

Introduction

From one of the world's largest diasporas, Chinese migrants and their descendants have maintained close ties with their families and their ancestral homeland. Scholars have documented various forms of linkages, including investment, voluntary associations and other social institutions, charity, and political nationalism. However, little is known outside China about the role of *qiaopi* (letters sent together with a remittance) in the sociocultural and political history of China and the Chinese diaspora over the last century and a half (1820–1980). This book is one of a small handful of English-language studies, and the first book-length one, on the characteristics and transformations of *qiaopi*, including their forms, contents, and role in connecting Chinese migrants and descendants and their non-migrant families. It argues that such institutionalized and cross-national mechanisms not only helped sustain the ties of families separated by oceans and political regimes, but also contributed to the sending regions' economic development. Beyond that, they played an important role in the making of a transnational China characterized by extensive flows of people, capital, ideas, and social practices across different socio-political and cultural domains in East Asia.

CHINESE INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION IN SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL PERSPECTIVE

Three distinctive phases of international migration out of China can be identified in modern times. In the hundred years between 1850 and 1950, large numbers of southern Chinese (predominantly laborers) went overseas, mainly to Southeast Asia.¹ Until the end of the Second World War and beyond, most still saw themselves

as *Huaqiao* (“sojourners” or “overseas Chinese”) or *qiaobao* (“overseas compatriots”), whose political and cultural orientation was toward the ancestral homeland. During the second period, from 1950 to 1980, two big changes came about: new ethnic-Chinese identities emerged, and the geography of Chinese emigration both in China and abroad widened and diversified. Most Chinese living overseas belonged by then to second or third generations; the outflow of new migrants from China had been put on hold after the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. Some *Huaqiao* continued to identify with China, but most became *Huaren* (“ethnic Chinese”) by adopting local citizenship and identifying with their countries of birth and residence. Observers have fixed on two traditional Chinese idioms to encapsulate the difference: *luoye guigen* (“fallen leaves return to their roots”) refers to those who stayed loyal to their native places in China and wished (usually in vain) to return to them; *luodi shenggen* (“falling to the ground and taking root”) refers to those who considered themselves permanently settled outside China and renounced their Chinese citizenship (which did not exclude privately preserving a Chinese lifestyle and cultural values). Beyond these two groups, Hong Kong and Taiwan added new sources of Chinese emigration to the mix, joined by “re-migrants” from Southeast Asia, who also began spreading across the world. Unlike Chinese migrants of previous times, the great majority ended up in the migrant countries of North America and Australia and in Western Europe.² In the third and most recent period (1980 to the present), new migrants from mainland China (the so-called *xin yimin*) have begun to form an ever greater proportion of overall Chinese emigration, while the trends evident in the second phase have continued. It is now estimated that more than fifty million ethnic and migrant Chinese live outside China, and that Chinese live in almost every corner of the earth.³

A variety of mechanisms linked the Chinese diaspora with the homeland, including voluntary associations, investment, trade and business networks, participation in Chinese politics, and remittances.⁴ Studies on these forms of modern Chinese transnationalism have contributed to our understanding of global Chinese migration and its roles in both homeland and host lands. However, we know relatively little about how family ties were constructed and maintained in the transnational social and cultural spaces under different political systems. This question concerns not just Chinese international migration, which generally led to families’ physical separation by geography, but modern Chinese history as a whole. In his study on American-Chinese family connections, Haiming Liu points out that “family and home are one word, *jia*, in the Chinese language. Family can be apart, home relocated, but *jia* remains intact, as it signifies a system of mutual obligations and a set of cultural values.”⁵ In modern China, family was intimately linked to another key unit of Chinese society, the village, which the anthropologist Fei Xiaotong called “the basic unit of Chinese rural society,” built in turn on family and

kinship.⁶ Hence the sociologist Siu-lun Wong declared that “the essence of Chinese economic organization is familism.”⁷

Given the importance of family to Chinese international migration, some recent studies have focused on transnational family strategies and linkages in the age of globalization and the internet, especially the business family.⁸ However, with some major exceptions, few studies have appeared in English on the linkages between Chinese international migrants (especially in Southeast Asia, where more than 85 percent of Chinese migrants lived until recently), the family, and the sending places before the advances in transportation and communication technology in the second half of the twentieth century, when most Chinese diasporic attachments switched from China to the country of birth or settlement.⁹

This book looks at the life and times of the *qiaopi*, a crucial link between Chinese migrants and their families and home villages. *Qiaopi* is one of the names (there are several, depending on locality) given in China to letters written home by Chinese emigrants in the 150 years since the 1820s. *Huipi* are the replies.

Around 160,000 *qiaopi* are known to have survived in private collections and public archives in China.¹⁰ They are drawn from China’s major regions of outmigration and of settlement overseas, in Southeast Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific. Far fewer *huipi* have survived, given their wider scattering and the greater mobility of their recipients and the recipients’ descendants. These materials cover a crucial, defining period in China’s modern history and the history of global migration, itself a driving force in global social and economic development.

In June 2013, an archival venture officially designated as the *Qiaopi* Project was formally registered under UNESCO’s Memory of the World program, set up in 1992 because of “a growing awareness of the parlous state of preservation of documentary heritage” in the world.¹¹ The registration of the *Qiaopi* Project followed, and was inspired by, UNESCO’s 2007 listing as a World Heritage Site of the Kaiping Village Conservation and Development Project, a project also linked to the history of emigration out of southern China.¹² The Memory of the World program is designed, in part, to bring into the historical record the documentary heritage of groups commonly excluded from it. Chinese migrants, whose documented lives have hitherto served chiefly as material for study by outsiders, are proclaimed by the *Qiaopi* Project’s sponsors as a prime example of such a group.

The defining characteristic of a *qiaopi* or *zhengpi* (“main pi”) was that it comprised both a letter and a remittance (*qiaohui*), usually of money, whereas the *huipi* served in the first instance as a receipt intended for the remitter.¹³ This is a key difference between *qiaopi* and most non-Chinese emigrants’ letters, which do not by definition include money. Scholars have noted the importance of remittances for China as a crucial factor in its economic growth and in the ideology and practice of its emigration. A main focus of this study is on the letters (and their sociocultural meaning), neglected by comparison with the better-known remittances.

However, letters and remittances were closely related and are not easily separated analytically. They traveled along identical logistical networks as part of a single transaction and simultaneously reinforced the families' transnational sentiment. The study, therefore, also examines the remittances, and the institutions through which letters and remittances reached China and through which the *huiji* reached the remitters.

The study aims to paint a broad picture of the *qiaopi* collection and of the historical and institutional context within which the *qiaopi* phenomenon emerged; the evolution of its institutions; the letters' themes, styles, types, and purposes; the range of the various recipients of remittances; the management and delivery of *qiaopi*; their role in maintaining ties of kinship and native place; and the moral world they helped sustain and at whose heart they lay. It will also explore differences in the *qiaopi* trade between Chinese provinces and parts of provinces; differences in letters' themes, depending on their writers' geographic origin in China or their destination (say, North America or Southeast Asia); and changes in the *qiaopi* trade over time, ending eventually in its demise. The study is based in part on archival materials collected in China and elsewhere, but it also draws on ideas and references from scores of essays and monographs written by *qiaopi* scholars in Guangdong, Fujian, and other places, as well as primary materials collected in Southeast Asia, North America, and Australia.

As the first monograph in English on *qiaopi*, this book is concerned not just with *qiaopi* themselves but with broader related issues that add to our understanding of modern China and the Chinese diaspora. The letters home served as an important link between China and Chinese overseas, who were tied emotionally, socially, and economically with a China that was in the middle of a process of radical change toward a modern society and state. The remittances sent home by Chinese migrants not only served to lift the migrants' families out of poverty but were a wellspring of China's economic modernization. Partly as a result of the *qiaopi* trade, modern mechanisms and institutions of finance and communication such as banks and post offices became a cornerstone of the modern Chinese state, from the late Qing and the Republic to the People's Republic. The study argues that *qiaopi* served as an indispensable mechanism linking Chinese migrants, their families, their hometowns, and China. This, in turn, has acted as a key foundation for the emergence and evolution of modern Chinese transnationalism, a dimension of Chineseness often ignored in the existing literature.¹⁴

So *qiaopi* provide a unique window into modern China. They illuminate our understanding of external China (the Chinese diaspora) and its impact upon and connections with a changing Chinese homeland, and they show China from new angles on its margins and at its lower levels. The immigrants were, on the whole, poor peasants without any formal education. Most were from Guangdong and Fujian, provinces that, until the reform era beginning in the late 1970s, were rela-

tively peripheral to modern Chinese history and politics. Their voice, as heard in these letters, is a record of a China quite different from that described in writings of the Chinese elite in Beijing, Nanjing, and Shanghai. They are the big diaspora—not the tiny diaspora of students, diplomats, and established businesspeople that previously monopolized the attention of observers—the true voice of a transnational China whose formation can be traced back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the whole of Asia was swept up into the vortex of globalization.

This study aims to contribute to an understanding of modern and contemporary China from a transnational perspective. Since John Fairbank, scholars have paid much attention to how external environments and forces shaped China's domestic evolution from the point of view of trade, diplomacy, commercial culture, and diaspora.¹⁵ Scholars have also begun to examine China from a transnational perspective. The anthropologist Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, for example, defines “transnational China” as geographically comprising “mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese communities all over the world.” She further argues:

I would like to adopt the term *transnational China* to capture the spatial and geographical extension of Chinese culture across national and political boundaries and take into account the persistent interconnectedness among these cultural offshoots with each other and with the “Motherland.” This interconnectedness can be seen in terms of both the flows of people, goods, and culture across these boundaries as well as the maintenance of a “Chinese identity,” still defined as singular even though it is distinctively differentiated according to place. The fact that transnational China can be seen as a very loosely organized entity (more a network than a social organism) in the world today is due both to its being the product of an inherited cultural heritage as well as to the ongoing maintenance, renewal, and reinvention of cultural connections and a Chinese identity through cultural and materials flows across political borders.¹⁶

Existing studies on transnational China have been written primarily from a cultural studies perspective, with a focus on contemporary China at the time of globalization and technological advancement.¹⁷ But it is important to understand transnational China historically and from an institutional perspective, examining the intersecting flows of people, culture, ideas, and capital. By analyzing both the material and the spiritual dimensions of this transnational connectedness, this study on the role played by *qiaopi* and the *qiaopi* trade in making China transnational cuts across different domains and approaches them from the perspective of *qiaopi* and their senders and recipients as well as associated agents, thus adding to the debate a hitherto neglected but equally important dimension of the matter.

This study on *qiaopi* in historical and comparative perspective will also contribute to an understanding of the continuing importance of remittance in developing countries. The World Bank estimated officially recorded remittances to developing

countries at \$401 billion in 2012. Remittances remain a crucial resource flow, one that far exceeds official development assistance as well as private debt and portfolio equity in volume. China received US\$51 billion of remittances in 2010, second only to India, which received US\$55 billion.¹⁸ China was again the second-largest recipient in 2015, with an inflow of \$63.9 billion.¹⁹ While the means of communication have changed beyond recognition, with the telephone, social media, and the internet replacing handwritten letters mailed home through remittance houses, the substance of the remittance (linking immigrants with the family and homeland) and its various modes (formal and informal) remain a key feature of contemporary migration and overseas settlement.²⁰ Remittance has also continued to influence the political economy and social and cultural behavior of post-reform China.²¹

QIAOPI

Qiaopi as a specialist trade in the remitting of letters accompanied by money grew out of a rudimentary system that started, at the latest, in the eighteenth century, when migrants communicated with their families by way of returning kinsmen who took back an oral or written message, with or without cash. Some studies date the origins of the practice even earlier, to the Ming's Jiajing reign (1522–66), when two Fujianese brothers in the Philippines are said, in local records, to have regularly sent home remittances “on which the whole family relied,” and when other overseas traders sent back “silver and letters.”²² Others claim that the first *qiaopi* were sent from Thailand even before the Ming.²³ As early as 1810, Chinese in the Dutch East Indies (today's Indonesia) are said to have remitted the equivalent of 1.7 million yuan to China.²⁴ However, early remittances are hard to trace, given that they were, for most of the time, illegal from the point of view of the Chinese authorities and did not usually figure in official records. The *qiaopi* traffic grew massively after the Beijing Convention of 1860, concluded between the Qing Court and Great Britain, France, and Russia. This treaty decreed the protection of Chinese emigrants, who had previously been unprotected. (The decree did not, in the event, prevent continuing discrimination against Chinese in many, if not most, migrant destinations.)²⁵ As for the *qiaopi* trade's eventual demise, some date it to in 1973, when a state directive put it under the direct control of the People's Bank of China, but most date it to 1979, when *qiaopi* personnel were incorporated into local state-owned banks and control of the remittance trade was put in the hands of the banks.²⁶ This study takes 1820 as the starting point of *qiaopi* as a distinctive mechanism combining letters and remittance joining China and the Chinese in diaspora, and 1980 as the equally rough, unofficial date of its final demise.

The defining feature of the *qiaopi* was, as we have seen, that it comprised a letter (*pixin*) and silver (*pikuan*, i.e., “money”) in one envelope. The remitter usually recorded the amount remitted on the envelope, employing complex variants of

numerals designed to prevent their fraudulent alteration, and again on the enclosed letter. As well as letter and money, the envelope might also contain bills, invoices, and other official documents recording the transaction.²⁷ Besides the amount, the envelope registered the name of the sender and the name and address (often just the village) of the intended recipient (often rendered simply as “father,” “grand-mother,” etc.).²⁸ Many remittance houses stamped the envelope with promotional slogans, Confucian homilies, or—during the war—calls for a boycott of imperialist Japan and defense of the Chinese motherland. The arrival of a *qiao pi* in the village was the equivalent for most recipients of a visit from a loved one, a form of intense psychological consolation.

Not all *qiao pi* conformed to the definition of money plus letter. In the case of death notices, a letter alone could be expected, but a so-called *baixin* (a letter without money) was otherwise unlikely; at the very least, a couple of dollars would be attached as a token of regard and a promise for the future. Nor was there always a letter, as we explain later, though its absence usually had a special explanation. So the saying “If there’s a letter, there’s bound to be money; if there’s money, there’s bound to be a letter” did not always apply.²⁹

There were several forms of remittance. The three most common were *xinhui* (“mail transfer”), *piaohui* (“draft remittance”), and *dianhui* (“telegraphic transfer”). In the case of mail transfer, the amount (usually small) was generally recorded on the left-hand side of the envelope (and therefore also known as *waifu*, “handed over externally”). Mail transfers and *waifu* remittances had to be delivered personally, so they were relatively expensive. Draft remittances were money orders designed or sold by the *piju* and placed inside the envelope (hence *neifu*, “handed over internally”). They were cheaper because they could be cashed by the payee at the *piju*, either on sight or a few days later, or by a third party (say, the owner of a local store). Telegraphic transfer was quickest (in fact, practically instantaneous), but it was also dearest and was typically used only in emergencies.³⁰

After the consolidation of a modern banking and postal system in the region, *piju* in Southeast Asia began dealing with letter and money separately, although the two items belonged nominally to a single transaction. The letter was usually sent by post to the *piju*’s branch or agent in China, whereas the money was turned into a money order that could be exchanged in Hong Kong (the entrepôt for nearly all the *qiao pi* trade). Alternatively, it was either posted to an intermediary in Hong Kong who then turned it into currency that could be used in the Chinese interior or posted directly to the *piju*’s branch or agent in China, where it could be sold to a local bank or *qianzhuang*.

In her study on the role of Hong Kong in the Chinese diaspora, Elizabeth Sinn argues that “for Chinese migrants, two of the most meaningful ways of maintaining ties with their native homes were sending money and arranging while still alive to have their bones sent home for reburial.”³¹ She concludes that Hong Kong

“occupied a special place in the consciousness of emigrants. For many emigrants leaving China, Hong Kong was their first stop outside China, and paradoxically, also their first stop in China on their return home. . . . The comfort zone that Hong Kong offered might have contributed to its reputation as the second home of overseas Chinese.”³²

In the interlude between receipt and delivery, the *qiaopi* sometimes underwent several currency conversions, starting with the initial conversion on receipt. Each conversion usually benefited the *piju*, which was more interested in charting a favorable course and devising appropriate strategies on the exchange market than in charging the remitter a fee for the remittance, which was therefore sometimes delivered at no cost.³³

The remittance office issued a counterfoil on receipt of the *qiaopi* and put a serial number (*bianhao*) on the counterfoil, the envelope, and the envelope provided for the reply (the *huiji*). This serial, sometimes starting with a *huama*, one of the indigenous “positional” numerals traditionally used in Chinese markets, was typically prefaced in Thailand and associated countries and in Malaya by a *liezi* (“list character”), usually drawn from the *Qian zi jing* (“Thousand character classic”), and in Singapore and the Philippines by a character rotated from the name of the remittance company or from an auspicious phrase.³⁴ By consulting the list character, it was easy to distinguish which company had handled the remittance. The serial was supplemented by the *banghao* (“shipment number”), in Roman or (less often) Arabic numerals, based on the *bang* or *chuanbang* (“shipment”), through which it was possible to identify the place at which the *qiaopi* had initially been collected. Thus, the simple numbering of remittances practiced by *shuike* developed over the years into a complex indicator.³⁵

The *bianhao* or *banghao* connected the entire process of remittance, each stage of which was tracked by the remittance office and its representatives. The shipping documents associated with a delivery were in some cases dispatched twice, on successive sailings, in case the first dispatch was for some reason lost or mislaid. An essential moment in the system was *xiaohao* (“cancelling the number”). This happened three times: on delivery to the recipient, in the port through which the reply (*huiji*) was dispatched, and on the reply’s arrival at the original remittance place. An uncollected, uncashed remittance was usually kept by an office for a maximum of ten years, whereafter it expired.³⁶

Migrants usually sent their first *qiaopi*, together with a token sum of a dollar or two commonly advanced by the clan association or a kin-based remittance house, from the port of disembarkation to let the family know they had arrived. This initial *qiaopi* was known, for obvious reasons, as the *ping’an pi* (“safe-and-sound *pi*”).³⁷

From a financial point of view, most *qiaopi* were designed to perform two main functions—to support the family and pay off debts, including debts incurred in the process of migrating.³⁸ They were used to pay for food and clothes, education, and

building or repairing houses; lending to kin; paying local taxes; and funding weddings, funerals, and other family events.³⁹ Most letters, apart from general expressions of well-wishing, therefore contained a sentence along these lines: “Your son abroad herewith has a small benefit for you; naturally it should be more.”⁴⁰ Instructions for distributing the remittance to blood relatives, affines, and (occasionally) friends were nearly always set out in strict order of seniority and kinship proximity.⁴¹

Big remittances were often done on credit and then paid on proof of receipt in China.⁴² At times, huge amounts were remitted under the *qiaopi* system. In 1941, for example, under the special circumstances of the war, one *qiaopi* included a remittance of \$10 million (in Nationalist currency) and another of \$600,000.⁴³

Qiaopi were nearly always addressed to the head of the family and members of senior generations, and the accompanying messages were cast in exaggeratedly polite language expressing humble salutations and as if the writer were kneeling in reverence. Around two in three recipients were the writer’s grandparents or parents, and they were mostly male; the writer’s sons were likelier recipients even than the writer’s mother. Of five hundred *qiaopi* analysed in one study, only ten were addressed to the wife, and even fewer to female in-laws.⁴⁴ Female recipients were likely to be senior: grandmother rather than mother, mother rather than wife.

Being in essence an appendage to a remittance, most letters were cursory, abrupt, and incommunicative, save for a stereotyped filial (husbandly, fatherly, etc.) salutation and a word or two about how to distribute the money. Space was in any case often limited by the size of the sheet of paper provided by the remittance house, which was usually skimpy and much smaller than normal letter paper.⁴⁵ Only a minority of letters went into detail.

Most remitters were illiterate or semiliterate, able to do little more than fill in the amount and date, so their *qiaopi* were often composed with the help of someone else, by professional scribes, or—in some *piju*—by an assistant, for free.⁴⁶ In Singapore, letter writers sat at roadside stalls “consisting of a small rude table, a little bundle of paper, a brush, some China ink, and a stool on which the operator sits.” These stalls were situated on public verandas, under trees, or in the shadow of walls. The letter writers charged between three and six cents a letter, depending on the amount of writing done.⁴⁷ One paid letter-writer explained in a memoir the difficulties of rendering messages and even names and addresses given in outlandish dialects, and how what he wrote was sometimes based on guesswork.⁴⁸

Some letters had a strong local linguistic flavor, full of dialect expressions; others were in semiclassical Chinese. Many were standard letters preprinted by the office as a convenience to remitters who feared that if they wrote the letters themselves and failed to observe conventions, they would be laughed at in the villages when their letters were read aloud by the postman. For the literate, a space was left on preprinted forms for private comments.⁴⁹

The handwriting in the letters was often clumsy and done in a jumble of styles with a large number of miswritten characters.⁵⁰ However, some letters displayed considerable calligraphic skill, executed in the early years with the traditional brush.⁵¹ Because the paper provided was generally not just flimsy but tiny, to keep the overall weight and therefore cost to a minimum, most letter writers opted for the *xingshu* (“running script”) or *kaishu* (“regular script”) style of writing, both of which are relatively regular and compact, allowing a larger number of characters to be fitted into a small space.⁵²

Calligraphy had an elevated status in old China and was prized and revered above other artistic genres. In previous times it was associated exclusively with the educated elite, principally the literati, as an emblem of the ruling class and its authority.⁵³ In the twentieth century, however, it became a popular art form (known as *minjian shufa*, “people’s calligraphy”) practiced as a hobby and a means of self-expression by Chinese of all classes and circles. *Qiaopi* calligraphy was part of this artistic revolution. Calligraphy was an integral part of the curriculum of the primary schools set up in and after 1898 in China’s towns and villages, and many of the migrants who went abroad from Guangdong and Fujian took with them a basic grounding in it. Migrants’ children born overseas or taken abroad at an early age would also have been exposed to it at the Chinese-language schools set up in Chinatown, for such schools usually followed the same curriculum as those in China. Over the last twenty years, people’s calligraphy has become more and more an object of study in China, and some scholars have written about its *qiaopi* variant.

Unlike elite calligraphy, a high art form, *qiaopi* calligraphy was typically simple and unadorned. The brush work was often clumsily executed, irregular, and slapdash, and the characters did not conform to accepted rules of structure and composition. For the educated elite, calligraphy was an object of intense study and constant practice, whereas for *qiaopi* writers it had a practical rather than an aesthetic purpose and was usually performed on inferior paper with poor-quality ink and brushes, or even with fountain pens and ballpoint pens. Yet the *qiaopi* writers’ very lack of training in the finer points of brushmanship often lent their writing a special vigour and vitality, infused with an element of improvisation and naïve creativity.⁵⁴

As later chapters show, the relationship between the remitter and the courier or entrepreneur who executed the transaction was based on trust, but that did not mean that remitters were unskeptical. Most remitters, especially the illiterate ones, were keenly aware of the chance of being rooked and fleeced. There are many folk stories about illiterate remitters using prearranged codes (e.g., drawings of dogs and temples to represent numbers) to outwit potential cheats.⁵⁵

Not all *qiaopi* followed the “silver plus letter” formula. Some remitters sent goods as well or instead. From Singapore, Stamford Raffles reported in 1817 that Chinese remitted birds’ nests, camphor, sea cucumbers, tin, opium, pepper, hides, indigo, and precious metals.⁵⁶ A typical later consignment consisted of cloth, a belt, a pen,

a sweatshirt, headache remedies, and soap.⁵⁷ Medicines and health remedies like Tiger Balm were a staple item, and in the 1950s, especially during famines, people sent grain, flour, pig fat, and chemical fertilizer in crates or steel containers.⁵⁸

Sometimes in the early years of the trade, before its professionalization, or during wars or to evade prying authorities, the remittance was accompanied by a *koupi* or “oral *pi*,” a message transmitted by word of mouth rather than in writing. During the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–45, for example, sums were entrusted viva voce to a reliable deliverer, who memorized the amount and address and took back at most a bare signature to prove receipt. Some deliverers memorized dozens or hundreds of such messages for crowds of clients.⁵⁹

The communication’s principal aim was often to convey precise instructions on how to distribute the money sent. Other common topics included children’s education, matters concerning children’s or other relatives’ emigration, children’s marriage plans, the maintenance of good neighborly relations, and other family or communal business. The emigration policies of foreign countries, and tactics to deal with them, often figured in the correspondence.⁶⁰ Because of the Chinese Exclusion Act (which was signed into law in 1882), the letters that flowed either way between China and North America were particularly likely to focus on immigration, how to deal with interrogation (on arrival), and how to get work.⁶¹

One set of letters shows how a family used kinship ties to construct a migration network across the Pacific, North America, and Southeast Asia that provided family members with the information and resources (birth certificates, application forms, depositions, witness statements) necessary to circumvent the ban.⁶² One lineage, the Guan, from Wuyi in Guangdong, used letters to create a Guan diaspora several thousand strong with branches and outposts across much of the United States, Canada, and Cuba.⁶³

Some letters rose above the level of platitudes and clichés to deal with weightier issues, including the state of the world, China, and the writer’s native place or place of settlement and proposals for radical reform.⁶⁴ Most migrants focused exclusively on hard work as the hoped-for way out of poverty, but some not only sympathized with these new viewpoints but proselytized for them in letters home. There are numerous instances of such proselytizing of family and friends in the *qiaopi* collections, just as there is evidence of migrants’ and dependents’ politicization in the inscriptions painted on the houses built in China by *qiaojuan* and *gui-qiao*. At every important political juncture in the history of modern China and the Chinese diaspora, letters home and, in some cases, letters from China to abroad (the *huiji*), as well as intra-diasporic correspondence that followed *qiaopi* circuits, reflected the changes and discussed how to respond to them. This was particularly true during the Hundred Days Reform of 1898, the Emperor-Protection movement, the reformers’ Business Revitalization campaign, the anti-Japanese movement, the National Salvation movement, the Sino-Japanese War, the Korean War,

the Cultural Revolution, and the fall of the “Gang of Four” after Mao’s death. Occasionally, correspondents described foreign customs, viewpoints, and institutions, providing a grass-roots perspective on the world often quite different from that reported by university students and diplomats in their correspondence and dispatches.⁶⁵

Most letter writers spoke only sparingly, if at all, about themselves, and far more copiously about those left behind at home.⁶⁶ Only a small minority conveyed strongly personal or emotional messages, and love letters were exceedingly rare (though not entirely lacking).⁶⁷ Most of the more substantial letters remained relentlessly fixated on the ancestral place—its land and fields, gods and spirits, natural environment, and ecology—and, of course, on their own ancestors, whose souls demanded reverence and ritual attention.⁶⁸

A rich popular culture grew up around *qiaopi*, both in China and overseas. Tales, anecdotes, and legends lionized well-known couriers (*shuike*), deliverers (*pijiao*), and remittance shops.⁶⁹ Praising stalwarts of the *qiaopi* trade continued after 1949, when stories about *qiaopi* heroes became a staple of Communist propaganda in migrant regions, designed to boost remittances and thus the wider economy, and when *pijiao* were feted, Stakhanovite-style, at conferences.⁷⁰

Qiaopi songs and poems abounded in the *qiaoxiang*, China’s regions of out-migration, and included “going-abroad ballads,” “thinking-of-home laments,” “returning-home melodies,” and “reporting-home songs.” They came in many styles—literary and elegant, vulgar and demotic—and took the form of folk songs, ballads, Hakka mountain songs, ditties, free-verse poems, and classical poems ranging from *lǔshi* to *ci* and *lian*. Many of the songs were in dialect. Initially, they were anonymous. Later, however, authorship was claimed—by migrants, dependents, popular singers, professional singers, scholars, luminaries, and after 1949, “cultural cadres.”⁷¹

HUIPI

The *huipi* were originally devised by the remittance houses as a way of setting at rest the minds of remitters, for whom they were proof of delivery. *Qiaopi* traders realized that families in remote areas could not easily come by paper and envelopes, so the traders started gluing a small *huipi* envelope to the bigger *qiaopi* envelope, containing a slip of flimsy paper at most two or three inches wide and three or four inches long—even smaller and less substantial than the paper provided for the letter accompanying the *qiaopi*. (Where this *huipi* sheet was not included, the office at the port of arrival in China might insert one.) The *huipi* envelope bore the same serial number as the original *qiaopi*. Often, recipients were required to sign two *huipi* stubs, one meant for the remitter and the other for the company. Some companies stamped the *qiaopi* with an instruction to recipients to “reply promptly

on receipt [of this] in order to spare worry on the remitter's part" and not "to write at length." The post office, which at a certain point in the history of the *qiaopi* trade came to supervise its middle section (between initial receipt of the *qiaopi* or *huiji* and its final delivery), joined in the bullying, stressing that only one sheet might be used and that including others' letters in one's own envelope would incur a fine.⁷²

In cases where *qiaopi* were dispensed by the *piju* on credit, receipt of the *huiji* triggered the remitter's repayment of the loan. It is not known when this system of advances first developed as part of the *qiaopi* trade, but it may have started with the *shuike*, especially after they became associated with stores and other businesses whose owners used loans to attract custom. Eventually, the system of advances became widespread in the trade, particularly in the Philippines,⁷³ and traders developed a system to check the creditworthiness of would-be recipients of advances. However, unlike modern banks, which also loaned money, there was usually no requirement of a guarantor.⁷⁴

The *huiji* was originally a creative innovation by the Chaoshan branch of the *qiaopi* trade, but it spread across mainland and maritime Southeast Asia and in many places became an essential moment in the remittance process.⁷⁵ In the Americas and Australasia, where few Chaoshanese lived, the process of delivery and receipt was less sophisticated. There and in Wuyi, the main sending area for these two continents, few companies provided *huiji* envelopes, and *huiji* were often sent not to individual addressees but to Chinese stores, which displayed them in racks in the store window for collection by the migrant.⁷⁶

Typical *huiji* themes included requests for money to meet family needs, complaints about missing remittances, and reasons why the addressee should return home (the wife's hard life, the father's yearning for his son, the father's or brothers' business plans, children's worries about their father's health, etc.). A mother would urge her son to come home and marry; parents would enjoin thrift and hard work on him. Others would inquire of the relative abroad about how to emigrate.⁷⁷

Few recipients of *qiaopi* could read or write, so the courier or *pijiao* often wrote the reply on their behalf. The *huiji* were then bundled together and sent off, although some recipients mailed their own. After 1949, under the People's Republic, writing *huiji* became the job of specialist teams whose members wrote thousands of letters and, in the course of their work, reunited hundreds of lost relatives. This job required tact, knowledge, and guile. The bare mention of the export of money became taboo in some destination countries after 1949, when the authorities in some places banned *qiaopi* altogether. However, in the early years of the People's Republic, remittances were crucial for China's economic development, so the lines along which they flowed had to be kept open.⁷⁸ As a result, secret codes were used to enable remitters to evade the bans. At the same time, wives were

urged to become literate so that they could solicit remittances and thus benefit both themselves and the state.⁷⁹

Far fewer *huipi* than *qiaopi* have survived into the present. This is because most early Chinese emigrants lived makeshift lives and moved often. However, without the replies the record will remain one-sided and incomplete, for the majority of those left behind in the villages were women.⁸⁰ Chinese scholars in China and overseas therefore emphasize the need to track down and preserve them wherever possible.

QIAOPI TERMS

The *qiaopi* trade became a major force in the economies of the *qiaoxiang* and of Chinese communities abroad, and it enriched the Chinese language with dozens of terms, either newly coined or adapted from old usages. This terminology was complex and wide-ranging in itself, and it varied greatly by dialect and place and over time.

Overseas migrants were collectively known under various names, including the standard *Huaqiao* ("Chinese sojourner"). They were also known in southeastern China as *xinke* ("new guest") or *xintang* ("new Tang person"), *Tangren* ("Tang person") being a name applicable to both Cantonese and Fujianese. The term *Huaqiao* dates back to the nineteenth century, but it was not until 1918 that it was incorporated into the official nomenclature by the State Council of the then-warlord government in Beijing, which in 1922 elevated the Overseas Chinese Office to a bureau. However, the bureau existed mainly in name only. In 1927–8, the new Republican government in Nanjing set up institutions that had real power and influence, which deepened in following years.⁸¹

As for *Huaqiao* destinations, Southeast Asia was known in China as the Nan-yang or Southern Ocean, also referred to as *fan* ("foreign, barbarian"), hence *fanke* ("overseas migrant") and *fanyin* ("foreign silver," i.e., "remittance"). Western regions of North America were known as *jinshan* ("gold mountain"), later renamed *jiu jinshan* ("old gold mountain," used today to designate San Francisco) after gold was discovered in Australia (*xin jinshan*, "new gold mountain").⁸² Chinese laborers in North America were known as *jinshanke* or *jinshanbo* ("gold mountain guest/uncle"), their wives as *jinshanpo* ("gold mountain woman"), and their children as *jinshanshao* ("gold mountain youngster").⁸³

The couriers who started taking remittances to China in the early days, on a largely individual basis before the institutionalization of the *qiaopi* trade, were known as *shuike* ("water guests") and less commonly as *nanyangke* ("Southern Ocean guests"), *zoushui* ("water goers"), or *yangshuike* ("foreign water guests").⁸⁴ The term *shuike* dates back to the Western Jin (265–316) or Tang (618–907), when it referred to boatmen and fishermen; later, it came to mean petty itinerant traveler, before acquiring its modern sense of "courier."⁸⁵ In some places, a distinction was

made between *chidanshui* (“freshwater eaters”), couriers at the domestic end of the chain, and the *liucushui* (“saltwater skaters”) who connected China and the world.⁸⁶ In Guangdong’s Guangfu region, domestic couriers were called *xunchengma* (“town-patrolling horses”) or, if they specialized in carrying goods, *zoudanbang* (“lone travelers”). Couriers who simultaneously (or exclusively) escorted migrants to and from places overseas, after assembling them in the nearest port, were known as *ketou* (“guest chiefs,” often written as *kheh-tau* and translated as crimps, or “coolie brokers”⁸⁷) or *datou* (“[guest] senders”).⁸⁸ The premises couriers lived in overseas were called *hangguan* (“trade building”) or *piguan* (“*pi* building”), and the hostels or barracoons the migrants lodged in were called *kezhan* (“guest hostels”) or *kejian* (“guest spaces”).⁸⁹

The term *qiaopi* itself is a compound of *qiao*, “to sojourn abroad,” and *pi*, where *qiao* is short for *Huaqiao*. Strictly speaking, *qiao* only applies to those living outside China who are Chinese nationals, not to the *Huaren* (“ethnic Chinese”) whose tie to China is only of descent and ethnicity, and who came to account for an ever-growing proportion of remitters as the generations deepened. This was especially so after 1955, when dual nationality was abolished and Chinese outside China were required to choose between citizenship of China and of their country of residence.⁹⁰ It is inapplicable, for the same reason, to Chinese in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao, who also remitted in large numbers. However, the term *qiaopi* endured in administration and scholarship, despite its terminological inaccuracy in some cases.⁹¹

As for the word *pi*, it has been the subject of intense debate among *qiaopi* scholars, especially between scholars from the *qiaoxiang* in Chaoshan and southern Fujian, where languages belonging to two major dialect groups are spoken. Some scholars explain the term by the fact that in southern Fujian *pi* means “letter,” but others dispute this theory. Some believe that *pi* is a Chaoshan word unconnected with the Fujianese usage and means not letter but, in Chaoshan dialect, a note to record the sending or receiving of money, or even the remittance itself, the “silver.” In fact, this usage has been firmly embedded in Chinese since Tang times (in the form of *pizi*, subsequently elided in the Chao dialect to *pi*). In this view, the Chaoshan term prevailed partly because Chaoshan people played a dominant role in Chinese migration overseas (and in establishing the *qiaopi* trade) and partly because speakers of Fujian dialects confused the Chaoshan meaning with their own.⁹²

The Chaoshan scholar Zeng Xubo, in an analysis of linguistic evidence contained in letters and on remittance envelopes, cites a Qing envelope on which the term *yinpi* (“silver *pi*”) clearly refers, exclusively, to the “silver” accompanying an item delivered by an official postal station, a domestic transaction originating in that case in the Lianghuai region of northern Jiangsu and unconnected with the dispatch of remittances from abroad. From this evidence, he concludes that this

use of the term *pi*, which survived prominently in Chaoshan dialect and among Chaoshanese overseas, can be found in documents from other parts of China.

To reinforce his argument that *pi* does not mean letter but refers to the remittance or note of remittance, Zeng points out that many *qiaopi* were not actually accompanied by a letter or even by a brief note—not surprising, given that the great majority of migrant remitters were illiterate or semiliterate. While some illiterate remitters wrote letters with the help of friends, remittance-shop employees, or professional letter writers, this was often impossible, especially in the case of the remittances collected in scores or hundreds by representatives of the remittance shops who toured the mines, farms, factories, and jungle clearance sites where many of the migrants worked. These remittance touts were usually in a hurry to avoid missing the next sailing, and they could hardly write letters for all their clients. Most clients simply registered the amount and address of their remittances unless there was something urgent that needed saying. Zeng concludes that letterless remittances were far more common than most scholars assume, but that the evidence for them was—for obvious reasons—also far less likely to survive than those accompanied by letters. As a result, the phenomenon has been minimized or overlooked.⁹³

The word *pi* can also mean “batch” in standard Chinese, which has led other scholars to believe that it connotes the shipments in which letters reached Chinese ports.⁹⁴ However, Zeng Xubo points out that the measure word *pi*, meaning “batch,” is not usual in the dialects of either Chaoshan or Minnan (southern Fujian), both of which use the word *bang* to convey this meaning.⁹⁵

Whatever its origin and precise meaning, it seems that Chaoshanese first used the term *pi* in its new context, referring to *qiaohui*, in Singapore sometime between 1829 and 1835, whence it spread to nearby Hakka-speaking Meixian in Guangdong.⁹⁶ Other names used to denote *qiaopi* include *fanpi* (“foreign [or barbarian] *pi*”) and, in Guangfu, *yinxin* (“silver letter”) or *xinyin*, short for *shuxin yinliang*. A variant form of *qiaopi* was the aforementioned *koupi* or *kouxin* (“oral *pi* or letter”), sent by mouth in the early days of the trade or in wartime; *anpi* (“secret *pi*”) were remittances sent in code to evade overseas government bans, especially after 1945 and 1949. In the Guangfu region, the source of most of the Chinese emigrants in North America, the terms *yinxin* and *jinshan xin* (“gold mountain letter”) were usual.⁹⁷ The term *qiaopi* must, of course, be distinguished from *qiaohui* (“emigrant remittance”), which has a broader meaning.

The word *qiaopi*, one name among many for a phenomenon that took regional forms and had regional names, became standard, at least in official parlance at the national level, in the years between 1928 and 1931, after successive government rulings. At first, the authorities in Nanjing rejected the *pi* element in the compound on the grounds that it was not linguistically “standard” (*dian*) and instead favored the term *qiaohui* (“remittance”). In most regions, however, the name *qiaopi*

endured. Then, in 1931 a changed ruling gave official sanction to the popular term, though without the prefix *Hua* (“Chinese”).⁹⁸

There are at least a dozen names for the companies that ran the *qiaopi* trade, including *qiaopiju* (“*qiaopi* office”), *pixinju* (“remittance-letter office”), *yinxinju* (“*yinxin* office”), *xinju* (“letter office”), and *huidui zhuang* (“remittance shop”). Some names had regional associations. In southern Fujian, the companies were known as *minxinju* (“people’s letter office”) or *piju* (“*pi* office”), in the Chaoshan region of eastern Guangdong as *piguan* (“*pi* shop”), and in Guangfu as *huiduiju* (“remittance offices”).⁹⁹ Different names were used in Thailand (*yinxinju*) and French Indochina (*pixinju*), although the trade in mainland (as opposed to maritime) Southeast Asia came in time to form a single system. The term *minxinju*, as we shall see, originally applied to native-style domestic post offices and was the usual name for remittance houses in Fujian, even those with overseas ties, during the Qing dynasty and in some places right through until the 1950s. In Chaoshan, on the other hand, the names *piju* and *piguan* prevailed.¹⁰⁰ Officially, the term *qiaopiju* was favored, after a meeting of businesspeople in 1931 argued that names like *pixinju* could lead to confusion with domestic postal services since they lacked the *qiao* prefix.¹⁰¹ In this study, we stick to *piju*, to mark up their special function and because it is the shortest name. After 1949, the terms *qiaohuiye* (“remittance trade”) and *qiaohui zhuang* (“remittance shop”) were officially used, and employees in the *qiaopi* trade were known as *pigong* (“*pi* workers”).¹⁰²

Qiaopi deliveries were at first largely random and opportunist, but later they became more regular. The person (usually a man) who delivered the letters and money to the villages was known, variously, as *pijiao* (“*pi* feet”), *daipiren* (“*pi* deliverer”), or *piban* (“*pi* companion”), and his or her sack as the *pibao* or *pidai*. A substantial remittance was a *dapi* (“big *pi*”). The distribution of remittance letters around the houses was known as *fenpi* (“distributing *pi*”). The reply, or *huiji* (“return *pi*”), was written on a *pizai* (“*pi* child”), the tiny sheet of paper glued to the back of the *qiaopi* envelope by the *piju* for the recipient’s convenience. In some places, the *huiji* were gathered together in the village store to save the *pijiao* time, a process called *shoupi* (“gathering the *pi*”). *Panpi* (“hoping for *pi*”) and *kaopi* (“relying on *pi*”) expressed the sense of *pi* as a lifeline. In the Sino-Japanese War, when the trade was disastrously interrupted in some places, a fateful new term entered the language: *piduan*, “the breaking off of *pi*”.¹⁰³

The complex and diverse terms used with reference to *qiaopi* highlight three key themes that are centrally relevant both to *qiaopi* studies themselves and to the history of the Chinese diaspora in the context of a transnational China. First, systemic mechanisms linked both the Chinese in diaspora and their respective hometowns and a China that, at the time, was emerging as a nation state. While the *qiaopi* sources and destinations changed across the 160 years covered by this book, an abiding set of linkages and modes of operation lies at the heart of this study.

Second, the variation in the terms used in the *qiaopi* trade reflected the diversity of the connections associated with localities, dialects, associations, and different political regimes in China and the diasporic hostlands. This study focuses on this diversity and its implications for an understanding of transnational China. Third, the interactions of *qiaopi* and their external sociopolitical environment shaped the nature and characteristics of *qiaopi*, also a key subject of our analysis.