

Beacons of modern learning: Diaspora-funded schools in the China-Australia corridor

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Abstract

In the early 20th century, modern school curricula and new-style schools mushroomed in the Chinese remittance landscape of southern China. Breaking away from the two-and-a-half millennia of Confucian tradition, their creation marked a pivotal point of departure between the nation's past and future. Since overseas migration and modern education both provide a fruitful context for the circulation of new objects and a cross-fertilization of ideas, new schools serve as barometers of social-material change. Research in the present-day cities of Zhongshan and Zhuhai (formerly Heung San County) suggests that diaspora-funded schools were beacons of modern learning within the China–Australia corridor. Both their physical structures and material manifestations invited a new engagement with the modern world.

Keywords

Chinese migration, Australia, modern schools, modern China, material modernity

Introduction

Cantonese emigration from the 19th century onward coincided with burgeoning nationalism in China. Australia was an important “Gum San” [金山 *lit.*

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gold field] destination for the Cantonese Pacific (Yu, 2018) that saw a visit by the reformer Mr. Liang Qichao [梁啟超, 1873–1929] in 1900, the establishment of a series of Chinese medium newspapers (Kuo, 2013) and strong financial support for the Nationalist Government (KMT)—all of which were proponents of new political ideas for a New China.

At the time the late Qing Empire was defeated in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, a leitmotif used by all successive political regimes in the 20th century was “national salvation through education” [教育救國] (Peterson, Hayhoe and Lu, 2001: 1). In China, a modern curriculum had appeared by the turn of the century, offering subjects in science, English, physical exercise, music, art and the like. Yet insufficient funds, lack of qualified teachers, as well as widespread public disinterest, meant a full reform was all but ineffective (Borthwick, 1983).

In this paper, I focus on the material fabric and architecture of diaspora-funded schools in Zhongshan [中山] and Zhuhai [珠海]. Formerly located in the countryside of Heung San [香山], Chinese emigration to Australia resulted in new-style schools [新式學堂] that mushroomed in the Pearl River Delta hometowns in the 20th century.¹

From the time of the Opium Wars in the mid-19th century onwards, many treaty ports began to see the emergence of churches and Christian schools (Cody, 1997: 3; Wang, 2007). Between the 1840s and 1930s, architects began to critique the imposed ecclesiastical building styles and considered better adapting them to local conditions to appease a Chinese congregation (Coomans, 2018: 66). The outcome was uneven.

By the early 20th century, during an era of growing nationalism, civic architecture had adopted a style later known as “adaptive Chinese” (Cody, 2001) or “Chinese Renaissance” architecture (Lee and DiStefano, 2016). This movement coincided with the return of the first wave of overseas-trained architects and is identifiable by its “Chinese palatial look” (glazed terracotta tiled gable roof) on a western building frame.

During my fieldwork in southern China, it was a little surprising to see that what would have once been new-style schools funded by Chinese-Australian migrants in the early 20th century did not exhibit any features of Chinese Renaissance architecture (e.g., see Figures 1, 2 and 3, which do not visibly possess Chinese built aesthetics). This was unexpected because this locality was the hometown of the first President of the Republic of China—Sun

¹The name Heung San County [香山], literally “Fragrant Hills,” changed to Chung Shan County in 1925, now Zhongshan City. It is geographically positioned on the western bank of the Canton (Pearl River) Delta, next to Macau and about 70 km from Guangzhou (formerly Canton). To respect the language of the time, Cantonese spelling is used throughout this paper for names of people and places of the 19th and 20th centuries; otherwise, contemporary Mandarin renderings have been used.

Yat-sen [孫逸, 1866–1925] and also many Heung San migrants in Australia were Nationalist supporters (Kuo and Brett, 2013).

Meanwhile, recent publications have begun to show the enduring links between Australia and China (Loy-Wilson, 2017) and the importance of the ancestral home in the Chinese migration narrative (Williams, 2018). Beyond that, it is well known that many Chinese (and mixed race) children born in Australia in the late 19th and early 20th century were sent back to China (Yong, 1977: 211); many of them for an education or to learn Chinese customs, or both (Williams, 2018: 77). European Australians often held misconceptions of what happened to these children, with some journalists even speculating they were sold into slavery (Williams, 2018: 176–177). Others in Australia commented that there was little knowledge of the kind of education that the children were exposed to (Bagnall, 2018: 93). As early as the 1960s, scholars like Carlson (1962: 537) found regrettable the lack of accounts by students and teachers who lived, studied and taught in schools in China. My research has also shown that descendants of Chinese-Australians usually know something of their forefathers' sacrifices but are less informed about the actual outcomes of their philanthropic accomplishments. For example, the question of how educational philanthropy actually benefited the home communities in China remains largely unanswered. This may be attributed to several factors: first, the circumstance of starting afresh in another country meant many early migrants were either away from family, or had spent little time with them because they had worked exceptionally long hours for long periods of time. Among local children born in Australia, there were both inter-cultural and second-language (Chinese-English) cleavages that caused misinterpretations and misunderstandings (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2006), making diaspora philanthropy a largely misunderstood phenomenon among the diaspora (Chau and Fitzgerald, 2018: 5).

In the absence of readily accessible documentary evidence, this study gives priority to the memories of first-generation students attending the many new schools found in the *qiaoxiang* [僑鄉] or emigrant villages and hometowns of southern China. Without insider accounts of what a modern school felt like, an understanding of the social and cultural impacts of Chinese migration remains incomplete. A historical reconstruction involved a multi-lingual (Cantonese, Mandarin and English) approach to data collection in China, Hong Kong and Australia, which featured oral history interviews, accessing primary documents and secondary materials (directed archival and library research) as well as on-site observations and photographic documentation. A range of new-style schools ($n=21$) was visited in the present-day cities of Zhongshan and Zhuhai (former Heung San County), including kindergartens, elementary and middle schools, with the earliest purpose-built school appearing in the 1920s. A total of 51 individuals were interviewed between 2017 and 2020, including former students, migrant-benefactors and their Australian-born

descendants, current principals and teachers, local historians, school archivists, village leaders and academics. Most of my interlocutors voluntarily agreed to use their real names for research purposes, but two had denied permission as they presented sensitive issues. As the focus of this paper—unveiling the (hidden) schooling experiences in modern schools—is a non-sensitive topic, my participants' real names appear in this article. The first contribution of my study has hence been to record and synthesize a diverse range of first-hand accounts on diaspora-funded schools [僑捐學校].

In addition to presenting new material, another contribution has been to clarify the unspoken contributions (beyond migrant dollars) of emigrants-turned-benefactors in their homeland (Levitt, 1998), specifically the material experience of modern education in the Chinese emigrant village in the 20th century. Moving away from a study of transnational material flow within Chinese migration studies—from an outflow of human labor (people), recipes and ingredients, traditional herbal remedies and *qiaokan* [僑刊] (magazines) to an inflow of remittances, letters and bones—a materialist or “material engagement” approach (Malafouris, 2013) is adopted here to give voice to the physical structures and material realities of migration, an often-overlooked aspect in Chinese migration research. In her study on school life, Lisa Rasmussen (2012) uncovered how objects acted as a valuable catalyst for remembering everyday school life. My study also highlights things themselves—especially the schools funded by the Chinese-Australian diaspora. I examined the “structure of feelings” of schools during the heyday of modern school-buildings (1911 to 1937) in one of southern China's most outward-looking emigrant regions. This is to demonstrate how a repertoire of new construction technologies was introduced in emigrant villages, which in turn, cultivated a new way of life. These experiences constitute what Raymond Williams (1978) describes as a “structure of feelings.” Rather than actual feelings per se, it refers to the situated experiences of newness at a juncture of historical time. These *feelings* contributed to seeing educational modernity as social acts of enlightenment. I argue that individual memories talk to the grander narrative of social-material transformation in the *qiaoxiang*.

Chinese migration and the desire for modern education

Following the movement of Cantonese peasants across the Pacific was the circulatory flow of goods, ideas and practices between homeland and destination country. In spatial terms, Chinese migration operated within a collective “migration corridor”: at one end was the overseas destination, the other was the homeland (Kuhn, 2008). This arrangement is based on “chain migration” where emigration from one locale to a particular other faraway place is sustained through kinship (Tilly, 2007). Transnational migration led to a socio-material transformation of both the destination country and the

ancestral home (Choy, 2012; Zheng, 2003). Over time this material legacy constituted an interconnected transnational heritage corridor (Byrne, 2016). The corridor concept needs to allow, of course, for divergence to or stopping off in major cities or county capitals, and occasionally generational leaps to other destinations in the course of movement from the origin to the destination locale. From my research, new-style schools in the ancestral home were identified as being often the most significant civic projects in the China–Australia migration corridor.

Migrants-turned-benefactors were usually not well-educated. In interviews, they often said they did not necessarily have much idea about modern education, other than that it was desirable. Still, benefactors were greatly admired. For example, Mr. Stanley Hunt [陳沛德, 1927–2019], a motelier in Sydney, recalls that never in his previous life had he been praised by his father, but his father could not help but tell Stanley how proud he was when his son built a school for the village (Hunt, 2009:184). The significance becomes obvious when we contextualize the circumstances.

Prior to emigration, villagers living in a relatively stable space-time continuum for centuries could easily seek an elder person for advice (Fei, 1992: 53). There was little means and no practical need to be literate, apart from those aspiring to officialdom. While the imperial exams were theoretically accessible to all, meaning a man could move in one generation from manual labor to the gentry, in practice the pathway via education to material benefits and social prestige was difficult to access. The 90 percent of the population from artisan, peasant and trader backgrounds were insignificant contenders (Cheng, 2009: 405). Women were never formally inhibited from gaining education, but traditionally it was their brothers that were given the opportunity to study, since the goal of officialdom was also to honor the good name of the clan—and it was sons who customarily carried forward the lineage. Since not everybody from rural communities would sit the exams, traditional schools also served another function, beyond developing literacy skills, of baptizing pupils into Confucian culture (Leung, 1994: 382).

Emigration changed the educational expectations and aspirations of everyone involved. Suddenly, there were overseas letters to write, commonly known as *qiaopi* [僑批] (Benton and Liu, 2018), and newspapers (Kuo, 2013), and overseas Chinese magazines (*qiaokan*) to read (Hsu, 2000b). But initially, not all were able to become literate. “Some could not even recognize the simplest characters, such as 丁 (*ding*), let alone their [Chinese] names or any English” (Interview with Ma Yin-chiu [馬彥昭], male, village elder, 79, Sha Chung village, Zhongshan, 4 December 2018). Late Qing estimates show that up to 45 percent of the men and 10 percent of women were literate, an average of one literate person per household (Rawski, 1979: 140). This handicap fostered a supplementary source of

income for scribes who wrote letters on behalf of their illiterate countrymen (Benton and Liu, 2018: 9).

Historians have remarked that “by far, the greatest impact on the *qiaoxiang* in the long term was education” (Williams, 2018: 82; also, see Hsu, 2000a: 45–47). Ironically, education in China was championed by compatriots who had ventured abroad but tended to have little of it themselves (Liu, 2002: 264). The most frequent subject of discussion in migrant letters was education, which included educating daughters and daughters-in-law (Benton and Liu, 2018: 136). Overseas migration clearly garnered a newfound enthusiasm toward education, and when the diaspora started to fund modern education, they began realizing a vision for a literate future for the homeland.

Building diaspora-funded schools

New-style schools were immediately noticeable to the visitor upon entering the *qiaoxiang*. In terms of built fabric, the schools comprised the three most significant communal buildings in the village, the others being temples and ancestral halls. But schools visibly belonged to a category of their own as they looked very different from the buildings of the past (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). With their multi-storied, neo-classical or modernist façades, schools prominently contrasted with the single-storied ephemeral, sun-dried brick dwellings, the more permanent stone and grey brick “palace style” [宮殿式] temples and ancestral halls that predated modern buildings (see Figure 1).

I now turn to the life history of a Heung San migrant, Mr. Ma Wing-chan [馬永燦, 1863–1938], to illustrate how he fared in colonial Australia, before discussing why and how a Western aesthetic may have been favored when Ma returned to the village to build a school. For Ma and his contemporaries, migration was not only a turning point in his life but a turning point for his ancestral home as well. This resulted in several changes, including the establishment of a modern school in his village.

As a representative of a pre-1949 migrant elite, Mr. Ma Wing-chan was among the first from Australia on a return visit to China. That visit resulted in mobilizing his fellow compatriots to rebuild the homeland. Ma had left his native village of Sha Chung [沙涌] at the age of 16 and sought his luck on the goldfields, before becoming a market gardener in Sydney. He then joined Wing Sang & Co. as a fresh fruit wholesaler (Chen, 2013: 558–559). Ma and his contemporaries later established Sincere Co., the first Chinese department store in Hong Kong, in 1900. This cohort of Heung San men had effectively realized their rags to riches “Goldminer’s dream” [金山夢] in the China–Australia corridor.² Their department stores would go down in

²For further discussions on the department store owners’ accumulation of wealth and entrepreneurial success, refer to Fitzgerald (2007: 194–200) and Kuo (2013: 42–47).

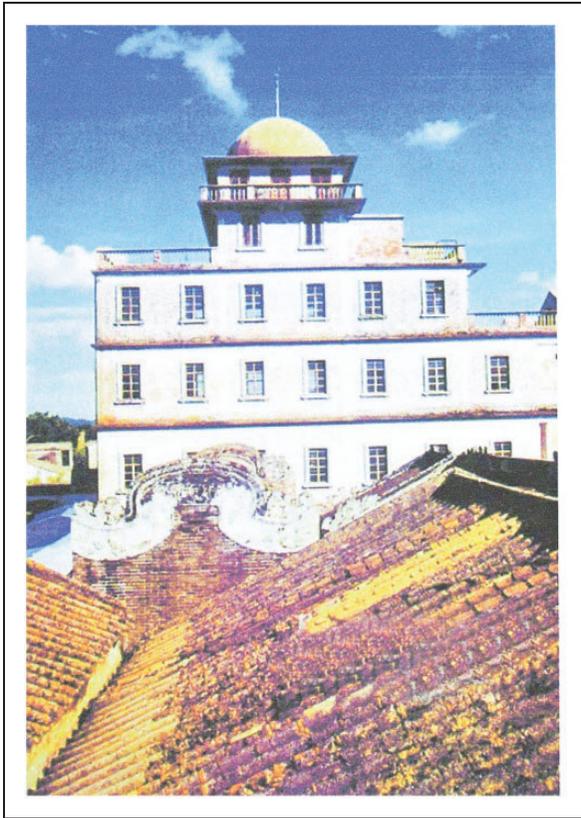


Figure 1. The lofty Lai Wor School [禮和學校] (with a dome on top) was inevitably a landmark of its time (Courtesy of Mr. Ronald Choy [蔡旭光], grandson of the school founder Mr. Choy Hing [蔡興, 1869–1957], Ngoi Sha village [外沙], Zhuhai).

history as the “four premier stores” [四大公司] that reconfigured urban life in early 20th-century China (Chan, 1999). At the same time, they also introduced modern education in the countryside. After all, the success of the department stores resulted in new-style schools being erected in the native home villages of its shareholders between the years 1911 and 1937.³

Before building a school in the village, Ma Wing-chan had begun restoring the ancestral hall. An interview with a village elder in Sha Chung recounts the process:

³This period corresponds to the rise of the Nationalist Government in 1911 and the Japanese invasion of China in 1937.



Figure 2. The old Sha Chung School [沙涌學校] in Zhongshan, now factory (Photographer anon., September 2014).

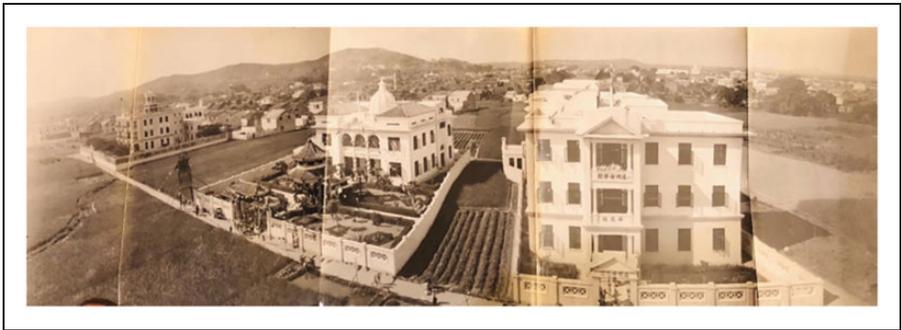


Figure 3. The Women and Children's Centre [婦兒院] (shown on the right) in Sha Chung village, Zhongshan (Courtesy of South District Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, circa 1930s).

By the time [Mr.] Ma Wing-chan and [fellow business partner at Wing Sang and Sincere department store] [Mr.] Ma Ying-piu [馬應彪, 1864–1944] returned, they appealed to other *wah-kiu*⁴ to contribute. These men collectively transformed the uninvitingly small hall into what would become a grand three hall-two

⁴The term *wah-kiu* [華僑] (in Mandarin *Huaqiao*) describes an overseas Chinese sojourner.

courtyard structure that became well-known across Lingnan⁵ . . . On the roof was ornamentation with dragons . . . Ordinary halls could not possess such, but our ancestor [Mr.] Ma Nam-bo [馬南寶, 1244–1280] was a [high-ranking] Song dynasty official⁶ (Interview with Ma Yin-chiu, Sha Chung village, Zhongshan, 2 January 2019).

The hall was seldom used, except for ceremonial purposes. “It was only used for the spring and autumn rituals”⁷ My informant recounted, “So, why not use it as a school as well?” Some villagers proposed this, but as the hall was not designed for modern education, spatially it remained inadequate.

There were three halls, how many classrooms could there possibly be? The last hall displayed [ancestral] tablets. The two open-air courtyards were susceptible to sun and rain so could not be ordinarily used. The remaining space on either side [of the hall] was all the space we had for makeshift classrooms (Interview with Ma Yin-chiu, Sha Chung village, Zhongshan, 2 January 2019).

Because of space, it was likely children who attended the makeshift school in the ancestral hall took turns, each attending half a day. By 1907, as reported in a Chinese-language newspaper in Australia, funds were already being pooled by the Ma clansmen for a new school.⁸ Again, it was led by the financially able Ma Wing-chan. Sha Chung School commenced construction in 1920. After its completion in 1923, whoever visited it would fail to comprehend how a building of such grandeur, or “an architectural wonder” (Dikötter, 2006: 122) emerged in the countryside (Interview with Ma Yin-chiu, Sha Chung village, Zhongshan, 2 January 2019). The two-storied, reinforced concrete and red-brick building with handsome masonry lintels (see Figure 2)⁹ was among the earliest purpose-built modern schools in rural Heung San.¹⁰

It must be remembered that prior to the era of overseas migration, most village structures were single-storied, quickly erected, and certainly made of

⁵Lingnan [嶺南] means south of Nanling Mountains. It refers to a geographic region covering Guangdong, Guangxi and Hainan, as well as modern northern Vietnam.

⁶Imperial law governed matters such as the color of tiles and the ornamentation of roofs, designating what was permitted for various official ranks.

⁷The Cantonese refer to the spring and autumn rituals as *Ching Ming* [清明] and *Chung Yeung* (aka Double Ninth) [重陽], respectively. They are occasions on the lunar calendar when the entire family participates in cleaning their ancestral graves.

⁸*Tung Wah Times* 《東華報》 (1907) 〈旅澳洲募捐沙涌馬氏學堂經費數列〉 [The Ma clansmen in Australia raise funds for a school in Sha Chung], 4 May, p.8.

⁹Fieldwork observation, June 2018. (See also, Liu, 2002: 266).

¹⁰Apart from the ancestral halls mentioned above, prior to the erection of modern schools, schooling took place in large Chinese-style houses or Western-style remittance dwellings and churches repurposed as “schoolhouses.”

local materials. In his study of rural construction, Ronald Knapp (1986: 87) notes that the traditional Chinese building “expresses frugality and often poverty rather than ostentation and wealth.” Thus, when diaspora-funded schools started cropping up the *qiaoxiang*, they offered a vision of modernity beyond urban China. Due to their size and non-traditional designs, these schools stood out in the countryside. Like modernity elsewhere, however, it was dependent on a reference point (Mitchell, 2000: xii) and that was likely to be a combination of where the benefactors had emigrated or travelled.

Built around the same period and requiring a decade to complete (1923–1933), the three modern buildings erected by department store founder, Mr. Ma Ying-piu (see Figure 3) were once, like other “red brick” buildings in Sha Chung, stand-out structures in their day although they are less prominent today.¹¹ Plus, “red brick was new!” (Interview with Ma Yin-chiu, Sha Chung village, Zhongshan, 27 May 2019). As the economic conditions permitted, typically newer buildings in southern China used red fired bricks instead of tamped earth or grey bricks (Knapp, 1986: 146). The transition from grey to red bricks apparently did not relate so much to quality as to supply chains.¹² Due to material shortages, accessibility issues (roads impassable during rainy seasons) and the labor-intensity of transporting materials, building a modern school was no small feat in an undeveloped village, as a village elder reminisced:

Most likely, roads were being laid as the materials were transported by foot into the village. China was so backward at the time. It could not even produce its own galvanized nails or manufacture bricks, so construction materials came from Hong Kong . . . the whole lot came by boat . . . Elders recounted that shipments arrived at Shekki River [岐江河], and then the laborious task of unloading cargo onto hand-pushed trolleys to be transported to the village began . . . That’s why it took so long [to build everything] (Interview with Ma Yin-chiu, Sha Chung village, Zhongshan, 2 January 2019).

Before red bricks could be cheaply mass-produced by machine after 1936, their scarcity meant the so-called “red-brick buildings,” for example, in Shanghai, resorted to grey-brickwork in inconspicuous positions (Shu, 2018: 102). The practice of combining the new and old, or Western and indigenous products, did not only apply to bricks. The interior non-structural walls of Sha Chung School were made of concrete reinforced with bamboo, a cheaper alternative to ferroconcrete (Interview with Ma Yin-chiu, Sha Chung village,

¹¹Their appearance changed when a stucco render was applied. Beyond that, Sha Chung village is now much more built-up than it was a century ago.

¹²While red bricks [紅磚] were newer, reportedly grey bricks [青磚], sometimes translated as “blue bricks,” are more durable.

Zhongshan, 2 January 2019). This mix-and-match produced a “hybrid modernity” in the Chinese countryside.

Since the school was designed by a Hong Kong-based contractor rather than a Heung San native, the choice of materials reflected what could be sourced in the colony (Interview with Ma Yin-chiu, Sha Chung village, Zhongshan, 27 May 2019). Importing it to the Delta added to the expensive construction bill, but no doubt contributed to its novelty. There may have been several reasons for building a non-traditional, or even non-Chinese-looking building. Echoing Daniel Miller’s (2010: 72) remark that the material speaks of the immaterial, an explanation for a school made with durable materials may have symbolized the long-term legacy promised by modern education. It rests on the uplift that education would inevitably bring to the future of the ancestral home. A rare account of a sojourner-turned-building contractor upon his return from Australia sheds light on how a new, more durable, form of construction emerged in rural China.

Coming from a small farming village in southern China, Lam [Woo]¹³ was struck by the contrast between these solid-looking, stately buildings constructed with huge stone [in Melbourne, Australia] and the small village huts he knew at home. Built of mud or bricks and stone and wood, the huts and even the ancestral hall commonly burned down or collapsed during heavy rain (Chan-Yeung, 2017: 26).

Many Cantonese left the Pearl River Delta reluctantly and only when their livelihoods were at stake. Yet life in Australia, in an alien world under pervasive and institutional racism, was precarious. A majority lived frugally, some in makeshift market garden sheds, but by dint of hard work, they aspired to be like department store co-founder, Ma Wing-chan, and “make it.” The selection of durable building materials, however difficult they were to transport, could be a metaphor for the physical “grounding” of an emigrant’s life after perpetual uncertainty and marginality.

Another explanation for the schools’ distinctive appearance was that many of the key benefactors of the schools in early-20th-century Heung San were not ordinary Chinese migrants (goldminers and market gardeners), or even merchants (shopkeepers) in colonial Australia. Instead, they were migrants who

¹³Arriving as a 14-year-old boy in 1884, Lam Woo’s [林護 1870–1933] seven-year sojourn in Australia had a profound influence on his career. As a shop assistant in downtown Melbourne, he was particularly impressed with the wealthy gold-rush-created city, leading to his desire to become a builder (Chan-Yeung, 2017: 22–23). Through partnership with the Canton-based Australian architectural firm, Purnell and Paget, he acquired knowledge of ferroconcrete technology and later became one of the foremost building contractors in China (Peng, 2008: 66). While there is evidence of his involvement in building department stores, churches and schools in Hong Kong, Canton and Shanghai, it is likely that he worked on schools in Heung San too, given his extensive Australian networks formed during his time in Sydney, mostly with Heung San men.

had permanently returned and became part of the mercantile elite of China—running booming department store empires.¹⁴ Due to their frequent travels abroad, a modern aesthetic was thought to have been nurtured (Chan, 1999: 36). Village students who encountered modern schools in the countryside were thus also invited to engage with a new material reality of modernity.

Multi-story buildings

Multi-story school buildings were not only a technological triumph in a rural setting but offered multiple novelties for schoolchildren and rural residents alike. Having “seen the world,” *huaqiao* were more likely accustomed to international “standards” but equally aware of safety. An architectural historian suggested that stairs in schools might have been designed with children as users in mind.¹⁵

The school stairs are safer . . . it’s probably something the *wah-kiu* brought home. I have seen in some places, such as Toi San [台山] and Hoi Ping [開平], where letters from overseas had measurements of steps and treads . . . Mind you, the traditional stairs, if you have seen them were like ladders, almost vertical. They were without handrails, but not schools built by *wah-kiu* (Interview with Peng Changxin [彭長欽], male, Professor of Architecture, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou, 25 December 2018).

On this very issue, a former student of Sha Chung School recalled his teacher outlining the etiquette of using stairs on his first day.

The lower grade students were astonished. They kept running up and down [the stairs], chasing each other, doing cartwheels on the balcony (Mrs. Ma giggles in the background), so the school decided to set up rules. The rooftop was out of bounds . . . On the first day [of school], we were told: “You cannot climb onto the rails.” The [first floor] balcony rail was 1-meter-high, so our teacher instructed: “If you fall over the edge, you’ll kill yourself for sure! Also, you shall not run on the stairs. When going down, keep to the right. When going up, keep right. Staying on the right all the time, you’ll never bump into anyone. There will be no collisions, and you should never ever chase after your classmates either up or downstairs” (Interview with Ma Yin-chiu, Zhongshan, 2 January 2019).

¹⁴From a survey of schools funded by Chinese-Australian donors in Heung San in the early 20th century, all but one of the nine schools were funded by department store tycoons. The exception is Caobian School [曹邊學校], an odd case, initiated largely by Queensland market gardeners and shopkeepers.

¹⁵Multi-story buildings were, in themselves, something very new for the villagers, most of whom would have lived their entire lives in single-story homes. If they had upper floors, perhaps these were lofts only accessed by ladders, usually serving as additional storage.

At another school, one of its first pupils mentioned the imposition of gender expectations on her.

I dared not climb to the top [of the school], I worried the teachers would be upset. I was very obedient and afraid of authority. Everybody was very strict. People were still conservative, expecting girls to remain at home and not muck around (Interview with Leon Siu-en [梁紹英], female, former student, 95, Caobian village, Zhongshan, 25 December 2017).

A former student of Lai Wor school remembered how terrifying it was for her as she first climbed the staircase at her school—a six-story building (see Figure 1)—as a nine-year-old.

I had never been to such a high building before. I felt intimidated. My heart throbbed as I ascended . . . In hindsight, it was probably a fear of heights, but I didn't know at the time what the feeling was (Interview with Sheng Lai Kum [盛麗金], female, former student, 84, Ngoi Sha village, Zhuhai, 29 November 2018).

Apart from soaring new heights, reinforced concrete technology allowed for large windowpanes. Before the availability of electric lighting and fans, these effectively provided outdoor views, natural light and fresh air (Eskilson, 2018). During my visit to Chuk Sau Yuen School [竹秀園學校] (see Figure 4), its proud principal pointed out, “despite [our school] being built almost a century ago, its state-of-the-art qualities stood the test of time. Enough natural lighting means if a blackout occurs classes can continue uninterrupted” (Interview with Li Xiangping [李向平], male, school principal, Chuk Sau Yuen village, Zhongshan, 15 December 2017).

Looking out through glass classroom windows, students ordinarily saw further across the village landscape than their farming forebears. Traditional buildings were “introverted,” as they did not have windows (Ruan, 2016). Besides their inward orientation, most were single-storied, hence the rise of multi-story buildings was not only a departure from tradition but was, in the local context, also an engineering triumph. This is especially the case in Lingnan, a region prone to typhoons and flooding. Besides the novelty of the multi-story school building and all it constituted—stairs, handrails and expansive windows—another defining feature was its school bell.

School bells

Before even setting foot in the school compound, the echoes of hand-rung bells created a new (disruptive) rhythm in the village. Modern schools emerged long after the founding dates of villages (i.e., 700 years or more), and while sometimes, they were built centrally (for example, next to the



Figure 4. A modern classroom with large windows (Photo by author, Chuk Sau Yuen School, December 2017).

village temple), the shortage of unbuilt space in the village meant many more were erected on peripheral site spaces such as hillsides. Hence, they were not only seen from afar but, because of their height, when the bells rang they were heard far and wide, as informants from different villages have recalled. Starting school in 1937, then six-year-old Au-Yeung Chow [歐陽洲], recalled his school was two-stories high, about four times the size of his house, with three classrooms on each floor. On the second floor was a cast bronze bell. “When it rang, *dang, dang, dang*, it was telling us it was class time. The ringing could be heard as far as Cheung Kar Bin” [張家邊, some three kilometers away] (Interview with Au-Yeung Chow, male, village scribe, 86, Dai Leng village [大嶺], Zhongshan, 26 December 2017). Mr. and Mrs. Ma, who had attended a school in Sha Chung, recalled the same phenomenon.¹⁶ Talking about the bell tower on top of their school, Mr. Ma opened his hands to indicate an invisible bell, over half a meter in size (Interview with Ma Yin-chiu, Sha Chung village, Zhongshan, 2 January 2019).

Punctuality became a desirable trait to the modern individual (Borthwick, 1983: 15; Mitchell, 2000: 18). This was especially the case for those aspiring for a post-farming livelihood. At Lai Wor, the bell rang 10 minutes prior and when it was time for class. If you were late, “You stood up for the entire lesson” (Interview with Sheng Lai Kum, Ngoi Sha village, Zhuhai, Zhongshan, 29 November 2018). No wonder a fourth-grade schoolboy at

¹⁶Mrs. Ma [李氏, née Lee] was a native of the neighboring village, Heng Mei [恒美].

Caobian School wrote, “One day I was at school and then I heard the bell ring, I ran to class and tripped. . .”¹⁷

The ringing sound of bells extended the connection beyond a singular time-place. An Australian visitor, upon hearing the brass bell at a school, felt temporarily transported back to a century ago, when “the modern time discipline” began in Australia among Chinese laborers (Byrne, 2016: 273; Kuo, 2013: 63–64). Ien Ang (2011: 86) refers to a “diasporic state of mind,” meaning that subjects dwell concurrently in more than one world, the homeland, and the new land. Memories of the school bells of the home village may well be an element of that state of mind that transports a migrant back in “diasporic time.”¹⁸

Beyond the school compound itself, the quest for an all-round education provided a catalyst for the next turning point: the establishment of public parks, quasi “schoolyards,” to host extra-curricular activities.

Extra-curricular activities

When the construction of Sha Chung School was underway, Sydney fruit wholesaler turned department store pioneer Ma Ying-piu decided to build a park. Like the school, both its conception and some of the activities engaged in there, were unmistakably foreign. It is worth remembering that throughout much of history, parks and gardens remained the private domains of the Chinese elite (Yang, 2009: 111). Not unexpectedly then, when Sha Chung Park [沙涌公園] opened in March 1921, it was the first public park in Heung San (Liu, 2014). As stated in a bulletin at the time, the park reportedly improved the ventilation of the city and village. “A city without a park is like a house without windows. Nobody would like to live there” (Liu, 2014: 36).

Talking to village elders, I learned that the most memorable afterschool activity was basketball. The sport was first introduced by students who returned to Heung San from Hong Kong and Canton (Guangzhou) for their holidays (Shi, 2017). “In the beginning, they played barefoot on dirt courts. What more could you expect from a bunch of farmers’ kids!? They played inter-village competitions in our park until more basketball courts were built elsewhere” (Interview with Ma Yin-chiu, Sha Chung village, Zhongshan, 2 January 2019).

As the game grew in popularity, so did the vibrant atmosphere of Sha Chung, and the park became an attractive evening venue. Elsewhere in Heung San—in Lung Doo [隆都], for example—basketball brought with it a new culture that included bicycle trips to attend competitions, usually two

¹⁷Leong Sek Tao [梁錫濤] in the *Caobian School Magazine* 《曹邊校刊》 (1936: 18).

¹⁸Shelly Chan (2018) considers such time in relation to the everyday lives of the diaspora away from their homeland.

persons per bicycle bearing with them pots and pans to boil drinking water,¹⁹ and new friendships and enmities were formed with close and not-so-close villagers in the process (Interview with Miss Chen [陳主任], female, former student and current teacher, Ha Zhat Village School [下澤鄉校], 27 December 2018; Interview with Ma Yin-chiu, Sha Chung village, Zhongshan, 2 January 2019). Sponsorship and donations of equipment included new basketballs. Rewarding winning teams with jerseys also allowed a greater number of rural residents to reap the benefits of organized sports (Shi, 2017).

After hearing about basketball jerseys, I became curious about school uniforms. A former female student of one school replied, “We wore cadet uniforms” (Interview with Sheng Lai Kum, Ngoi Sha village, Zhuhai, 29 November 2018). The driver of this was nationalism. Students all over the country participated in military drills (Cook, 2000: 19; Shao, 2004: 168) and the physical indoctrination of the body was political. Jinlin Hwang (2006: 183) commented that mimicking foreigners in hope of defeating them one day was an underlining factor in shaping the modern Chinese body. A student recalled the intensive training:

Military drills took place every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, from 4 to 5 pm. With energetic boys and girls routinely parading in cadet uniforms, they didn’t need to sprinkle white lining powder to mark [the boundaries of] the [basketball] courts as our routine stomping created a trail where no grass could grow. (Interview with Sheng Lai Kum, Ngoi Sha village, Zhuhai, 29 November 2018)

The new parks also introduced grass lawns, which were another novelty. Whether it was for sheer survival or to improve the prospect of the lineage or both, Cantonese farmers traditionally abhorred lawns. This was rooted in the ultra-productive way land was used (Tsu, [1912] 1968: 36–37; Nicolson, 2016: 11). Instead of rearing cattle or growing crops, which had led to a love of lawns in the West, in Asia, where the staple diet was rice, successful land management meant different strategies of “growing land” to bolster communal assets (Byrne, 2019: 283). For example, floodplains were reclaimed from the sea to create new farmland or hillsides were terraced. Productivity affected other domains, to the point that before the advent of migration, life depended upon what farmers could do with their land.

Funding a park nonetheless not only cultivated discipline and teamwork, above all, it sparked a new way of life. New facilities provided a remedy to a life of relentless indulgence, vice and idleness that regrettably had often

¹⁹The Chinese have long considered the habit of drinking lukewarm water a healthy practice. In present-day Australia, Chinese students and new migrants alike are seen carrying thermally insulated “hot water” bottles.

emerged from an economic transition to dependence on overseas remittances (Benton and Liu, 2018: 140; Hsu, 2000b: 311). Promoting healthy pastimes, like sports, were among the ongoing benefits of modern education brought home to the villages through the influence exerted by far-flung compatriots (returning emigrants) working together with schoolteachers to cultivate responsible habits that children might safely nurture beyond their formative years. In conjunction with the development of the modern intellectual mind, extra-curricular activities promoted healthy bodies that benefited the community in the long-term.

Beacons of modern learning

Modern schools, as can be garnered from above, were not only significant buildings in the emigrant village but part of a revolution in village education. Education was a quasi-insurance plan that many migrants had not the privilege of experiencing themselves but something they desired, after encountering an urban, capitalistic and cosmopolitan lifestyle. The experience of traveling abroad enabled migrants to become modern by imagining and anticipating an alternative future for their families and community (Parson, 1951). Exposed to more risks than an ordinary farmer was prepared for, migrants eventually realized that skills beyond an agrarian economy were required to survive in a post-traditional world; they unanimously supported modern education as a risk-alleviation measure (e.g., Giddens and Pierson, 1998: 17).

Remittances made popular education possible. Diaspora-funded schools have been attributed to two factors: the co-emergence of a diaspora identity and the development of educational philanthropy at the end of the 19th century (Cook, 2000: 1–2). Before 1910, children mainly attended private schools called *sisuk* [私塾], where Confucian scholars were hired by families to instruct their children in the classics (Yu, 1983: 48). After the founding of the Republic in 1911, emigrants erected much larger schools in the *qiaoxiang*, paid for better quality teachers and paid for school maintenance costs (Li, 2008: 59, 61). This sparked a literacy revolution in a vast sea of illiteracy but also brought a fundamental change in the attitude to education. In comparing the new and old systems, the reformer Zheng Guanying [鄭觀應, 1842–1921] suggested that the purpose of modern education was “to encourage students’ interests in learning, to achieve enlightenment, instead make them suffer” (Wu, 2010: 199). Traditional education had notoriously been an “examination hell” (Miyazaki, 1976) or a “cultural prison” (Elman, 2000).

Among the most radical changes was co-education. In departing from the archaic tradition, it did not materialize without considerable debate and anxiety, especially over whether educated women would bring grief to the family they married into (Bailey, 2001). Nonetheless, in 1907, the late Qing government agreed that if China were to modernize, this certainly depended on

educating its women. Knowing China's conditions, an advocate of modern education, Liang Qichao [梁啟超, 1873–1929], expressed his concerns. In his view, often children were left in the care of uneducated women, who knew nothing but gossip and superstitions (Bai, 2001: 130). In the absence of men (because of migration), left-behind women and children remained in a precarious position. Fortunately, for Heung San there was a key player from Australia who revolutionized the educational scene. The department store pioneer, Mr. Ma Ying-piu, remarked, "If we have schools for boys, girls cannot go without" (Li, 2008: 58). Understanding the importance of women and children to the future of China, Ma (co-)founded several schools, including schools for women and children (see Figure 3), as well as a female teachers' college. Allowing girls to receive an education not only enabled the exchange of letters between them and their overseas fathers and future husbands (e.g., Li, 2016), but allowed them to also participate in sports, developing healthy, modern bodies, unlike their forebears who were restricted to the house by their bound feet (Hong, 1997).

My study has shown that by funding modern education, the diaspora also created a physical environment that clearly reconfigured the village. More importantly, modern schools enlightened generations of students through everyday encounters, especially when many in the countryside could not afford to be modern on their own terms. Rather than viewing modernization as a complete break from a continuous cultural past, modern curricula appeared in ancestral halls, village temples and study halls in some villages, coexisting with new-style schools in other localities at a time of "multiple modernities" (Eisenstadt, 2000).

A material modernity appearing in the public realm (for example, ringing bells) meant that villagers had no choice but to accept the ever-growing intrusion of technology from the modern West. Putting modern things on public display transformed the school into a locus of educational modernity in rural China—it was, according to Frank Dikötter (2006: 51), a part of the "educative mission of enlightenment." In *Culturing Modernity*, Shao (2004) regarded modern schools founded by Zhang Jian [張謇, 1853–1926] in the Yangtze River city of Nantong [南通] as, by far, the most important places for presenting achievement and gaining public support—what she termed "exhibitory modernity" (Shao, 2004: 160).

Taking their ideas one step further, it is proposed here that the new-style schools in the *qiaoxiang* were beacons of modern learning. As evident in this paper, their physical structures and material manifestations encapsulated a sense of modern learning. They introduced a repertoire of new construction materials, such as the use of red bricks; the technology of building multiple stories; as well as new practices, such as punctuality and how to safely navigate multi-story buildings, and what it meant to practice, cooperate and compete in organized sports. The point here is that

school buildings are not simply a visual reminder of a modernizing China (see Dikötter, 2006 and Shao, 2004); instead, they also preserve social memories in the material fabric. Students actively interacted with the fabric of the school, co-creating novel experiences (now memories), forging relationships and identities for generation upon generation of students, teachers and their emigrant families. Although many accounts presented in this paper relate to individual experiences of modern schools, read together, they provide glimpses of how the materialities of diaspora-funded schools interacted to create an everyday past in the *qiaoxiang*. In doing so, they impart an immersive understanding of how rural people in early 20th-century China learned to be modern.

Conclusion

Returning to the query posed earlier—why did Chinese Australians, upon returning to their homeland, favor non-traditional or even non-Chinese-looking architecture? This study has examined diaspora-funded schools that appeared in Heung San in the early 20th century to answer this and the material experience of modern schools. The *qiaoxiang* village schools can be considered harbingers of the future. Their creation marked a pivotal point of departure between the nation's traditional past and modern future. This may have occurred because Chinese migrants to Australia not only brought ideas of commerce (department stores) and building technology (Lam Woo) home with them, but also improved educational opportunities (new-style schools). In fact, emigrants were not only enthusiastic about returning to rebuild their respective native homes, they also inspired others to do the same. Clearly, the *huaqiao* from Australia demonstrated that they were typical of men such as those who James A. Cook (2006: 161) described as “bringers of enlightenment,” when he wrote about the self-perception and image projection of sojourners who permanently returned from Southeast Asia in the first half of the 20th century:

Huaqiao merchants saw themselves, rather than Western missionaries, Chinese radicals, or the Nanjing government, as the “bringers of enlightenment” and Xiamen, as a model for a “New China.”

Yet, unlike Nanyang (Southeast Asia) migrants who sponsored somewhat Chinese-inspired school architecture,²⁰ Heung San migrants from Australia

²⁰The most famous of these Nanyang buildings was Xiamen University, attributed to Mr. Tan Kah Kee [陳嘉庚, 1874-1961], a patriotic second-generation Singaporean sojourner who built numerous educational intuitions in Amoy (present-day Xiamen). Tan's buildings were said to strike a balance between “indigenous culture and western technology” (Yu, 2007: 131).

desired more radical change. This was fueled by several factors, including traditional reverence to education despite being perpetually marginalized while overseas as largely illiterate migrating subjects. This was further escalated by changes in the way of life in their home village due to remittances that had led to materialism and lack of initiative among the villagers (see Benton and Liu, 2018: 140; Hsu, 2000b: 311). But perhaps most important of all, it compounded a newfound aspiration to improve the communities the migrants had grown up in and left behind. Upon becoming China's entrepreneurial elite, department store tycoons not only transformed Nanjing Road in Shanghai into a shopping mecca (Chan, 1999), these men also transformed their own hometowns in Guangdong into meccas of progress (Zheng, 2003: 19; Cheng, 2019). Like the department stores of urban China, the "beacons of modern learning" were similarly architectural landmarks in the countryside. Due to overseas capital and the ability to procure novel building materials, the schools were truly educational wonderlands that offered a similarly state-of-the-art experience as the modern department stores did as retail wonderlands, but in the countryside.

Schools in the *qiaoxiang* once represented the future of rural society. Today they can be considered a heritage of Chinese migration. Further research could seek to understand how these lodestar buildings become sites of transnational heritage. Documenting their material vestiges and comparing other legacies of modern learning in the *qiaoxiang*, for example, libraries (Benton and Liu, 2018: 140), promises to enrich our understanding of the socio-material transformation of the Chinese remittance landscape.

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