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# Remittance letters from Manila: The gendered, individual and emotional world of the Chinese diaspora

Huifen Shen

*In the long history of Chinese emigration, men left home to work abroad, leaving family members behind. While overseas, they sent money to their relatives along with remittance letters (qiaopi). Many qiaopi were formulaic documents prepared by professional letter writers, but those sent by Huang Kaiwu to his wife between 1903 and 1916 provide information on changing family values and gender norms in the years leading up to the Chinese Revolution and Republic. Huang was a textile merchant in the Philippines, a leader of the Chinese community in Manila, and a revolutionary who actively supported the 1911 Revolution. His wife lived with members of his family in his home village. His letters reveal tensions between tradition and change both on his part and on hers. Written at a time of momentous socio-political change and under the influence of Chinese nationalism, they provide insights into how modernist thinking played out in one Chinese migrant family and enrich academic understanding of the Chinese diaspora especially in the early twentieth century.*

For well over two hundred years (the eighteenth to mid-twentieth century), Chinese men who left home to work abroad sent remittances to their families at home in China along with letters known as *qiaopi* 侨批.[1] Many migrants came

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1 In the earlier days, go-betweens known as '*shuike*' 水客 (alternatively '*pike*' 批客, courier) travelled between China and migrant communities carrying money, letters, household goods, or oral messages between migrants and their relatives in China. In the Republican era (1912–49), private postal exchanges (or remittance agencies, *xinju* 信局, *qiaopiju* 侨批局, *minxinju* 民信局, or *piguan* 批馆) largely replaced the *shuike* and provided the same services, as did banks and post offices. For details on how these agents and institutions worked, see Zheng Linkuan 郑林宽, *Fujian huaqiao huikuan* 福建华侨汇款 (The remittances of Fujian Overseas Chinese) (Fuzhou: Fujian sheng zhengfu mishuchu tongjishi, 1940), pp. 67–84.

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from the southeastern coast of China, especially Fujian (Min闽) and Guangdong (Yue 粤), a region long embedded in global commerce. Junk traders based in Xiamen, Zhangling and Canton created internal networks in coastal China and transregional networks in Nanyang 南洋 (Southeast Asia), for trade and migration, and played a significant role in global commerce. For example, in the late sixteenth century, Yuegang 月港 in Fujian became an important source of goods for Spain's galleon trade between Manila and Acapulco. Human mobility accompanied the junk trade, and Min-Yue merchants and labourers settled in Southeast Asian port cities. The junk trade came to an end in the 1850s, but trade and migration continued and Chinese migrants arrived in the region in substantial numbers during the late Qing dynasty and the Republic of China period.[2] In the early 1950s, around 12 to 13 million people of Chinese origin resided outside of China (migrants and the descendants of migrants), 90 per cent of them in Southeast Asia.[3] A large proportion of the migrants were men who supported left-behind family members, a pattern of migration that changed very little in history and has not been studied thoroughly.[4]

The first decade of the twentieth century brought the birth of overseas Chinese nationalism, which can be divided into three competing factions: Chinese imperial, reformist, and revolutionary.[5] Chinese governments, especially the nationalist government, called for patriotism among the Chinese overseas while it engaged with them in various ways.[6] The rise of Chinese nationalism within the diaspora pushed many migrants to serve not only their families but also their nation, and made daily life and gender relationships ever more complex and unstable.

For the Min-Yue people, Southeast Asian countries were a space of livelihoods, becoming an extension of coastal China, minimising the significance of boundaries between countries and regions. On the other hand, while Chinese migrants in Southeast Asia transcended ethnic and cultural boundaries, scholars have often viewed these Chinese communities as a single community.

The distance and geographical boundaries that separated migrants from their families created complex individual and spiritual spaces, and presented challenges to migrant couples' lives. In the new socio-political environment, many couples grew dissatisfied with having separate marital and family lives, and couples increasingly reunited in the host countries in Southeast Asia or back in China. When that was impossible, they coped with the inconvenience of separation through more

2 Ng Chin-keong, 'Expanding possibilities: Revisiting the Min-Yue Junk-trade enterprise on the China coast and in the Nanyang during the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries', in Ng Chin-keong, *Boundaries and beyond: China's maritime Southeast in late imperial times* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), pp. 345–414; Wang Gungwu 王赓武, 'Yueyang xunzhao kongjian: zhongguode yimin' 越洋寻找空间：中国的移民 [Transcending overseas in search of space: Chinese migration], *Huaren yanjiu guoji xuebao* 华人研究国际学报 [International Journal of Diasporic Chinese Studies] 1, 1 (2009): 1–49.

3 Zhuang Guotu 庄国土, 'Shijie huaqiao huaren shuliang he fenbu de lishi bianhua' 世界华侨华人数量和分布的历史变化 [Historical changes in the numbers and distribution of overseas Chinese in the world], *Shijie minzu* 世界民族 [Journal of World Peoples Studies] 5 (2011): 9–10.

4 See Huifen Shen, *China's left-behind wives: Families of the migrants from Fujian to Southeast Asia, 1930s–1950s* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).

5 Prasenjit Duara, 'Nationalists among transnationals: Overseas Chinese and the idea of China, 1900–1911', in *Ungrounded empires: The cultural politics of modern Chinese trans-nationalism*, ed. Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 39–60.

6 Wang, 'Yueyang xunzhao kongjian', pp. 19–35.

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contact through remittance letters and home visits. As a result, the flow of remittance letters increased in the first half of the twentieth century. While some letters are formulaic messages drafted by professional writers, others—such as those sent by Huang Kaiwu 黄开物[7] to his wife, Lin Xuanzhi 林选治—offer a glimpse into the private lives of individuals and the thinking that animated them.

### Huang Kaiwu and Lin Xuanzhi

Around 1901, Huang Kaiwu again left his hometown in Fujian to work in his family's textile business in the Philippines.[8] His wife remained in his village in China, living with his family until she joined him in Manila in 1916. Between 1903 and 1916, Huang wrote regularly to his wife and other family members, and many of his letters have survived.[9] During this period, the recently established American colonial regime challenged many of the established practices of the Spanish regime, and China experiencing a wave of modernist reforms and a revolution that overturned its centuries-old imperial system. Huang supported the 1911 Revolution and other reform efforts in China and became a leading figure among revolution-minded Chinese in Manila. However, his correspondence shows that he and his wife both variously clung to and abandoned traditional behaviours. Their letters show how ideas about gender and modernity played out in one migrant marriage.

Huang Kaiwu was born in 1878 in Jinzhai 锦宅 village, Tong'an, Fujian, near the historic ports of Yuegang and Xiamen. As a boy, he studied traditional Chinese literature under the guidance of private tutors. When he was a teenager he followed his older brothers to work in the Philippines, a Nanyang country that people from Yuegang had traded or settled down for centuries. The Huang family's textile firm was one of the oldest such Chinese business in Manila. In 1910, it was registered as Hengmei Buzhuang (恒美布庄, Hengmei Textile Firm) at No. 204 Rosario Street, Manila, where most of the Chinese textile firms were located. Interviews I conducted in Jinzhai village indicated that the shop was opened by the second son of the Huang family, Huang Kai'en 黄开恩, and staffed by his brothers and nephews who followed him to Manila (fig. 1).[10] Huang Kaiwu's third elder brother, Huang Kaibing 黄开冰, handled the business, but when his father died in 1909, Huang Kaibing returned to handle the father's funeral affairs and Huang Kaiwu managed the business. From then on, the brothers alternated between staying in Manila and in China. Between April 1914 and June 1915, they worked together in Manila and

7 Also known as Uy Cay Bot, and Huang Zaiyu 黄在毓.

8 For the year he moved, see for reference, Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, ed., *Minnan qiaopi daquan* (*di yi ji*) (di yi ce) 闽南侨批大全 (第一辑) (第一册) [A complete collection of the remittance letters from southern Fujian, vol. 1, no. 1) (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2016), pp. 2–3.

9 A collection of more than three hundred remittance letters published in 2016 and 2018 includes 77 letters from Huang Kaiwu to his wife. See Huang Qinghai 黄清海, ed., *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi: shijie jiyi caifu* 菲华黄开物侨批：世界记忆财富 [Remittance letters of Huang Kaiwu, a Philippine Chinese: Memory Heritage of the world] (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2016); Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol. 1, no. 1; Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, ed., *Minnan qiaopi daquan* (*di er ji*) (di yi ce) 闽南侨批大全 (第二辑) (第一册) [A complete collection of remittance letters from southern Fujian, vol. 2, no. 1] (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2018).

10 Interview, Huang Jinbi 黄锦碧, 86, Jinzhai village, Jiaomei town, Longhai, Zhangzhou, Fujian, 23 Nov. 2014. Huang Kai'en is Jinbi's grandfather.

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**Figure 1. Young Huang Kaiwu and Huang Kaibao in Manila, Author's Personal Collection; Photographer Unknown**

were often in conflict, but the elder brother fell ill and returned to China in June 1915. From then until 1921, when he returned to China again, Huang Kaiwu handled the business on his own.[11]

Working in Manila before 1902, Huang Kaiwu experienced revolution and war in the Philippines. The new American colonial regime 'introduced a number of changes in immigration control and economic policy', the Chinese merchants largely 'found the period between 1898 and 1909 one of economic hardship'. But between 1909

11 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 6–7, 12–13, 26, 27, 43.

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and 1929, it was a 'golden era' for Chinese merchants 'in their economic pursuits'.[12] Under American colonial rule, free trade between the Philippines and the United States integrated the Philippine economy into the world market—Chinese businesses flourished, but competition within the textile trade also increased.[13] Wong Kwok-Chu observes, 'Throughout the 1910s and the 1920s, cotton and silk goods made up 20 to 30 per cent of the country's annual imports, amounting to millions of pesos each year.'[14] Handling or assisting in handling Hengmei, Huang Kaiwu explored a new world of capitalism. In the process, he became a leading figure in the Chinese community both in the Philippines and in Fujian.[15] Hengmei was one of the prominent textile firms in the Philippines from the turn of the century to the 1920s and perhaps maybe later. Between 1905 and 1911, Hengmei's business was not good. In late 1911 a big fire burnt down more than a hundred Chinese shops on Rosario Street. The front part of Hengmei was burnt too, causing losses of around 10,000 yuan. The family store itself was spared, with its goods worth more than 21,000 yuan. In the 1910s, Hengmei's business was improving, although it was bad in 1914–15. In December 1920, the firm's store held goods worth 19,532.15 yuan, and in the first six months of 1921 it earned a profit of more than 4,000 yuan. But by the end of the year, it still lost more than 10,000 yuan.[16] The changing fortunes of the business were largely due to market forces, the ups and downs of the Philippine economy, and the First World War. It also depended on the capabilities and cooperation among its managerial staff (namely the Huang brothers and the younger male generation). Hengmei was a member of Hoc Lian Egg Textile Merchants' Association (Fulianyi bushanghui 福联益布商会) which Huang had played a leading role in establishing in the 1910s. In 1923, Huang Kaiwu and other prominent members joined another Chinese Textile Merchants' Association, Yiheju Textile Merchants' Association (义和局布商会) in Manila, and established the Chinese Textile Merchants' Association in the Philippines, a member of the Philippine Chinese General Chamber of Commerce established in 1904. Huang was also one of the directors of the Chinese Textile Merchants' Association in the Philippines in 1923, 1924, 1929, and vice president in 1927 and 1928, executive committee member in 1930, for a one-year term each.[17] Huang's position in the association indicates that Hengmei was in a good position in these years.

12 Wong Kwok-chu, *The Chinese in the Philippines economy 1898–1941* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1999), pp. 1–3.

13 Ibid., pp. 196–9.

14 Ibid., pp. 59–60.

15 Huang Kaiwu had been almost totally forgotten when the author visited his village in 2014: few villagers, including his relatives, knew about his contributions. He received little scholarly attention until his remittance letters became publicly available in 2009.

16 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 6–13, 16, 19, 98–9, 132, 135; Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 70–71, 131, 136, 390, 407.

17 'Feilübin zhonghua bushanghui' [菲律滨中华布商会 The Chinese Textile Merchants' Association in the Philippines], in *Feilübin Minlila zhonghua shanghui sanshi zhounian jiniankan* [菲律宾岷里拉中华商会三十周年纪念刊]. The Philippine Chinese General Chamber of Commerce, 1904–1933, a book published in commemoration of its 30th anniversary), eds. Ning Ming 宁明 and Huang Xiaochan 黄晓沧 (Manila: Publication Dept of the Philippine Chinese General Chamber of Commerce, 1936), vol. 1, pp. 74–81.

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Politically, Kuang Kaiwu supported the 1911 Revolution led by Dr Sun Yat-sen and was a member of the revolutionary Tongmeng Hui (同盟会 China Alliance Society) in the Philippines and of the Puzhi Chinese Reading Club (Puzhiyueshubao She 普智阅书报社) in Manila. He wrote articles for Tongmeng Hui's newspaper in the Philippines, *Kong Li Po* (公理报), founded in 1912. In 1912 the Fujian Jinanju (福建暨南局 Fujian Jinan Bureau, 1912–26), the first local official institution created in China to deal with Overseas Chinese affairs, was established in Xiamen. The Puzhi Chinese Reading Club put forward Huang's name as one of its 15 committee members.[18] Remittance letters from Lin Shuyan 林书晏 in Manila in 1911–12 show that Huang Kaiwu left Jinzhai to help organise Xiamen Revolution with other revolutionaries from Manila in November 1911.[19] And during the revolution, Huang Kaiwu had his queue cut.[20] In 1914 and 1919 he was one of the leaders of the Philippine Branch of the Zhonghua Gemingdang (中华革命党 Revolutionary Party of China) and the Philippine Branch of the Nationalist Party.[21]

Huang Kaiwu was, then, a person who discarded tradition in his political activities, but mixed modernity and tradition in his personal life and marital relations (fig. 2). His letters to Lin Xuanzhi do not reveal information about his role as a prominent merchant or as a revolutionary, partly because he did not want his wife to worry about him. But his new ideology strongly influenced his handling of some aspects of their relationship, as will be demonstrated later.

Huang Kaiwu occasionally travelled between Fujian and the Philippines for business or personal reasons,[22] and when he was in Manila he often sent remittances and letters to his family. A well-known private postal exchange, Tianyi Xinju天一信局 (1880–1928) had a general office near Jinzhai village and handled most of his correspondence, although he occasionally used other remittance agencies as well.[23] Huang wrote to his wife to send money, pass messages, and extend moral support. He also remitted money separately to other relatives back home who helped handle the

18 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 168–9; Liu Bozi 刘伯孳, 'Cong kuaguo jingyan dao minzu zhuyi de kuayue: yi Huang Kaiwu de qiaopi qiaoxin weili' 从跨国经验到民族主义的跨越：以黄开物的侨批、侨信为例 [From international experience to nationalism: A case study of the overseas remittances and letters of Huang Kaiwu], *Minshang wenhua yanjiu* 闽商文化研究 [Journal of Studies on Fujianese Entrepreneurs Culture] 1 (2011): 30, 35.

19 See for example, Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, p. 80; Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 145, 137.

20 Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 23–5.

21 Luo Fuhui 罗福惠 and Xiaoyi 萧怡, eds, *Juzheng wenji* 居正文集 [Collected works of Ju Zheng] (Wuhan: Huazhong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1989), p. 281; Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan jindaishi yanjiusuo and Zhonghua minguoshi yanjiushi, ed., *Sun Zhongshan quanji* 孙中山全集 [Complete works of Sun Yat-sen] (vol. 3) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), pp. 431, 458; Li Zonghuang 李宗黄, *Zhongguo guomindang shi* 中国国民党史 [A history of the Chinese Nationalist Party], 5th edn (n.p., 1929), pp. 138–9.

22 The Hengmei Textile Firm was later dissolved, and a sum of money was recouped by the families of his older brothers. Later on, Huang Kaiwu established another textile business under his own name (Huang Jinbi, interview). He died in 1968 in the Philippines. I would like to thank Kua Bak Lim for the information on Huang Kaiwu's year of death.

23 Liu, 'Cong kuaguo jingyan dao minzu zhuyi de kuayue', p. 30. He made use of transnational couriers (*shuike*), such as Huang Zhengrun (a lineage nephew), Lin Dengcan, Pingqing, Lin Zhican, and returned relatives or fellow villagers such as his lineage brother, Huang Linbin, to connect with his home community.

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**Figure 2. Huang Kaiwu in 1912, Author's Personal Collection; Photographer Unknown**

family's affairs.[24] His letters to Lin Xuanzhi were sometimes addressed to her personally, in other cases he addressed her through other family members, including her sons, her grandmother (who died in 1910), her mother (who died in 1907), her uncles living in Jinzhai, and sometimes his own father. These modes of communication possibly reflected her lower social status in traditional society.[25]

Unlike many migrants, Huang Kaiwu did not make use of professional scribes, and his cursive writing was 'in scribble form'.[26] Moreover, he wrote classical

24 Apart from his wife, elder brothers and other relatives, Huang communicated with a variety of persons, including his wife's natal family, various revolutionaries during the 1911 Revolution, friends, business partners, and fellow villagers in China, Hong Kong, and the Philippines. See Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 2–3, 62–3, 96–7, 148–9, 176–7.

25 Researchers distinguish three classes of Chinese migrant letters based on the recipient; see Gregor Benton and Hong Liu, *Dear China: Emigrant letters and remittances, 1820–1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), p. 157. But Lin's diverse and flexible thinking and behaviour make Huang's letters hard to classify.

26 Kua Bak Lim, 'Preface', in Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, p. 9.

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Chinese with no punctuation and mixed Mandarin with the Hokkien dialect. Almost every letter covers multiple topics, but there is limited context given and the contents can be difficult to read and understand. Somewhat unusually, as we will see, Huang also freely expressed his ideas and feelings on many personal and wider social topics. The letters reveal a man who adhered to many traditional customs, but also departed from them, as when he urged his wife to unbind her feet. His wife, too, both followed and departed from tradition, visiting her natal family against his wishes, and resisting his pressure to unbind her feet. Sometimes, she used the money he sent in ways contrary to his instructions, and she was actively involved in decisions about their children and the move to Manila.

Living in Jinzhai village with her father-in-law and the families of her elder brothers-in-law, Lin Xuanzhi often sought comfort from her natal family in Dongshan 东山, a village near Jinzhai. With her bound feet, Lin needed transport and help whenever she returned home. Before 1908, the family consisted of Lin's grandparents, mother, and an unmarried young brother. Lin Xuanhi was not a strong woman, and had a maid who had accompanied her since her marriage. In 1903, she gave birth to a baby girl, and in 1904 she stayed with her natal family for some time to regain her health.[27]

When her husband's letters, namely *laipi* 来批 (letters from a migrant) arrived, Lin Xuanzhi had to depend on family members, such as her grandfather and uncles, to write her *huipi* 回批 (return letter). It is unclear whether she could read, and whether she might have depended on others to read aloud her husband's letters as well.[28] Sometimes she sent oral messages through relatives, and in urgent situations she sent telegrams.[29] Huang himself seems to have trusted those who helped Lin write and/or read his letters because he felt comfortable about expressing his feelings on intimate matters, including spousal love, and did not find it necessary to hide personal matters or protect family secrets.

Huang's letters, like those studied by Gregor Benton and Hong Liu, 'focus on money and promoting family migration'.[30] Even though he lived outside of China, he sent advice and instructions, fulfilling the role of head of his family. Huang's 'letters of admonition' blend traditional Chinese family value and 'aspects of Western culture and life style' as Benton and Liu summarised.[31] Benton and Liu argue that between 1820 and 1980, the tone of Chinese migrant letters was 'quieter, less radical, more practical and humdrum' compared to European migrants' letters.[32] However, Huang's correspondence with his wife and family suggest a more nuanced state of affairs. His letters do not display the anxiety and pessimism that Benton and Liu identify as 'abiding features of the Chinese letters'.[33] They are unusually detailed and open,

27 See Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 14–15, 28–9; Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 290–91. Unfortunately, none of her return letters were available.

28 Letter-writing services for illiterate spouses were common in migrant hometowns, provided by individuals or institutes. Remittance agencies provided free letter writing services.

29 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 10, 12.

30 Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, p. 161.

31 Ibid., pp. 172–4, 168.

32 Ibid., p. 175.

33 Ibid., p. 168.

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what I refer to as 'letters with rich content'.[34] While his letters were full of instructions and advice, his wife did not always follow these and sometimes did the opposite, as mentioned. The detailed interactions of the couple offer insight into what lay behind such letters of admonition. They also reveal a renegotiation of the gender relations and power position between one Chinese migrant and his left-behind wife at a time when new ways of thinking were challenging traditional practices. In brief, they reveal a more complex and subtle relationship between husband and wife than is found in other letters that scholars have examined, and depart from conventional stenotypes, such as the responses of the left-behind wife to her husband's letters, and changes in gender/power and gendered/power relationships between the emigrant in the diaspora and his wife at home.

### Financial and family affairs

Chinese remittance letters played a significant role in linking migrants with their home families.[35] Jiemin Bao points out, that it was a 'gender division of labour—the son would accumulate capital abroad while the daughter-in-law took care of the family in China' and it was 'calculated and arranged across national borders'.[36] As told by the letters, during his years of sojourning, Huang Kaiwu looked forward to a family reunion in Fujian or Manila. He wrote frequently to his wife about various matters, including advice on how to use his remittances, manage the family and look after their sons, reflecting his position as the head of the family. The letters show a great deal of affection for his immediate family, particularly his sons.

Benton and Liu observe that *qiaopi* contain moral instructions and censure, as well as other advice. By using letters to issue instructions, make or interfere in family decisions or adjudicate disputes, male migrants 'continued to play the role of master of the family'.[37] Jiemin Bao argues that this further strengthened the 'sexual inequality embedded within the institution of marriage'.[38] However, left-behind wives did not always welcome these attempts to exert control remotely. Michael Szonyi observes that Overseas Chinese felt great concern about the ways family members used remittance money they received, and tension often arose over this issue.[39]

34 Benton and Liu (*Dear China*, p. 167) point out the limitations of some analyses that argue 'Chinese *qiaopi* scholars focus mainly on the historical, economic, and institutional setting, from the letter's collection in Chinatown and conveyance to China along networks to its delivery in the village'.

35 See for example, Haiming Liu, *The transnational history of a Chinese family: Immigrant letters, family business, and reverse migration* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Huifen Shen, 'Letters from Southeast Asia: Links between Chinese overseas and left-behind family members across the South China Sea in the 1890s–1910s', paper presented at the Conference on 'The *qiaopi* trade in China and Overseas', Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 10 Oct. 2015; Dong Huiying, 'Warm tidings in a Cold War: Remittance letters and family ties in the Chinese diaspora, 1950s–1970s', in *Singapore's social & business history through paper ephemera in the Koh Seow Chuan Collection*, ed. Koh Keng We (Singapore: National Library Board, 2017), p. 86; Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, p. 4.

36 Jiemin Bao, 'The gendered biopolitics of marriage and immigration: A study of pre-1949 Chinese immigrants in Thailand', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34, 1 (2003): 127. On daughters-in-law's experiences of such marriages, see Shen, *China's left-behind wives*.

37 Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, pp. 160–61, 172–4.

38 Bao, 'The gendered biopolitics of marriage and immigration', p. 151.

39 Michael Szonyi, 'Mothers, sons and lovers: Fidelity and frugality in the overseas Chinese divided family before 1949', *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 1, 1 (2005): 43–64.

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Huang Kaiwu's letters display such tension. Sometimes Lin Xuanzhi made her own decisions on the use of the remittance, and her husband criticised this behaviour as unacceptable. Huang generally sent 2 to 4 yuan at a time, but occasionally he sent up 40 yuan. The money came in the form of silver yuan or Spanish dollars. He also sent household goods, including cloth, soap, combs, leather shoes, bird's nests for soup, quilts, cookies, artwork, socks, Chinese medicine pills and oil, coffee, suitcases, and other items.[40] In a letter dated 23 November 1914, Huang told his wife not to use the courier to exchange Spanish dollars into silver yuan because the exchange rate was too low. When she exchanged Spanish dollars through a courier to lend 15 silver yuan to the family of Uncle Nu after his death, Huang instructed her not to do this again.[41] But in July 1915, Lin Xuanzhi again exchanged 10 silver yuan through a courier, which made her husband very angry, and he warned her never to do it again.[42]

The couple often discussed financial matters in their letters. Huang earned the money and expected his wife to follow his guidance on how it should be spent, but she had day to day control of it and the couple's financial relationship involved some tension. Until 1915, he frequently reminded her that it was hard to earn money when the Manila business was in a poor state, and called on her to be thrifty and make good use of the remittances.[43] Sometimes the remittances did not cover the family needs,[44] and when there was a shortfall Huang told Lin Xuanzhi to borrow money from others and repay the loans when his money arrived. In some cases, he told her how to invest the remittance. For instance, in February 1915 he sent 10 silver yuan and instructed her to pass the money to her uncle to help buy lottery tickets. He also explained how to prevent the tickets from being destroyed by water or dust.[45] Some funds, he told her, were to pay his travel expenses when he came to visit the family, or for emergencies.[46]

In practice, Lin Xuanzhi was the de facto manager of the family. Although she received much advice from her husband and consulted him on important issues or when she needed more money, she made her own decisions on how to handle family affairs, how to behave, or how to spend the money. In 1914, Lin Xuanzhi told her husband that her grandfather would be celebrating his birthday and she wanted to give him a coat and some food that would cost more than 10 yuan. She also said she needed money for their son. Huang replied that she could decide how much to spend for the birthday, since her grandfather was very kind to her, and that she should borrow money from his fifth elder brother for their son before his remittance arrived.[47] In early 1915, he expressed his trust in her ability to handle the funds, and asked her to tell him directly the amount the family needed each month, and if she managed not to 'fool away' (*lanyong* 滥用) the money, he would send more every month.[48]

40 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*; Editorial Committee, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol, 1, no. 1; Liu, 'Cong kuaguo jingyan dao minzu zhuyi de kuayue', pp. 31–4.
41 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, p. 32.
42 Ibid., p. 44.
43 Ibid., pp. 6, 8, 20, 28, 30–31, 34–5, 38.
44 See for example, ibid., pp. 8–9, 34–5.
45 Ibid., p. 36.
46 See for example, ibid., pp. 34–5.
47 Ibid., pp. 26–7.
48 Ibid., pp. 34–5.

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Money aside, Huang made efforts to cultivate a close relationship with his wife through his letters. They show concern for her health and for their children. They had a daughter born in 1903 and adopted three small boys. One of them, Huang Zongqin 黄宗钦, was adopted in around 1903, since the family wanted a boy. He seldom mentioned his daughter, although she was his biological child, reflecting traditional gender prejudices in Chinese culture, where even an adopted son was more highly valued than a daughter.

The sons figured prominently in Huang's letters. In the winter of 1903 he urged his wife to 'try her best to bring up' the *xiao'er* (小儿, small son), and he wrote in May 1904 that he would 'be comforted if she takes care of the *xiao'er* with all her heart' (*xiao'er wuyi jinxin zhaogu weiwei* 小儿务宜尽心照顾为慰).[49] However, Huang Zongqin was in poor health and died in 1908, which made Lin Xuanzhi very sad and Huang unhappy. They adopted a second boy, Huang Zongrui 黄宗睿, and in 1914 yet another, Huang Zongchun 黄宗纯. Huang again pressed his wife to 'make efforts to take care of the *xiao'er*' and 'look after the *xiao'er* carefully'.[50] He also offered concrete guidance on how to look after their sons, telling her to keep their peri-navel regions warm with thick towels during cold nights in autumn and winter. He sent ginseng root home so the younger son, Zongchun, could drink ginseng tea, and suggested that the child not be allowed to sit on the cold stone chair outside the house, for he was weak.[51] On the education of the children, he discussed with his wife whether he should bring Zongrui to be educated in Manila, since the Chinese tutor in Jinzhai was not considered qualified to teach him.[52] These letters were substantial, detailed and fatherly, demonstrating Huang's deep concern for the sons who would continue the family patrilineal line and replace him in management of the business when they grew up.

In the early twentieth century, most migrants, including Huang, left their wives at home, but as a Chinese merchant in Manila, Huang Kaiwu was allowed by the local authorities to bring his wife and children to the Philippines.[53] His mother died in 1902 and his father in 1909, and their passing left his wife and children free to join him in Manila. The couple dreamt of a family reunion but various obstacles remained. Sometimes they questioned whether or not the wife and children should live overseas, but the main issues were a shortage of funds and suitable accommodation.[54] The following letters on this matter show the importance of family reunion for the couple and indicate Huang's regrets and deep attachment to his wife and children.

In January 1907, Huang again left for Manila, and in February 1909, after two more years of separation and with the death of the first adopted son, Lin Xuanzhi asked her husband to return to China, but Huang said that was impossible owing

49 Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol. 1. no. 1, pp. 8–9.

50 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 10, 17, 21, 27, 50.

51 Ibid., pp. 30–35, 52–3.

52 Ibid., pp. 36, 43.

53 On the separation of family members, see Shen, *China's left-behind wives*, pp. 24–37. For American colonial restrictions on Chinese immigrants, see Wong, *The Chinese in the Philippine economy 1898–1941*, pp. 28–9.

54 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 30–31, 42–3, 126; Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 300–301; Huang Kaiwu's letter to his wife, 16 Sept. 1914 that was unpublished, provided by Mr Liu Bozi.

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to a lack of travelling funds and bad business conditions.[55] Instead he wrote on 29 July 1909 and asked her to accompany him to Manila on his next trip home so they could live together. The letter below demonstrates a radical departure from the traditional life of Chinese migrant couples who generally lived separately:

> It is an ancient Chinese custom that husband and wife live together and that a wife follow her husband. This is also consistent with the practice governing the relationship between husband and wife in any advanced country in the world. If you stay at home, we would only live together for several years during our lifetime, which will be greatly regrettable.
>
> *jin guren fuchang fusui zhi chengfa, yi shijie wenming geguo suo gong ye, ru yu shou zai shi jia, ze yisheng fufu zhong wu shunian zhi yuan, shi yi da hanshi ye*
>
> 尽古人夫倡妇随之成法，亦世界文明各国所仝也。如欲守在室家，则一生夫妇终无数年之缘，实一大憾事也.[56]

However, Huang did not bring his family together as he had suggested, mainly because Lin Xuanzhi did not want to live in Manila.[57] Understandably, the continued long-term separation was hard for the couple to endure.[58] Huang Kaiwu lamented that without his wife's company, he 'lacked a confidant to understand and comfort (*wu yi zhixin xiang gaowei* 无一知心相告慰)' him.[59] It is considered that Southeast Asian Chinese migrants' 'returning was well organized and cheaper than for Europeans, … and getting home was easier'.[60] However, being a businessman who was one of the middling group of Chinese migrants, Huang faced various difficulties going home.

China became a Republic in 1912, a goal that many migrants such as Huang Kaiwu had worked to promote. However, China did not become a strong, independent and democratic state, and it was neither stable nor safe. In late 1915, for example, Jinzhai village was threatened by bandits. Moreover, Yuan Shikai in Beijing had declared himself 'Emperor' of China, which made Huang Kaiwu decide to continue living in Manila since he could not put up with this state of affairs. He tried again and again to persuade and encourage his wife to join him in the Philippines. In 1916, when their nephew Huang Zongji went to Manila to join the business, Lin Xuanzhi and her children followed him, and the family was finally reunited in Manila (fig. 3).[61]

55 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 4, 10.
56 Ibid., p. 15.
57 Ibid., p. 26.
58 See ibid., p. 42.
59 Ibid., p. 53.
60 See Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, p. 161.
61 Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 320–21; Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 50–54. In 1921, Huang Kaiwu and his family temporarily returned home to handle the building of the Jinzhai Overseas Chinese Primary School, supported by fellow villagers in Manila, Cebu, Sulu, and elsewhere in the Philippines (Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 168–9). See also Huang Qinghai 黄清海, 'Cong Lin Shuyan kan feihua xinhaigeming reqing' 从林书晏侨批看菲华辛亥革命热情 [A discussion on the Philippine Chinese Overseas' enthusiasm for the 1911 Revolution: From the *qiaopi* of Lin Shuyan], *Yatai Jingji* 亚太经济 [Economy of the Asia Pacific], supplementary issue (2011): 70–75; Liu, 'Cong kuaguo jingyan dao minzu zhuyi de kuayue', pp. 30, 35.

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**Figure 3. Huang Kaiwu's family in Manila, Author's Personal Collection; Photographer Unknown**

## Gender norms

In traditional China, Huang Kaiwu's higher gender status allowed him to regulate his wife's behaviour, including her outside activities and social contacts. He sought to set a good example to his wife, he wanted to be a 'good' man who was filial to the elderly, loyal to his wife, fatherly to his sons, working hard to earn money to feed the family, qualities that were consistent with traditional Chinese norms for a good man. He also tried to educate his wife to be a 'good' wife in compliance with the traditional Chinese women's virtues, for the good reputation of his family and himself. He asked her 'to abide by a wife's code of conduct' (*xiu fudao* 修妇道), and become a '*neizhu*' (内助 domestic helper) to him. According to him, a *neizhu* was one who was 'good at maintaining her chastity, being industrial and thrifty, and was able to help in what her husband cannot do (*fei te neng yi chi jie qinjian yi er, bing neng zanzhu zhangfu zhi suo buji shi ye* 非特能以持节勤俭已耳，并能赞助丈夫之所不及是也)'. He also asked her to be thrifty when running the household, to prepare for financial uncertainty at home and overseas, as mentioned above. His role was 'that of the rice maker and hers would be the home maker', or '*nantian nü'an* 男田女岸' in a Chinese saying.[62]

These aspirations reflect a traditional hierarchical gendered relationship between Huang and his wife. However, his letters reveal a much more complex situation. Lin Xuanzhi did not always meet her husband's expectations and follow his instructions, and sometimes did the opposite of what he requested, putting him in embarrassing situations. Huang's letters provide detailed examples of such instances.

62 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 17, 8, 34.

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In China Lin Xuanzhi lived with Huang's family in a large house in his ancestral village, as mentioned.[63] The household included his elder brothers and their families, and they all benefited from the proceeds of the textile business in Manila. In his letters, Huang expressed the hope that his wife would have a harmonious relationship with his relatives, and said that if something happened that was hard to compromise, she still should avoid conflict with them. In the letter of 15 September 1914, Huang told her that his fifth elder brother had written to him, complaining about the problem of handling the Huang family affairs because of a shortage of money. Huang warned her that if there was any gossip about the family's well-being, she should pay no attention. He added his response to anything that was hard to tolerate was to ignore it completely, and he asked her to follow his example in handling gossip. According to him, in doing so, she would 'abide by a wife's code of conduct'.[64]

He seemed particularly concerned with his wife's visits to her natal family. Like other left-behind wives, natal families were 'an important source of comfort' for Lin Xuanzhi as mentioned earlier.[65] But Huang was not thinking of his wife's feelings, because of the fact that in the hometown society, her overnight stays would invite unnecessary gossip, and damage his own reputation and that of the Huang family.

Up to 1908, Huang acknowledged the assistance given by her natal family and confessing that the good relationship 'comforted his heart'.[66] Actually, as a son-in-law, Huang considered himself 'a half-son', *banzi* 半子, of her natal family, and remitted money to the family to show his filial duty.[67]

In 1908, Huang's attitude towards the wife's natal family changed. He wrote to his wife on 9 November 1908, 'Since ancient times, a married woman had to live in the husband's house and not return often to her natal family' (*zigu dajin, nü ji you jia yi dang chizhu, buying die yu guining* 自古达今，女既有家宜当持住，不应迭欲归宁).[68] Huang's displeasure over the time Lin spent with her natal family is clear, even though he knew she needed their emotional support sometimes, especially after the death of their first adopted son. At the time, he had told her he would return to be with her, but he failed to make the trip due to business commitments.[69] Earlier, Huang had no qualms about his wife's visits to her natal family, so why did his attitude change? He gave three reasons in a letter. First, after his wife's mother died during the summer of 1907, he considered that his wife was no longer obliged to return as frequently as before. Second, her grandmother was very old, which made the return improper (for reasons unknown). Third, and most importantly, he said that 'the only thing I care about is my reputation (*yu wei mingyu*[*yu*]

63 The house was built in a traditional Chinese style and remains in the village. Huang Jinqin 黄锦清, Huang Kaiwu's grandson, lived there at the time of my visit to Jinzhai in 2014.

64 Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 290–91.

65 Shen, *China's left-behind wives*, pp. 114–15.

66 Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 11.

67 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, p. 6; Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 5–6, 11, 16. In most occasions, it was several silver yuan. But in his letter on 18 Dec. 1903, he remitted 50 silver yuan. It was probably meant to cover the natal family's expenses when Lin Xuanzhi lived there.

68 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, p. 8.

69 Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 52–3; Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, p. 10.

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*shi zhong* 愚惟名预[誉]是重)'.[70] In his view, visits to her natal family invited rumours and gossip that would affect his and his family's reputation. For these reasons, he forbade her from visiting her natal family too often and told her not to stay overnight.

Fellow migrants from his hometown and home correspondence often brought news to Huang Kaiwu about his family, especially matters relating to his wife and her maid.[71] Negative or false information could spread widely and affect his reputation in Manila and Fujian. As a result, Huang was very sensitive to any hint that his family reputation was ruined by any 'improper' behaviour of any female family member.

In July 1910, Huang learnt from a letter from his wife that her grandmother was seriously ill. He knew that she would visit her natal family to attend the funeral if her grandmother died, and wrote to his elder lineage brother and Lin Xuanzhi's uncle, Huang Yongdong 黄永栋, in Jinzhai village and asked him to persuade her not to get involved in the funeral affairs. He wanted Huang Yongdong's son to help arrange the funeral in order to prevent his wife from 'showing her head and feet outside the house (*lushou luwei* 露首露尾)'. He wrote that if she stayed overnight and invited any rumours, his 'heart will be broken (*sha wu xin* 杀吾心)'. Huang confessed his worries to Huang Yongdong but asked that they be kept secret.[72] However, Lin Xuanzhi did not follow his advice that he had given three times, and stayed with her natal family for the funeral for several days. Huang was very angry, but he could only hope to persuade her to restrict her movements in future. In a letter dated 14 November 1910, he expresses his deep disappointment with her behaviour:

> You intentionally stayed at your natal family home so long. I have thought about this hundreds of times, but I don't know why. Now it has come to pass, I will let it be forgotten. I deeply hope that in the future you will treasure yourself and stay at home.
>
> *gu yu jiuliu waijia, shi ling ren baisi er bu huo jie zhe, jin ji ruci, suowei jiwang bujiu, yihou dang jianshu zi'ai, shi suo shen dao*
>
> 故欲久留外家，实令人百思而不获解者，今既如此，所谓既往不究，以后当检束自爱，是所深祷.[73]

To protect his reputation, Huang sought to restrict his wife's social contacts and sent letters asking her to do as he requested. His letters demonstrate that she should avoid contact with women who had had affairs, did not have a good reputation, were addicted to gambling, or were unworthy of association. Such women, he said, should not enter his house. In July 1913, he told her about the adultery of a maid working in Dongshan, Lin Xuanzhi's natal village. He said news about the matter spread widely among the Dongshan people in Manila and told his wife not to allow the maid to

70 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 8–9. To keep up his reputation, he continued to stay on in Manila even when the business was making little profit, to avoid any unflattering rumours, such as that he returned home because the business was bad; or that he could not handle the business.
71 See for example, Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 282–3.
72 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, p. 19.
73 Ibid., p. 22.

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enter their house. Furthermore, he persuaded her to sell their own maid, Dizhai, so that there would be no repeat of a similar happening that would damage the reputation of the family.[74]

However, his wife disappointed him again. In June 1914, Huang's niece invited several women to gamble in Huang's house, and Lin Xuanzhi and her sisters-in-law watched the gambling take place. Huang was very angry when he learnt of this matter, and his letter dated 11 December that year expressed his anger and unhappiness. Once again, he warned Lin Xuanzhi not to contact these 'evil women' (恶妇 *e fu*) and threatened dire consequences if she did not follow his warning. As he put it:

> Our family has been humiliated by this matter. It gives me heartache and headache. From now on, these evil women should not contact you and the elder sisters-in-law. If you continue to ignore my warning, I will cut off my link to home.
>
> *si ci dian ru jiafeng, shi lingren tongxin jishou, cihou shi deng efu buzhun er bei yu zhi wanglai, ru zai moran zhi zhi, ze yu dang bi duan xiangsi ye*
>
> 似此垫辱家风，实令人痛心疾首。此后是等恶妇不准尔辈与之往来。如再漠然置之，则愚当必断乡思耶.[75]

In a letter dated 12 January 1915, he further urged his wife not to have any relationship with '*sangu liupo*' (三姑六婆, referring to nuns and female fortune-tellers and six kinds of elderly lower-class women found in old China, including procuresses or madams of brothels, matchmakers, sorceresses or witches, female pharmacists, midwives and women traffickers) and '*wuchi shaofu*' (无耻少妇 brazen women). He added, 'I hope you did not ignore my warning, this is an important matter'.[76]

According to Chinese custom, being the family head and the breadwinner entitled Huang to regulate his wife's conduct. His letters reveal self-evaluation of gender roles, showing that he considered himself a 'good' man who deserved a 'good' wife.

On 7 April 1914, he received a letter from his wife complaining about his failure to keep his promise to have her join him in Manila. She said she suspected that he might want to acquire a '*fanbo*' (番婆, a local woman who married a Chinese migrant) because, although he had asked her to join him in Manila, he made no effort to follow through. Huang defended himself by saying that he had not even visited a brothel throughout his more than ten years' stay abroad. This, he claims, could be confirmed by everyone there.[77] In addition, he said he had not 'become a barbarian' (*bianfan* 变番). He remained a pure Chinese upholding the good tradition even after spending years in Manila.[78] As mentioned earlier, he wanted to have a modern

74 Ibid., pp. 24–5.
75 Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 300–301.
76 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 34–5. For the translation of *sangu liupo*, available at http://www.iciba.com/三姑六婆 (accessed 20 June 2015). In Jinzhai village, *sangu liupo* were considered 'bad women' and left-behind women were not allowed to meet them at home even during the Ming dynasty when the Yuegang global trade flourished. Interview with Mr Huang Zizhao 黄子照, Jinzhai village, Jiaomei town, Longhai, Zhangzhou, Fujian, 23 Nov. 2014.
77 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 26–7.
78 Ibid., pp. 20–21.

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relationship between husband and wife as the one in an 'advanced country'. But at the same time he took it as a personal sacrifice that he had made and, thus, he expected his wife to do her duty of being a 'good' wife.

Despite all his expressions of unhappiness and disappointment about his wife, Huang still regarded her and the family with affection, and he sought comfort from his wife whenever he encountered hardships in Manila or at home. For instance, in letters to her written after the death of their first son in 1908, he expressed his anxieties about the business and his clashes with his third elder brother in Manila. He was also not happy with his brothers in China because they kept asking him for money even though the family textile business was not doing well. And in a letter dated 1 July 1909, Huang wrote to her about the passing of his father, expressing his sorrow and regret that he had lost his father forever. He had to remain in Manila to handle the business, however, while his third elder brother travelled back for the funeral.[79]

The letters show that the couple managed to sort out their marital problems, and along with criticism, Huang frankly expressed his feelings and fondness for his wife, and recognised her understanding of the hardships he faced in running a business.

Such intimate exchanges between this couple are evidence contrary to Benton and Liu's assertion that the Chinese migrants 'avoided not just expressions of spousal love but even endearments of the sort that were commonplace in European migrants' letters'.[80] In his study of family letters between father and children, Haiming Liu also shows that although the letters were 'a channel of moral education', they also 'show how intimately, in a Chinese family, children and parents could exchange ideas, opinions, and feelings'.[81] As an emigrant, Huang's personal connection with his family members in China was primarily through letters, and this openness was not unique to him: studies of letters between family members of migrants from the Chaoshan in Guangdong province show similar traits.[82] These letters exchanges include both admonitions along with expression of ideas, opinions, and feelings. Together with Huang's, they reveal the multifaceted relationships among separated family members living at home and abroad.

### Ideas on women and society

While Huang's letters clearly reflect traditional concepts of family and gender bias, they also include modern, or revolutionary ideas. Describing Huang as purely a traditionalist would be misleading.

Huang saw the 1911 Revolution as a promising opportunity to build a new society in China. He and other Chinese merchants in Manila supported the Revolution through donations or by returning to participate in the Revolution. They also cut

79 See for example, ibid., pp. 12–13, 16, 30, 42–3, 46.

80 Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, p. 164.

81 Liu, *The transnational history of a Chinese family*, pp. 135–40.

82 See for example, Wang Weizhong 王炜中, 'Chuxi qiaopi qingjie' 初析侨批情结 [A preliminary study on the emotional ties of remittances), in *Shoujie qiaopi wenhua yantaohui lunwenji* 首届侨批文化研讨会论文集 [Papers from the Inaugural Workshop on Remittance Culture], ed. Wang Weizhong (Shantou: Chaoshan wenhua lishi yanjiu zhongxin, 2004), pp. 268–76; Xu Xiuying 许秀莹, 'Qiaopi, weixi qiaojuan hunyin shenghuo de niudai' 侨批, 维系侨眷婚姻生活的纽带 [Remittances: The ties that bind the marital lives of the *Qiaojuan*], in Wang Weizhong, *Shoujie qiaopi wenhua yantaohui lunwenji*, pp. 307–12; Dong, 'Warm tidings in a Cold War'.

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their queues with the Revolution.[83] Although he criticised his wife for her non-traditional behaviour, he also expressed and urged her to accept new ideas on the women's rights even before the Revolution, for example, unbound feet. A practice since the Song dynasty (960–1279), footbinding was a symbol of female identity and sexuality in Chinese society. After the 1911 Revolution, the practice received increasing criticism, and women were encouraged to unbind their feet, so that they could literally be free to move and help build a new society.[84]

Soon after his father's death in the summer of 1909, when she had to leave her house more often to deal with family affairs, Huang urged his wife to 'unbind her feet' (*fangzu* 放足) so she could take care of herself better. In his letter, he said *fangzu* would be 'the most valuable and convenient thing' for her because it 'had several advantages'. First, it would be easier for her to walk around; second, it would help her travel comfortably; and third, it would enable her to do things efficiently (*fangzhu zhi yi shi you shu ceng, xinglu mian jiannan ye, chuwai zhouce mian weiqie ye, caozuo de ziyou ye* 放足之益实有数层，行路免艰难也，出外舟车免畏怯也，操作得自由也).[85]

When he returned home in 1911, he assisted her to unbind her feet, but Lin Xuanzhi did not like unbinding her feet, and after Huang returned to Manila in 1913, she again bound her feet. She ignored her husband's repeated requests to follow his advice, he became disappointed and angry over the matter. In the spring of 1915 he wrote, 'So far you haven't unbound your feet. Why did you ignore my advice? I deeply sigh!' In reply, she lied to him and said she had done so. When Huang had found out the truth in the autumn of that year, he reprimanded his wife: 'On the question of unbinding your feet, you must really put in efforts to do it. Do not lie to me anymore. It truly annoys me.' [86]

He also introduced his wife to modern ideas on health and women's rights. Knowing she was not in good health, he said in a letter written on 15 March 1915 that:

> Nowadays, people's minds are more open. Thus, both men and women should value their bodies and try to keep themselves healthy.
>
> *jin minqi dakai, bulun nannü ge yi baoshen wei zhong*
> 今民气大开，不论男女各以保身为重.[87]

83 Liu Bozi 刘伯孳, 'Lue shu minnan huaqiao dui xinhai geming de gongxian—yi Huang Kaiwu de qiaopi qiaoxin wei cankao' 略述旅菲闽南华侨对辛亥革命的贡献—以黄开物的侨批侨信为参考 [A discussion on the contribution of Chinese Overseas from Southern Fujian to the Philippines to the 1911 Revolution—Qiaopi of Huang Kaiwu as Reference], in *Zhongguo qiaoshi xuejie jinian xinhai geming 100 zhounian xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* 中国侨史学界纪念辛亥革命 100 周年学术研讨会论文集 [Collected Papers of Conference on the Academic Circle of Chinese Overseas Studies' Commemorative Activity on the 100th Anniversary of the 1911 Revolution], ed. Zhao Hongying 赵红英 and Zhang Chunwang 张春旺 (Beijing: Zhongguo Huaqiao chubanshe, 2011), pp. 188–93. Queues were the symbol of Manchu rule over the Chinese during the Qing dynasty. Cutting queues signified a breaking of ties with the Qing ruler and their revolt against the rule.

84 See Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's sisters: A revisionist history of footbinding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

85 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 14–15.

86 Ibid., pp. 24–7, 38–9, 50–53.

87 Ibid., p. 40.

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Huang also criticised some traditional customs in Fujian, but his wife did not show any interest in dropping these practices. In 1910 when her grandmother passed away, she told him that she planned to go back to her natal family to take part in a funerary ritual known as *chaodu* (超度, releasing the soul from purgatory through rituals performed by a monk). Huang wrote to explain the origins of the practice and told her that it was mere superstition and a waste of money. He tried to persuade her not to follow the practice, but she ignored his request.[88]

In the summer of 1914, Lin Xuanzhi's grandfather passed away, and Huang again wrote to his wife explaining his opposition to *chaodu*. In this letter he added that it was necessary to abandon old customs such as the practice of *chaodu* in order to improve society in the 'open era' (*kaitong shidai* 开通时代). Again she did not agree with his position, and even wrote to him asking for money to perform the rites. Huang was disappointed, but he compromised and asked whether 20 to 30 silver yuan was enough for the ritual. Later he remitted 20 silver yuan to her, even though his business in Manila was faring poorly.[89]

Lin, like other left-behind wives, turned to religion for emotional support while her husband was abroad,[90] but Huang did not understand why his wife was so 'superstitious' and insisted on taking part in customary rites. He believed that the dependence of women on such religious rituals for emotional and spiritual comfort had dragged China down. He repeatedly asked his wife not to pray to the gods, because he 'always hated superstition' (*su e ren mixin* 素恶人迷信).[91]

Huang also mentioned world affairs and current events in some of his letters to his wife. He encouraged her to learn about the world outside the house. This is ironic given that he didn't seem to want his wife venturing out on her own. In the spring of 1915, when Japan occupied Shandong province and presented China with the infamous Twenty-One Demands, he explained the threat of Japanese imperialism to her.[92] After several days, he further wrote:

> Japan would occupy our Fujian. I learnt that Japanese ships often arrived at the Fujian sea. The *huaqiao* (华侨 Overseas Chinese) here worry about the situation very much. If China terminates its foreign relationship with Japan, Fujian would suffer huge losses. Although you are a woman, you should also know about the situation.
>
> *Jin riben yu tun wu Fujian, wen xian rijian shi you min hai, waidi huaqiao renxin huanhuan, tang waijiao juelie, ze wu min shou moda zhi sunshi, er sui furen ying yi deng ci tongzhi ye*
>
> 今日本欲吞吾福建，闻现日舰时游闽海，外地华侨人心惶惶。倘外交决裂，则吾闽受莫大之损失，尔虽妇人应亦等此通知耶.[93]

88 Ibid., pp. 20–22.
89 Ibid., pp. 28–31.
90 See Shen, *China's left-behind wives*, pp. 110–11.
91 Huang Qinghai, *Feihua Huang Kaiwu qiaopi*, pp. 40–43.
92 Ibid., pp. 38–9.
93 Ibid., p. 40.

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The coexistence of traditional and modern ideas in Huang's letters reflects the changing circumstances of the Chinese migrants and the impact of a blend of alien cultures, Chinese traditions, modernist reform, and the Chinese Revolution. For her part, Lin Xuanzhi rejected some of Huang's modern ideas, such as his promotion of unbinding women's feet and his opposition to certain local rituals. The conflict between these new ideas and traditional beliefs might explain why she followed her own way of thinking and rejected her husband's propositions, but in doing so, she too both adhered to and departed from tradition. In any case, her actions show that left-behind wives were not simply passive recipients of instructions or demands contained in letters sent by their husbands living abroad.[94] Moreover, her husband had little choice but to accept what she decided to do, since he was far from home and could not enforce his will at a distance, and more importantly, his power had been reduced when he had to depend on her in many respects to manage the family while he remained abroad.

Another aspect of Huang's ideas went against tradition. In the early twentieth century, few Chinese women travelled overseas, but Huang had pursued the idea of living with his family in Manila as early as 1909. He continued to mention the idea and in 1915 the situation in China and the Philippines made it possible, but Lin Xuanzhi hesitated. Huang encouraged her not to worry about making the trip, writing:

> In this open era, both males and females can go overseas for a family reunion. On this matter, no one dares to criticise the idea.
>
> *mujin kaitong shidai, wulun nanü jun ke chuyang tuanju, yi wuren gan yi*
>
> 目今开通时代，无论男女均可出洋团聚，亦无人敢议.[95]

Some Chinese migrants introduced aspects of Western culture and lifestyle to their families at home, but the writing styles of these letters and their responses among people at home have not been fully discussed. Chen Ta observes in the mid-1930s that some emigrants introduced new habits or called for changes to old customs in their remittance letters and during home visits. Chen comments, 'Enriched by foreign experience, he usually stands for law and order and for the maintenance of justice—as he sees it. He fights against those forms of oppression and licentiousness which to his mind are associated with too slavish a clinging to antiquate mores.'[96] Obviously, Huang Kaiwu was such a person who kept introducing new ideas to his wife. His letters provide a set of modern ideas and reveal how they were responded to in China, showing a complex process of the inflow and transition of modern ideas in *qiaoxiang* (侨乡, emigrant communities in China).

94 An earlier discussion on the topic can be found in Shen, *China's left-behind wives*. However, the study does not provide an exploration on the changing relationship between migrants and their left-behind wives in letter correspondence.

95 Editorial Committee of *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, *Minnan qiaopi daquan*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 330.

96 Chen Ta, *Emigrant communities in South China: A study of overseas migration and its influence on standards of living and social change*, English version, ed. Bruno Lasker (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1940), p. 128.

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## Conclusion

Huang's letters offer a male migrant's understanding of remittances, children, family, women, gender and society, as well as his feelings, considerations and judgements concerning these issues and other people while he lived and worked in a foreign country. They illustrate a unique gender institution behind Chinese mass migration, which sustained a close but hierarchical relationship between migrant husband and left-behind wife. The letters provide examples of a male migrant' s norms, experiences, feelings, and emotions, and provide evidence for a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of Chinese migration history drawing on gendered and emotional perspectives.

The letters also indicate that the values and gender norms in migrant families were in a state of flux in the early 1900s. Clearly, during an era of radical sociopolitical upheaval and shifts, some traditional values and norms became stronger and others weaker, especially before and after the establishment of the Republic. For one thing, traditional Chinese women's virtues became more significant for the sake of the migrant families and the migrants. A left-behind wife was expected to become stronger and more capable so that she could take care of the family and the children, and on many occasions, the elderly or young in-laws, too. However, back home in Fujian province, Lin Xuanzhi would be asked to catch up with the new era and unbind her feet so that she could move and do things freely. Changes in traditional Chinese culture and gender norms in migration need to be considered as significant factors in discussions of the history of the Chinese diaspora, as well as of Chinese remittance letters.

On the other hand, these letters suggest that in the diaspora, family generally remained the core of migrant life abroad and at home; migrants greatly valued the continuity of their patrilineage, as well as keeping up their personal and family reputations, even while participating actively in the building of a new China as a patriotic '*huaqiao*'. Migration and nationalism did not necessarily shake traditional gender roles. Being the family head and breadwinner, a migrant husband could attempt to regulate his wife's conduct. There is evidence that some remittance letters 'transformed the politics of gender and generation in the *qiaoxiang*',[97] yet the manner in which this happened and related complex transition process are understudied. Huang's letters show the combining of traditions and modern ideas and negotiations between old and new ideas, as well as the difficulties of implanting modern ideas. Further study is needed on the transformation of these ideas in migrant lands.

Obviously, some traditions came into conflict with new norms in modern China's transitional era. The Chinese emigrants abroad were exposed to new trends and new ideas, including more rights for women, a change affecting their wives back home. At the same time, a wife's ability to do as she saw fit, even with the money being sent home, could also be a source of tension, although there is little evidence to suggest families breaking up for this reason. Migration clearly undermined the gender roles of husband as master of the family and often changed his relationship with his wife.

97 Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, p. 147.

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However, it would be inaccurate to claim that migrant males in the diaspora abandoned their familial power and position. In fact, the left-behind wives continued to be under surveillance from relatives, the community, and even their own families.[98] Most wives did not progress much beyond being nominal family heads, while the male migrants still had effective control of family affairs from afar through the various communication channels, especially letters and proxies at home. However, the remittance letters often showed negotiations among the spouses, or other family members. Letters were embellished to make them acceptable to relatives and even to readjust their relations with those at home, unlike the findings of *Dear China*.[99] Being the so-called pillars of financial, material, spiritual and emotional support, many male migrants maintained a close relationship with home, even though their authority and power suffered somewhat from changing conditions.

The content and writing style of Chinese remittance letters were influenced by migration, gender, changing ideology, norms, and practices. Some of the letters expressed radical ideas, and frank personal feelings. Being direct and private products of communications between migrants and their family members or relatives/friends back home, the letters cover multifaceted aspects of the lives of people on both sides of the correspondence, which allow a window into intimate relationships, gender relations as well as the inner worlds of the individuals and their families across the diaspora. The remittance letters provide an opportunity for the writing of new and richer histories of Chinese migration.

Of course, remittance letters have their scholarly limitations. Many return letters have been lost, including Lin Xuanzhi's. And many letters from migrants or their relatives at home were written by others, or were very basic and lacked personal or emotional content.[100] In addition, many migrants hardly sent remittances home for various reasons,[101] and hence their history is not recorded in such letters.

In brief, as this case study shows, remittance letters with rich content, such as Huang Kaiwu's, provide a valuable resource for the study of the long-ignored gendered, individual and emotional aspects of migration, the inner, spiritual world of individual Chinese migrants, as well as their adjustments and renegotiations of relations with those at home. In addition to political and economic studies of the Chinese diaspora, Huang's letters bring the life of one individual in the history of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia into focus. Such letters are the tip of an iceberg that could lead us to uncover a fuller picture of gendered, individual and emotional experiences among the Chinese diaspora in the modern era.

98 See further Shen, *China's left-behind wives*, pp. 102–4, 137.

99 See Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, p. 164.

100 See Bao, 'The gendered biopolitics of marriage and immigration', p. 148; Tam Siumi Maria, 'Engendering Minnan mobility: Women sojourners in a patriarchal world', in *Southern Fujian: Reproduction of traditions in post-Mao China*, ed. Tan Chee-Beng (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2006), p. 148; Shen, *China's left-behind wives*, pp. 87, 90; Shen Huifen 沈惠芬, 'Goujian dongnan yanhai qiaoxiang nüxing shenghuoshi: qiaopi ziliao de jiazhi yu liyong' 构建东南沿海侨乡女性生活史：侨批资料的价值与利用 [Constructing a life history of the left-behind women in *qiaoxiang* in southeastern China: A discussion on the value and use of remittance letters for the research of left-behind women], *Fujian Luntan* 福建论坛 [Fujian Tribune] 7 (2013): 109; Benton and Liu, *Dear China*, pp. 151–75.

101 Shen, 'Goujian dongnan yanhai qiaoxiang nüxing shenghuoshi', p. 108.

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