to be disposed of” (Knapp and Shen 1992: 78). Hence, I felt obliged to document, even if only in a preliminary way, the transnational heritage of migration. Migrant heritage here refers to the tangible legacy of Overseas Chinese in their ancestral lands in southern China, which heritage scholar Denis Byrne (2016) reminds us do not simply belong to China but span at least two nation-states: not just where the migrants are from, but also where they have eventually settled.

Since mid-2016 and through until early 2019, I have visited and documented the material heritage of many ancestral homes of Overseas Chinese in southern Fujian and Guangdong. Since the material heritage of the *qiaoxiang* remains largely undescribed, this survey offers only a baseline study for further research on how to manage and protect heritage resources. Hence, the first contribution of this article is to summarize the distinctive features and issues relating to transnational migrant heritage in southern China. Second, it provides a chronology of the lifecycle of the *qiaoxiang*: from its emergence to decline and possible revival. Effectively, it not only illustrates what a single place (or *qiaoxiang* as a unique typology) means to people at a certain point in time, but also how it changes across historical time. For example, the ancestral home may initially have been meaningful to the migrant forbears who returned to build a house. The remittance dwelling stands as a material manifestation of the migrant’s economic success abroad. Over time the same house can be revealing to descendants who have never previously been to China but have returned in search of roots. Finally, and most importantly, rather than simply viewing the *qiaoxiang* in its current decrepit state, the article introduces the notion of a “grassroots-based modernity,” which relates to how ordinary people grapple with modernity in the *qiaoxiang*. It argues that one should remember—and never forget—that if one swings the pendulum back in time to when the *qiaoxiang* was modern and flourishing, it represented a unique vision of China’s future.

2 From Migrant Heritage to a Grassroots-based Modernity

This article identifies the features of a “remittance landscape” (Lopez 2014) where a culture of migration was once prevalent and resulted in an “uneven development” (Smith 1984) of the countryside. In China, such uneven development occurred in a place known as a “*qiaoxiang*.” The Chinese term *qiaoxiang* (侨乡) is more encompassing than a locality whence migrants hail (a village, hometown, county or district). It is also a place to which many Overseas Chinese migrant laborers and merchants returned. Whether they intended to retire there or not, in their absence overseas many felt obliged to improve this place. A “*qiaoxiang* consciousness” developed and continues to have a lingering effect on those with Chinese ancestry returning “home” in search of their “roots” (Khu 2001; Louie 2004).

The *qiaoxiang*—heritage sites characterized by the flow of novel ideas, goods, and foreign capital, differentiating them from their agrarian past—are the most significant material manifestation of the Overseas Chinese presence in China today. Significant studies of *qiaoxiang* exist—full-length books are available in English. They have mainly been the products of sociologists (e.g., Chen 1940), anthropologists (e.g., Watson 1975; Kuah-Pearce 2000; Chu 2010), historians (e.g., Hsu 2000a; Peterson 2012; Yow 2013; Williams 2018), and collaborations between scholars (e.g., Tan 2007). Historians tend to rely on textual sources, such as newspapers, magazines and letters; while sociologists and anthropologists spend considerable time “in the field,” interviewing, observing and documenting social life. Yet, given the ubiquity of built and material artifacts remaining in the *qiaoxiang*, this aspect has attracted surprisingly little scholarly attention. Therefore, this article focuses on the transnational material heritage related to emigration from southern China and explores the hidden grassroots-based modernity it represents.

Following Anthony Giddens, I consider modernity a departure from expectations, social norms and the customary ways of life at a time of immense change (see Giddens and Pierson 1998). The idea of a grassroots-based modernity in rural China posits a modernity that is not only physically grounded but has a cultural dimension too, related to the beliefs and aspirations of ordinary people, including migrants and their village-based kin. In this view, it counters the traditional bias found in social history, where Chinese modernity is conventionally associated with urbanity—and unquestioningly with the rise of Shanghai (Lee 1999; Esherick 2000; Rowe and Kuan 2002). In fact, in China as elsewhere “multiple modernities” or “alternative modernities” co-existed (e.g., Chakrabarty 2000; Eisenstadt 2000; Denison 2017).

Historian Madeline Hsu pointed out that the history of migration and the *qiaoxiang* have both contributed to China's quest for modernity (2000b: 309). After completing the railroads in North America, Chinese laborers were discriminated against and felt their lives had little value if they remained in America. Led by the American-Chinese émigré Chin Gee Hee (陈宜禧 Chen Yixi 1844–1929), some of them returned to put their hard-earned capital and new skills to use in their hometown, present-day Taishan.¹ The building of the Sun Ning Railway (新宁铁路) in Guangdong is a prime example of the introduction of emigration-led modernity in the rural landscape of southern China. This was not a smooth process but entailed multiple conflicts:

Powerful clans often feuded with one another over the route, or prevented the railway from passing through their territory because of superstitions. Wherever the rails went, fighting endured. During the process of construction, over a hundred riots were staged by local landlord forces. The company was forced to change its planned routes and add thirty-nine unnecessary turns, thus affecting the speed and safety of the trains as well as increasing considerably the cost of construction.

CHENG, LIU, and ZHENG 1982: 67

Historian Michael Szonyi (2011: 86) recognized that Overseas Chinese played a special role in China's modernization, but their contributions and aspirations, as depicted in the above railroad example, were far from unified. So, in writing about an alternative modernity, specifically a “grassroots-based modernity,” rather than one depicting a simple past or resorting to an official account, a pluralized understanding of the past is desired (e.g., Ashworth, Graham and Tunbridge 2007). To effectively capture the cultural horizon of new experiences, this article draws upon Raymond Williams' (1978) “structure of feelings” to provide a historically grounded interpretation of the transforming social experience in the remittance landscape of southern China.²

1 Formerly Romanized from Cantonese as Toishan (台山).

2 Rather than describe a feeling *per se*, Williams coined the term “structure of feelings” to capture the “affective elements of consciousness and relationships” (Sharma and Tygstrup 2015), which in this article refers to the experiences of the new at various junctures in time.

3 When the Future Came to Southern China

Ever since Chinese émigrés began returning home, they brought with them newfound wealth, foreign objects and ideas. In fact, growing affluence bought with it an esthetic and taste for “foreign things” associated with the modern West, or Western modernity. This included “imported” building designs and construction technologies, which evidently reconfigured the fabric of many towns and cities in southern China, making the *qiaoxiang* most distinctive (e.g., Liu 2002; Peng 2012; Zheng 2003). This section explores how “the production of locality” (Appadurai 1996) was deeply rooted in the social fabric of a place but also connected to a larger history of Overseas Chinese returning home in glory, building houses, funding schools and being consumers of a post-agrarian economy.

Reminiscent of the colonial verandah, the transposition of the two-story arcaded shop houses or *qilou* (骑楼) from Nanyang³ in the late Qing and early Republican era, according to historian James A. Cook (2006: 176), represented “Nanyang colonialism” in the *qiaoxiang*. This modern architectural typology fused East and West and “stood as a concrete representation of [Chinese migrants’] mercantile success” (Cook 2006: 173). The upstairs story was primarily a living quarter for the family, while the ground-floor provided a shop space and covered walkway. The overhang both protected window-shoppers from rainstorms and provided space to display items away from the strong sun (Lu 2005: 58). Meanwhile, in Chikan (赤坎), the old town along the embankment near the world heritage Kaiping⁴ *diaolou*⁵ site in Guangdong, locals at the time described the newly built arcades of the 1930s as a kind of “rebirth” (Kwok 2018: 334). The colonnaded walkway became an extension of their homes, offering a new social setting for dining, mah-jong, and nurturing new kinds of social interactions (Kwok 2018: 342). As Thomas Gieryn observed in his article “What Buildings Do,” these constructions reflect the fact that “buildings stabilize social life [by giving] structure to social institutions, durability to social networks [and] persistence to behavior patterns” (Gieryn 2002: 35).

3 Nanyang 南洋 literally “South Seas,” the nineteenth-century Chinese name for British territories in the Malay Peninsula, or more broadly today’s Southeast Asia.

4 Formerly Romanized from Cantonese as Hoi Ping (开平).

5 The *diaolou* (碉楼) “fortified watchtowers” are an exemplary form of the Chinese remittance house (Tan 2007; UNESCO 2007). Made with imported Portland cement (known as *hong mao ni* 红毛泥, literally “red-headed [foreigners’] mud”), the use of modern materials was not only indubitably a sign of prestige but, pragmatically, met the need to overcome seasonal flooding and to resist bandits (Batto and Hall 2006).

Like the *qilou*, returnees broke away from a longstanding building tradition by adopting western-style technologies and design in the construction of their remittance homes (Liu 2002: 416). The result was larger, sturdier, and much more elegant dwellings than their pre-migration counterparts: timber or tampered-earth structures were not only smaller and darker but also less-well ventilated (e.g., Hase and Lee: 1986: 86). Ronald G. Knapp reminds us that Chinese traditional rural construction “expresses frugality and often poverty rather than ostentation and wealth” (Knapp 1986: 87). Despite remittance houses appearing “western” and “modern” on the outside, however, these dwellings (sometimes called *yanglou* 洋楼, literally a “foreign multi-story building”) still continued to serve their traditional function—a home in which to raise a family and take care of one’s ancestors. As such they have been colloquially described as “a Western suit on a Chinese body.”⁶

Inside these dwellings, letters, photographs and relics related to migration may have survived. As many Chinese migrants were laborers abroad (Cohen 2008), it was not unusual to find woodworking or agricultural tools in these homes. With the passage of time, these items have now become artifacts that complement the dwelling as a testimony of migration-led modernization in the countryside. As descendants showed me their ancestors’ wares, they sometimes reminisced with delight at the novelty of setting eyes on these strange objects for the first time as young children.⁷ Others who had inherited the house and their forebears’ possessions, however, were dumbfounded, wondering how some of these tools were used.⁸

Other features of the *qiaoxiang* also demonstrated the affluence of émigrés and their quest for modernity. I was told that the installation of a bathtub, and more importantly hot water in the famous “Kwok Mansion”⁹ in Zhongshan, Guangdong, led to piped water and electricity being installed for the entire village (see also Fitzgerald 2008: 16; Loy-Wilson 2017: 25). One elder¹⁰ of Chuk Sau Yuen¹¹ even boasted that the success of the Wing On Company¹² made his village preeminent in Guangdong. “We could walk around the entire village on stone slabs (石板) without dirtying our shoes or worrying about getting bogged down whenever it rained.” To his knowledge, there is only one other place in Guangdong that could rival his native home for its level of

6 Field conversation, December 2017.

7 Field conversation, January 2019.

8 Field conversation, December 2017.

9 沛勋堂 *pei xun tang* in pinyin.

10 Field conversation, December 2018.

11 竹秀园 *Zhuxiuyuan* in pinyin.

12 永安公司 *yong an gongsi* in pinyin.

modernity—Taishan, another well-to-do *qiaoxiang*. Undoubtedly, new structures and improved amenities were an inspiration for neighbors and kin. Given the limited economic prospects in the homeland, many others must have been motivated by what they saw and decided to join the band-wagon of migrating men in search of their own economic success overseas. Thus, success bred imitation and prompted chain migration from a single locale and the eventual formation of an “emigrant village,” a *qiaoxiang*.

Popularizing education was arguably an even nobler deed in terms of improving the prospects of those in the homeland, given that the next generation was regarded as the future of a clan, the home village and even the entire Chinese nation (Cook 2000; Yu 1983). Autobiographies like *The Memoirs of Tan Kah-kee* (1994, originally published as 《南侨回忆录》陈嘉庚作) also vividly convey this sentiment, along with the voluminous sets of family correspondence, commonly known as *qiaopi*¹³ (Benton and Liu 2018: 136) and Overseas Chinese magazines, commonly known as *qiaokan*¹⁴ (e.g., Hsu 2000b: 313). In 1872, the first emigrant-endowed school in Guangdong was established by an educated America-returnee Yung Wing (容闳 1828–1912) in his home village in present-day Zhuhai (Peterson 2012: 14). Since that time, diaspora-funded schools (侨捐学校) have mushroomed in the countless *qiaoxiang* of southern China. No matter how much or little the observer knows about Chinese architecture, the migrant esthetic of these schools was and still is apparent on first sight. In terms of their appearance, they were simply out of place in an agrarian landscape (see Figure 2). The heyday of school building in Republican Zhongshan,¹⁵ for example, occurred between 1911 and 1937, where neo-classical (European-inspired) facades were initially favored until the international modern style came into vogue and resulted in Art Deco school buildings.¹⁶

13 While away, letters and remittance were regularly sent home by migrants. These money-bearing letters were known as *qiaopi* (侨批) in Hokkien (闽南) and Chaoshan (潮汕) regions, or *yinxin* (银信) or *jinxin* (金信) in parts of the Pearl River Delta. Some of these documents have survived several generations and are safely kept by descendants, while others are now displayed in museums or lie in the hands of collectors (Benton and Liu 2018).

14 When Overseas Chinese communities reached a sufficient size, it became possible to publish Overseas Chinese newsletters or magazines, known in the sending places as *qiaokan* (侨刊) or *xiangxun* (乡讯) (Kuhn 2008: 139). These presumably boosted loyalties by keeping emigrants abreast of the development of their hometowns and encouraging them to return and donate to new community projects, such as schools and infrastructure (Hsu 2000b).

15 Formerly Romanized from Cantonese as Chung Shan (中山), and, before 1925, as Heung San (香山). Previously Heung San had incorporated Zhuhai (珠海) and Doumen (斗门).

16 Interview with architectural historian Professor Peng Changxin (彭长歆), 25 December 2018.



FIGURE 2 The multi-story Lai Wor School (礼和学校) (far right), Tangjiawan (唐家湾), Zhuhai, Guangdong
PHOTO BY AUTHOR, 2018

No matter which styles or periods the buildings belonged to, these newer multi-story concrete-and-glass structures were considered architectural monuments that looked different from the older dwellings or the grey-brick Chinese “palace-style” temples and ancestral halls.

Modern schools were often much larger than their predecessors and better equipped. They exposed those privileged enough to enjoy a modern education to a world far larger than their peasant or emigrant ancestors might have fathomed. It must be remembered that traditional study halls had benefited comparatively far fewer pupils (Ming 1996). Besides the increased building size, glazing was a fundamental component of modern schools.

Reinforced concrete technology allowed large window panes to be inserted in walls, which in turn provided outdoor views, natural light, and fresh air, before the availability of electric lighting and fans (Eskilson 2018). Looking out through large glass windows, students could see further across the landscape of the village than before (unless the family lived in a *diaolou*). It is worth remembering that traditional buildings tended to be “introverts” (Ruan 2016) as they did not have windows and the interiors were often dark. Besides their inward orientation, nearly all buildings in China were at one time single-story, except for military lookout towers and the occasional pagoda. To a more superstitious farmer, building upward was said to constitute a direct interference with heaven; a risk that one was not willing to take when one’s livelihood relied on nature’s provision.¹⁷ Hence, the modern multi-story school buildings were not only a departure from long-standing cultural tradition, but were also considered to be an engineering triumph in the early 20th century, especially in a typhoon-prone region like southern China.

Within the school, material modernities like the school bell and world maps offered new experiences of time and space. While the first clock in China was associated with the sixteenth-century Italian missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), mechanical clocks were an object of desire once restricted to the aristocracy until they became part of the Republican extension of privileges to the ordinary people (Pagani 1995). But even before reaching the school, the sound of the hand-rung bell symbolized a change of pace and signaled a new rhythm in the hometown or village. The establishment of the Republic of China in 1912 was a historic moment that brought with it an objectively quantified and structured concept of time (Shao 2004: 86). Meanwhile, the printed world maps found in modern schools enabled students to imagine life beyond the places they knew at first-hand. This meant that students could more readily identify with places other than their neighboring villages or nearest town and pinpoint

17 Field conversation, August 2018.

where their forefathers may have ventured, such as the Nanyang or “Gum San.”¹⁸ Previously, it was also unlikely that a pupil would ever see a modern map, or even an ancient atlas, which even the pupil’s instructor probably did not know existed (Smith 1970: 71).

Many decades later, after the opening-up and economic reform of the 1980s, consumption in all forms has, arguably more so than in the Republican period, become an essential part of the homecoming experience. Hotels, museums, and other venues of amusement sprang up on all sides in the *qiaoxiang* and surrounding cities, offering new experiences for the returning diaspora. This is not to say that temporary accommodation was not important before that time.¹⁹ By the 1980s, however, hotels had become the preferred form of accommodation for returnees who usually felt it was more convenient to stay in them than in their ancestral villages. The visionary hotelier Henry Fok (霍英东 1923–2006) saw that upscale attractions were required to boost a sluggish economy. In 1984, next to his hot-springs resort that had opened a few years earlier in Zhongshan, Fok built China’s first modern golf course (*China Daily* 2018). Even those involved in the construction projects took to the game of golf with unmistakable enthusiasm, as an American golfer-cum-course designer Arnold Palmer reminisced:

[I] gave this man a golf ball I had in my pocket. He stared at it for a few moments, then tried to take a bite out of the cover. “No,” I said. “You don’t eat it.” That’s when it dawned on me that the men engaged in the grueling labor of building the golf-course had no idea what golf was. When I explained through an interpreter that this ball would be used to play the course our new friend was building, his eyes lit up and he took the ball from me as if I’d just presented him with the crown jewels of China.

cited in WASHBURN 2014: 6

18 The fabled “Gold Mountain” (金山) often refers to the goldfields in the Cantonese Pacific ports like rural parts of California and Victoria, rather than the city proper.

19 For many migrants to the Nanyang staying in a migration hostel was part of the package abroad that included the fare and labor contract. The five-story Tsung Kiang Grand Hotel (松江大酒店) in the old town of Songkou (松口) is an example of a place where prospective Hakka migrants stayed until there were enough passengers to fill a steam vessel bound for the Nanyang, a curator in Meizhou explained (see also *Meizhou Daily* 2014). In 1930s Shantou, according to the architectural historian Peng Changjun, hotels attracted guests by advertising newer technologies, ranging from piped hot water to the advent of electric fans, heaters, escalators and lifts (Peng 2012: 284).

Not too different to unsophisticated Chinese coolies (migrant laborers) overseas, working endlessly and saving every dollar, pound or baht in the hope of bettering the family they left behind, delayed gratification produced another condition in China. The capacity of returnees to shower kin with gifts and contribute to the welfare of the community earned them much respect and approval (Li 1999: 191; Veblen 1928: 32). Today, inviting kin to play a game of golf or have a meal in a rotating restaurant, or a massage at the hot springs resort, are variations of the “returning home in glory” trope. All these forms of conspicuous consumption were unimaginable to those who had lived in a pre-migration economy.

But as China’s tumultuous history will inevitably remind us, prosperity was not in every way a blessing. Sudden wealth made abroad at the wrong time, such as, for example, before the liberation of China in 1949, could lead to a paradoxical result. It dissipated ties to the homeland and led to a preference for life overseas, and caused what was once glorious to be abandoned, perhaps forever.

4 Abandonment, Decline and Resurgence

Today, if one visits the *qiaoxiang*, it does not take long to accept—not, of course, without some disappointment—why many villages are no longer inhabited, or why they became uninhabitable. Contrary to popular belief, a new home did not necessarily increase a sense of security or even offer greater comforts for the family. Turbulent times which saw livelihoods put on the line occurred with unusual frequency over the previous century. At times these issues resulted in a life of exile, forcing a returned migrant to abandon the new home built in the ancestral village and leave the village forever. A story told by a tour guide went something like this:²⁰

A Hakka migrant named Xia Wanqiu (夏万秋 1882–1936) returned from Malaysia to build his dream home. Bandits somehow learned he had a successful business abroad and decided to kidnap him. He was released only after paying a large ransom. That scared him into leaving his newly built house in Meizhou and returning to Nanyang. The house, named after him, 万秋楼 “a house of ten thousand autumns,” was only a couple of weeks old at the time. Today, it remains sturdy and magnificent like

20 A tourist who had been to Meizhou relayed this commentary to me in September 2016.

the many abandoned *diaolou* “fortified watchtowers” seen in Taishan and Kaiping.

Initially, the desire to migrate resulted from turmoil, economic necessity and lack of opportunities in the homeland (Kuhn 2008). Ironically, these reasons also caused the *qiaoxiang* to be a precarious place to return to. As shown above, although many lucky migrants “returned home with glory” (Williams 2018), unfortunately deep inside many feared for their lives—as the saying went, “behind the footsteps of an overseas returnee were three bandits.” Consequently, the remittance house²¹ stood as an “absent presence” in place of those who were away but still longed to inhabit their ancestral home (Byrne 2016: 2368).

With the passing of time, many properties were invariably forfeited. The changing conditions in China meant that, whenever feasible, loyal sojourners (华侨 *huaqiao*) in overseas locations became settlers (海外华人 *haiwai hua-ren*) there. A shopkeeper in the old town in Chikan²² said:

At the onset of liberation (1949), many left in a hurry. Their houses were new and barely lived in, just like the *diaolou* at Li Garden (立园). Many families simply went, some leaving their property leases inside. Within a few generations in the U.S., nobody returned anymore. Some may have lost their keys. Others no longer know the address and cannot distinguish which properties belonged to their forebears.

Ownership claims, or the lack thereof, may also deter subsequent generations from returning and thus reclaiming stakes, even if they wanted to. Pervasive and institutionalized racism in many destination countries of Overseas Chinese meant that in order to survive families had no choice but to discard the little evidence they had of their ethnic heritage. In the process, names of the migrating forebears and their native village (in Chinese characters) were lost, making the task of tracing one’s ancestral roots ever more cumbersome, if not impossible. A former curator of a Chinese museum in Australia told me that climatic factors, a series of relocations and a lack of Chinese literacy may have resulted in Chinese correspondence sometimes featuring otherwise hard-to-find names and addresses being thrown away.²³

There is also the issue that many overseas descendants simply do not wish to return. Outdated perceptions of the “old country” linger. This may be coupled

21 A dwelling built or improved with funds from overseas.

22 Field conversation, August 2016.

23 Personal conversation, October 2016.

with lost links and misguided information about the current state of affairs in China, which make those who are less interested even more hesitant to return. After long-term settlement abroad, they may not see a need to return (e.g., Yow 2005); or may be discouraged by their parents' or grandparents' stories of exile (e.g., Khu 2001), most notably under Chairman Mao (reign 1949–1976), when emigrant families were despised as a part of the bourgeois class and their properties forcibly confiscated, or when the Cultural Revolution took hold in the 1960s and 1970s (Peterson 2012).

Even if the ancestral village and home could be located, issues regarding their maintenance are likely to prevail, as ownership is likely to be dispersed, sometimes spanning various countries and possibly different language groups. Without family consensus—such a lack is, in these circumstances, not unusual—the ancestral house, rather than being a source of family pride, is left to deteriorate. This has happened too often and consequently the *qiaoxiang* is left to its own devices.

Meanwhile, as China has on the whole become wealthier and more urbanized, with many now able to travel and see the world, the *qiaoxiang* still remains a significant place for those who desire to reflect on or commemorate the past. Fueled by a rising sense of nostalgia, that is, a desire to return to a time that was seemingly much simpler and supposedly happier, in the past few years I have observed, at least in the bookstores in Zhongshan, an interest in capturing a last glimpse of rural life. Local artists and photojournalists have paired up with authors and travel writers to salvage a past on the verge of disappearance. As a result, they have produced a series of illustrated leisure texts, which often feature images of old houses and temples in emigrant villages, for Chinese readers (e.g., *Hello* 中山 and 中山客). This is most likely attributable to the economic promise brought by the emergence of the Greater Bay Area.²⁴ These developments mark a fundamental shift from reliance on remittances and the production of new buildings to an era of rediscovering and consuming the past.

Nowadays, individuals who have grown up in—and grown out of—old remittance houses have reached a stage of financial freedom where, if they want, they can do something about re-owning their village past. Capitalizing on their networks, some have successfully traced the dispersed ownership of

24 The Greater Bay Area (粤港澳大湾区) or the “Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area,” refers to the Chinese Government proposal to link 9 cities and 2 special administrative regions in southern China around the Pearl River Delta region into a single economic hub. These cities include Hong Kong, Macau, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Foshan, Zhongshan, Dongguan, Huizhou, Jiangmen and Zhaoqing. The scheme was first proposed in 2015, under The Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路).

otherwise abandoned properties and leased them on low-rent, long-tenancy agreements. One such tenant, a heritage crusader in the South District (南区) of Zhongshan, recounts his story:²⁵

I grew up here, and I do not want to see these buildings deteriorate.... But some have collapsed, others are infested by termites. Even if they are falling apart, I cannot touch them. So, I hope to find out who they belong to and fix them up.... I have been across the world four times looking for families ..., but I need your help to spread the word that there is somebody in China doing this. If you know of any families, whose ancestral roots are here, they can lease their house and I will help maintain it.

The intention is to stop these dwellings from falling apart and to bring the village back to life. Fortunately, numerous houses have been given a second lease of life (or, if we consider the reallocation of houses under the 1950s land reform, a third) as artists' studios, galleries or bars and restaurants. Likewise, when schools or historic hotels have outgrown their original use, they receive similar treatment and have been adapted into museums, community centers, workshops, galleries, or kindergartens (e.g. *Meizhou Daily* 2014; Tan 2015). This shows that after a building is complete, it may eventually lead a life very different from that envisaged by the original users or designers (see also Latour and Yaneva 2008; Maudin and Vellinga 2014).

With the heritage movement in full swing, these days increasingly more museums and restaurants are seeking their own "heritage trophies" in order to re-create a certain antique aura. This has unfortunately also meant that remittance homes, whether abandoned, leased or occupied, are vulnerable to burglary. It is not dissimilar to what an elderly Gaoyao resident from Chenghu village (澄湖村) in Guangdong experienced:²⁶

About a decade ago, when I was away taking care of my grandchildren, somebody told me the lights were on at home, so I returned and was saddened to see everything had been taken ... except for the hardwood furniture in the living room. It was probably too bulky to carry away that evening! Thieves probably climbed on top of my neighbors' house and, using a ladder, came down the heavenly well into my home. They took

25 Field conversation, December 2017.

26 Field conversation, December 2018. District formerly Romanized from Cantonese as Koyiu 高要.

everything—the large mirror, our family incense burner, the lot! They must have known I was away.... They even unscrewed the tapware and chiseled away and took my green glazed ceramic louvers.... After this incident, I worried about my safety and could not sleep at night, so I had no choice but to move out.

Trailing not far behind the rapid development of contemporary China (and its discontents) is the expansion of its heritage sector. This has been manifested in an increased interest in local history, “heritage buildings” and, regrettably, in the rising incidence of looting. Giddens reminds us there is no one way of relating to the past (Giddens and Pierson 1998: 16). So a heritage expedition to southern China will not only appeal to those who wish to gain fresh insights into how human beings adapted to post-rural life but also to those who wish to be reminded of the fragility and challenges inherent in an ever-changing world.

5 Toward a Greater Appreciation of Heritage in the *Qiaoxiang*

This article has shown how the *qiaoxiang* followed a distinctive evolutionary pattern: first, emigration, then the development of a *qiaoxiang*, characterized by overseas remittance and investment of foreign capital, goods and ideas; then abandonment, depopulation and decay, followed, possibly, by revival (see also Yow 2013). In the end, the *qiaoxiang* have effectively become “living museums” filled with fossil-like “objects of wonder.” In other words, it is a time-honored storehouse or “repository” of rare and exotic commodities. What’s more, beneath the surface of this “lost cultural landscape,” to borrow Nicolson’s words (2016), are countless stories waiting to be told.

While intuitively some may view the material possessions of migrating forebears differently from the way in which they were viewed at the time when they were new and modern, they are still fascinating gateways into the past. It is worth remembering, as Peter Howard reminds us, that “not everything is heritage, but anything could become heritage” (2003: 7). Having survived the test of time, however, they act as testimonies of their past exploits. More importantly, the buildings and material artifacts in the *qiaoxiang* serve as a reminder of migrating forebears’ efforts to both improve the lives of those they loved and left behind and shed light on an alternative worldview. Therefore, instead of being merely a material heartland of the Overseas Chinese, or a former place of glory for émigrés and their descendants, the *qiaoxiang* are a transnational legacy jointly created by at least two or more nation-states and



FIGURE 3 Delfware found in Meixian (梅县), Meizhou, Guangdong
PHOTO BY MR. WEI JINHUA, 2018

therefore represent the labor and aspirations of much more. Let me illustrate with one last example.

A Meizhou (梅州) collector turned curator²⁷ remarked that a lesson in world history can be had from a set of plates he found in a remittance house (see figure 3).

These plates with images of windmills and fishing boats are distinctly Dutch. Yet they were found in a home in Meizhou. The owner must have been a Hakka merchant in the Dutch East Indies. Delfware was

²⁷ Field interview, August 2016.

not originally from places like Indonesia. So, I believed what had happened was it travelled with colonizers or merchants from Holland (the Netherlands) to Nanyang before making its way into China.

As the narrative suggests, these plates have a social life of their own (Appadurai 1986). They not only represent the tastes of the Chinese *nouveaux riches* but also tell an interconnected history of the modern world. Except for a notable few (such as Marco Polo), it has long been known that the world first learned about China through its earliest migrants. Equally, however, it is through these people that China learned about the world (Candela 2013; Liu 2002: 2).

Clearly, built heritage and material artifacts remain a valuable resource in the *qiaoxiang*. Often, however, many scholars have simply ignored the material reminders left *in situ* in favor of texts and ethnographic data. Contrary to what most people think, heritage is not really about the past but very much about the present and the future (Aplin 2002: 2). From studying the heritage of the *qiaoxiang*, clues about the impact of exposure to technological innovation and migrant life at home and abroad can be reconstructed and reinterpreted. In that respect, the heritage of migration could and should be viewed as a foundation and opportunity for a shared future—of how a remittance landscape once flourished and how a grassroots-based modernity took hold in China. Stakeholders may include, for example, local communities, the diaspora, government and related specialists, such as historians, architects, anthropologists and archeologists in China and abroad. Fortunately, many *qiaoxiang* have a significant stock of buildings still standing, and the associated material artifacts are intact, waiting to be studied and admired. In writing this paper, I hope that greater interest in the heritage of migration develops as further studies and eventually long-term cross-border transnational collaborations emerge. These are needed to safeguard our *qiaoxiang*.

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