

**Remittances for Collective Consumption and Social Status Compensation:  
Variations on Transnational Practices among Chinese International Migrants<sup>1</sup>**

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*INTRODUCTION*

Economic reform in the People's Republic of China (PRC) since the late 1970s has revitalized diaspora-homeland ties and created new opportunities for immigrant transnationalism. Hundreds and thousands of Chinese migrants who have resettled in different parts of the world are returning to their ancestral homeland to capitalize on new economic opportunities. While they have contributed significantly to China's economic development via foreign direct investment and to the economic well-being of left-behind families through monetary and in-kind remittances, these migrants have also donated money to their hometowns to build or renovate symbolic structures (e.g., village gates, monuments, religious statues or altars in public space), educational institutions (e.g., schools and libraries), and other cultural facilities (e.g., ancestral halls, cultural centers, museums, and public parks). We refer to these monetary donations as "remittances for collective consumption." Our current study contributes to the existing literature by focusing on this special type of migrant remittances.

In China, remittances for collective consumption have left an indelible imprint on the physical landscape of migrant hometowns and villages, which not only serves to extol success stories of compatriots abroad but also helps boost the positive image of the hometown as simultaneously a nostalgic place for personal association and a transnational place for economic investment (Chen 2005; Kuah 2000; Li and Zhou 2012; Smart and Lin 2007; Taylor et al. 2003; Woon 1990). From our observation, however, some hometowns flourish with steady flows of remittances to build symbolic structures and cultural facilities, while others decline with few such remittances. This paper aims to

develop an analytical framework to explain why Chinese migrants from different hometowns and resettled in different receiving countries vary in their remittance-sending behavior. Based on a comparative analysis of ethnographic fieldwork data from two hometowns in South China, we specially address two main questions: (1) What drives Chinese migrants to send remittances back to their hometowns to build symbolic structures and cultural facilities for collective consumption? (2) How do they achieve their remitting objectives? In our view, the sending of remittances for collective consumption may be understood as a unique mechanism for social status compensation. We argue that the remitting behavior is not merely affected by migrants' own initiatives on the ground or by sending-country government policies from above, but also by migrants' lived experiences in their host societies and by the responses and actions of local governments and societies in their hometowns. It is the interaction between individual lived experiences (e.g., felt or experienced social marginalization) and multi-level contextual factors (e.g., wage differential, currency exchange rates, and hometown reception) that leads to the realization of social status compensation and accounts for regional variations.

### *REMITTANCES AND IMMIGRANT TRANSNATIONALISM*

In the age of globalization, more and more international migrants are participating in the transnational fields to conduct frequent and orderly activities in trade, finance, manufacturing, politics, and culture in their ancestral homelands while striving to integrate into their host societies (Glick-Schiller et al. 1992; Goldring 2002; Guarnizo et al. 1999; Itzigsohn 1995; Levitt 1998; Portes et al. 2002; Zhou and Lee 2013; Zhou and Lee 2015). Cross-border flows of remittances are generally considered important measures of immigrant transnationalism (De la Garza and Lowell 2002; Diaz-Briquets and Weintraub 1991; Durand et al. 1996; Portes and Zhou 2012; Vertovec 2004). Studies of migrant remittances have

paid ample attention to monetary remittances and their economic impacts on families and communities from which migrants hail. Remittances in hard currency support the basic subsistence of stay-behind families and help families achieve self-sufficiency and social mobility. The monetary remittances are usually used for financing family businesses, acquiring land, and constructing new homes for left-behind families or for migrants' own transnational living or retirement (Goldring 2002; Kurien 2008; Landolt 2001; Liang and Morooka 2008; Smith 2005). These monetary remittances, even those used for household economics, often generate the “multiplier effect” to benefit non-migrant households as well as local and regional developments in migrants' ancestral villages or towns (Cohen 2011; Durand et al. 1996; Goldring 2002; Massey and Parrado 1998; Taylor et al. 2003). Monetary remittances are also commonly used for noneconomic purposes, such as charitable donations for natural disaster relief, poverty reduction, education, and other social welfare provisions.

Prior research has paid attention to intangible remittances as well, such as social remittances, cultural remittances, and political remittances. Levitt (1998) coins the term “social remittances” to refer to norms, practices, identities, and social capital that migrants reconstruct through the process of adaptation and then remit to their hometowns through transnational visits and the exchange of letters, videos, cassettes, e-mails, blog posts and telephone calls. Flores (2009) defines “cultural remittances” as the ensemble of ideas, values and expressive forms that are introduced into migrant-sending communities by returning migrants and their families (also see Page 2010). Piper (2009) refers “political remittances” to the transfer of political ideas, egalitarian ideology, leadership styles, activism, and migrant rights which are infused in homeland politics, while Vélez-Torres and Agergaard (2014) consider them as social and political exchanges in configuring a trans-local community bound by its struggle for the right to territory. Both cultural and political remittances are captured in the concept of social remittances, which are further elaborated by Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011). According to Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011), there are two types of social remittances—

individual and collective. Individual social remittances cover exchanges of ideas and behaviors within migrants and their networks of families and households across transnational spaces, which entail cultural remittances. Collective social remittances involve the extended movement of knowledge and practices in the context of collective actions and political engagements or mobilizations, which encompass political remittances. While these various types of intangible remittances tend to transcend emigrant communities from the local to the regional, national, and even international, research on remittances for collective consumption has been scant, leaving a substantial void.

What motivates migrants to remit? The existing literature highlights two main motives. The altruistic motive suggests that migrants remit in order to improve the welfare of their families staying behind in the homeland (Bracking 2003; Johnson and Whitelaw 1974; Mahmud 2015). The self-interested motive, emphasizing remitting for migrants' own economic benefits, involves several types. One type, the exchange motive, implies that migrants remit to buy services for their families in order to secure future inheritances (Cox 1987; Hoddinott 1994; Sana 2005). Another type, the insurance motive, attributes remittances to a mutual risk diversification arrangement between the migrant and their household (Rosenzweig 1988; Stark and Levhari 1982). A third type, the investment motive, considers remittances a repayment for past loans from the household (Kelly and Solomon 2009; Lucas and Stark 1985; Poirine 1997). Past studies have also looked at the relationship between remitting behaviors and social status attainment (Cohen 2011; Goldring 2002; Mahmud 2015; Mountz and Wright 1996; Sana 2005; VanWey et al. 2005), but they have not addressed the issue of who provides social status rewards.

The existing literature suggests multi-level factors influencing the sending of remittances. At the individual level, migrants' demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, marital status, and generation) and socioeconomic characteristics (e.g., education, job skills, and earnings, as well as proficiency in the dominant language(s) and citizenship status of the host countries) are found to be

important determinants. At the group level, the proportions of foreign born, highly skilled, and self-employed of a migrant group, the strength and level of integration of the migrant community, and a migrant group's social position in receiving countries are found to influence the sending of various types of remittances (Cohen 2011; Guarnizo *et al.* 1999; Itzigsohn 1995; Goldring 2004; Mahler 1995; Portes *et al.* 2002). At the level of the state, policies of immigration and immigrant integration of the receiving country, bilateral relations between sending and receiving states, and sending-country policies are key macro-structural factors. In fact, sending-country governments are found to proactively engage with their compatriots to promote monetary remittances for investment and development projects of various kinds (Goldring 2002; Iskander 2010; Portes and Zhou 2012; Rodriguez 2010). However, how local governments and non-governmental institutions in migrant hometowns serve as primary facilitators and receivers of remittances, especially how they provide social status rewards to migrants, have not been adequately studied.

In the study of migrant hometowns, or *qiaoxiang*<sup>2</sup> studies in China, scholars develop four micro-behavioral models. The diasporic identity reaffirmation model sees migrants' remitting behavior, regardless of types of remittances, as a way to maintain or rebuild ties to their ancestral hometowns or villages. In the process, migrants reaffirm their "Chineseness" in the diaspora and symbolic existence in the homeland (Chen 2005; Liu 2005). The social capital accumulation model treats the sending of remittances as a two-step strategy toward an economic goal. Initially, migrants seek to establish altruistic images of "patriotic" compatriot and reaffirm their "we-group" status in hometown for the purpose to tapping into local networks of *guanxi* (social connections). In turn, they use *guanxi* to capture and capitalize on current or future economic opportunities in China (Smart and Lin 2007). The moral obligation fulfillment model explains remitting from the sending-community perspective. Catering to the desire of Chinese migrants to maintain diasporic ties, identities, the sense of belonging, government officials and local elites in hometowns innovatively employ strategies —

conferring honor or applying shame — to incorporate their compatriots into the moral system of the hometown so as to sustain the constant flow of monetary remittances (Kuah 2000; Li 2005). The conspicuous consumption model focuses on consumption patterns among compatriots and their stay-behind families in hometowns. Migrants remit their hard-earned dollars to build imposing symbolic structures and hold luxurious banquets and celebratory events for everybody in hometowns as a way of regaining or establishing social reputations (Li 1999; Wang 2000).

Taken together, these four models shed important lights to the complexity of remitting behavior among Chinese international migrants. However, these models are not unique to the Chinese. Studies of ethno-national groups of migrants have engaged with the social and cultural meanings undergirding the sending of remittances and alluded to the significance of migrants' social status pursuit through transnational practices (Appleyard 1989; Burgess 2006; Cohen 2011; Goldring 2002; Mahler 1995; Mahmud 2015; Mountz and Wright 1996; Rubenstein 1992; Sana 2005; Stodolska and Santos 2006). But these studies are constrained by the classical dichotomy of altruism vs. self-interest while overlooking the mechanisms and intervening processes at the local level and the interaction between individual migrants and institutional actors of the sending community.

### *SOCIAL STATUS COMPENSATION: AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK*

Building on the existing literature, we underscore the importance of social status compensation through the sending of a special type of remittances. This type is monetary in form and is used mainly for producing tangible and physically visible cultural facilities or objects of symbolic representation in migrant hometowns for public consumption. The sender generally expects to achieve a certain degree of social recognition through this unique form of transnational practice. However, the realization of social recognition depends not only on the sender but also on the receiver. Our ethnographic fieldwork

in migrant hometowns in China shows that not all migrants are keen on remitting money to their hometowns to build symbolic structures and cultural facilities and that not all hometowns are equally enthusiastic about receiving this type of remittances. Such different patterns cannot be explained by individual motives or by the social pressure or moral obligation on the migrant. It may, however, be possible to conceive of this remittance-sending behavior as an alternative means of attaining social status for international migrants.

Social status is multi-dimensional involving wealth, power and prestige. In our study, we focus on the prestige dimension. Unlike wealth and power, which can be quantitatively measured, prestige indicates the degree of honor or reputation attached to an individual's social position in a given society (Weber 1978; Zhai 1999). It is both subjective and relative, measured by a person's own assessment in contrast to a reference group and others' recognition of such self-assessment, regardless of the person's wealth or power (Zhai 1999). International migrants often experience a social status gap in comparison to the native-born in the host society, or social status loss in comparison to their past statuses in the sending community before migration (Remennick 2012; Li and Zhou 2012; Goldring 2002; Wang 2000). The availability of different frames of reference allows migrants to traverse different terrains, most commonly between home and host societies, to fill their social status gap or compensate for their status loss (Wang 2000). We thus develop an analytical framework to examine the mechanisms of social status compensation and explain why some migrants send remittances for collective consumption while others do not and why migrants from different hometowns show different patterns of remittance-sending.

Our analytical framework takes into account multi-level interacting factors. First, the desire for social status compensation on the part of the migrant is an important determinant. This seemingly individual factor is linked to an immigrant group's social position in the status hierarchy of the host society. If an immigrant group is marginalized, it would be difficult for group members, including

those who are socioeconomically mobile, to have their social status, attained after migration, recognized and validated by the host society. Hence, the social status gap, whether it is perceived, felt, or experienced, is likely to increase a migrant's desire to seek social status compensation elsewhere, usually in migrant hometowns.

Second, the economic capacity on the part of the migrant is affected by macro-level economic factors beyond individual earnings. Generally speaking, newer and less integrated migrants are less able to afford remittances for noneconomic purposes, including collective consumption, than their longer-time and more integrated coethnics, but they are more likely to experience the social status gap and thus have stronger desire to seek status compensation elsewhere, often in their hometowns. However, the cost of remittances for collective consumption as social status symbols is determined not only by the migrants' own socioeconomic circumstances but also by macroeconomic conditions, such as wage differential and differences in currency value between the sending and receiving countries. Higher wages in receiving countries enables even those who make earn wages to remit. Stronger currency value in the receiving country can lower the relative cost of remittances for collective consumption in the sending country.

Third, for remittances for collective consumption to confer social status upon the sender, we must also consider the role of hometown reception. Whether remittances for collective consumption can effectively be utilized for social status compensation depends on whether hometowns are receptive in acting as providers of social status rewards. Meso-level hometown institutions — local government agencies, local societies, and transnational media — are particularly critical in helping migrants realize social status compensation because these local institutions confer honor and rewards, confirm group membership and status in the local society, and provide means of publicly acknowledging rewards and honors. Although there are other determinants at work to influence the sending of cultural remittances,



we believe that multi-level interacting factors specified in our analytical framework offers a new and unique approach to examine the social status compensation hypothesis.

## *DATA AND METHODS*

Guided by our analytical framework, we explain why some migrants remit for collective consumption while others do not and why there are variations in the reception of remittances for collective consumption in different emigrant hometowns. We do so through ethnographic case studies in two traditional migrant hometowns — Kan Town and Wen Town — in South China.

Kan Town is located in Kaiping City in central south Guangdong. Kaiping City, used to be a rural county up till 1993, is a part of the *Siyi* (Sze Yap) region, with a population of 687,000 people as of 2010.<sup>3</sup> Large-scale Chinese emigration from the *Siyi* region started in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as part of labor migration, and the primary destination was North America. The total number of Kan Town compatriots overseas, including people of Chinese descent in Hong Kong and Macau, was estimated at 750,000 as of 2009, and the majority resides in the United States and Canada. Contemporary emigration from Kan Town witnesses a rapid and upward trend, where relatives back home “are queuing up to emigrate,” taking advantage of the family reunification preference of the 1965 US Hart-Celler Act and the 1962 Canadian Human Rights Act. In the United States and Canada, more than 60 percent of the Kan Town-born Chinese are relatively recent migrants, arriving in the past 10 to 20 years.

Wen Town is located in Wenchang City in northeast Hainan Province. Wenchang City, used to be a rural county up till 1995, had a population of 584,600 people in 2010. Wen Town has a much longer history of emigration than Kan Town, and the number of Wen Town compatriots overseas is much higher, estimated at nearly 1.2 million, and the majority resides in Southeast Asia, such as

Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. Because of the stringent immigration policies in receiving countries in Southeast Asia, contemporary emigration from Wen Town has been slow. As a result, most of the Wen Town-born compatriots residing in Southeast Asia are in their old ages.

We conducted fieldwork in Kan Town and Wen Town in 2010, which included participant observations, in-depth interviews, and reference group comparisons between Chinese migrants and those who have never emigrated overseas. We interviewed 65 relatives of Chinese migrants, government officials, and members of local societies in hometowns (40 from Kan Town and 25 from Wen Town). We also interviewed Chinese migrants from these two hometowns (55 from Kan Town and 20 from Wen Town) during our trips to Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Jakarta between 2011 and 2014. We compiled and analyzed data from documentary sources about the histories of emigration from these two hometowns.

Since the economic reform in the late 1970s, remittances for collective consumption to Kaiping City, in which Kan Town is a part, were estimated at about 1.1 billion yuan (*renminbi*), or 1,467 yuan per Chinese international migrant from that region.<sup>4</sup> During the same time period, in contrast, remittances for collective consumption to Wenchang City, in which Wen Town is a part, were estimated at roughly 381 million yuan, or only 323 yuan per Chinese emigrant from that region.<sup>5</sup> Why is there such a large variation on the sending of this particular type of remittances between these two long-time emigrant groups? Next, we offer an in-depth analysis of three sets of factors: at the micro level, individual migrant's desire; at the macro level, broader economic factors that constraints migrants' economic capacity to remit for collective consumption; and at the meso level, hometown reception of this type of remittances. We discuss how these multi-level factors interact to affect the realization of social status compensation.

#### *SOCIAL STATUS GAP AND MIGRANT'S DESIRE TO REMIT*

### *Kan Town Migrants in North America*

Kan Town has a long history of international migration, and the majority of emigrants went to North America, the United States in particular. People in Kan Town and other parts of the *Siyi* region used to call America the “gold mountain” and those migrants who sojourned in North America the “guests from the gold mountain.” Prior to World War II, America’s Chinatowns were dominated by *Siyi* people. Earlier Kan Town migrants were uneducated peasants, arriving in North America as low-skilled contract laborers. They were initially sojourners, leaving their families behind in sending villages and having the intention to return home eventually with gold and glory (Li and Zhou 2012; Zhou 1992). In the United States, the implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882-1943) reinforced their sojourning mentality and forced them into segregated Chinatowns. Immigration restriction and social exclusion, combined with anti-miscegenation laws, led to the formation of isolated bachelors’ societies. Many Chinese migrants found themselves stuck in Chinatowns with little hope to return to China permanently with gold and glory while being barred from integrating into the host society.

Nonetheless, these guests from the gold mountain were looked up to as a high status group by those staying behind in their hometown. Despite legal exclusion and precarious socioeconomic circumstances in America, the Chinese continued to emigrate under false identities, fake papers, or other illegal means via a well-established migration network and the support of the diasporic community (Romero 2010). Remitting money to support families staying behind in hometown and to contribute to community welfare were both a familial obligation and a normative practice for Kan Town migrants. The *diaolou* towers (fortified multi-storey towers) in many villages in Kan Town, inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage list, stand as the living testimony of the contributions made by overseas Chinese prior to WWII.

After the founding of PRC in 1949, emigration from Kan Town to North America was interrupted for nearly 30 years and the diaspora-homeland ties were completely cut off. Meanwhile, post-WWII United States and Canada removed legal barriers that had blocked the social mobility of the Chinese, allowing the children and grandchildren of earlier Chinese migrants to integrate into the host society as middle or upper middle class. Those who lived and worked in Chinatowns, however, still held the sojourning (*qiao* in Chinese) mentality and considered China to be home because they still had immediate family members staying behind.

The passage of the Hart-Celler Act in the US in 1965 and Canadian Human Rights Act in 1962 favoring family reunification and China's open door in 1979 jointly cause drastic changes. Since the late 1970s, Kan Town has witnessed two parallel trends: the "guests from the gold mountain" are re-connecting to their hometown by sending money or making trips back, while their relatives are queuing up for family-sponsored migration to North America. These two intertwined trends sustain a visible and continuous flow of monetary remittances to Kan Town, and a large proportion is used for renovating or building symbolic structures and cultural facilities for collective consumption.

The majority of contemporary migrants from Kan Town are family-sponsored migrants. Like their predecessors who came to the US or Canada earlier, they hail mostly from low socioeconomic status, lacking education, English language proficiency, and transferable job skills. Many find work in ethnic enclaves in North America through family and kin networks and live in inner city Chinatowns or Chinese ethnoburbs.<sup>6</sup> These new migrants describe their American or Canadian life as "*ai*" ("捱" endure hardship or suffer in Cantonese) as in the phrase *ai shijie* ("捱"世界 enduring hardship in life) because of their low socioeconomic status and because of their dual obligations—routinely sending monetary remittances to support stay-behind families and sponsoring family members to migrate to the US or Canada. This "*ai*" narrative is much like that of their coethnics who arrived in North America earlier. A Kan Town migrant who had lived in the US for several decades reflected on his life and said:

*We overseas Chinese are actually miserable. Life here is very hard. We came here to work all the time ... If we had found a better choice, we wouldn't have come to the US to "ai."*<sup>7</sup>

Even those who have a high school or college education find it difficult to move up the socioeconomic ladder because of their limited English or their lack of transferable educational credentials and job skills. They felt excluded from participating in the mainstream host society. As a new migrant from Kan Town recalled:

*I work for a remodeling firm in Chinatown. My boss is a laohuaqiao [Chinese migrants who had come earlier]. My work is mainly for other laohuaqiao who own businesses or rental property in Chinatown. They have come here quite early and have now established businesses, but in Chinatown. I had a college education in China. But since I don't know English and my education is useless, I can only work here in Chinatown, kind of like my boss.*<sup>8</sup>

The highly integrated migrants, those who have become naturalized U.S. citizens and have successfully achieved middle class status, also feel the social status gap. Although Chinese Americans are nowadays lauded by the media as a well-assimilated "model minority" for their extraordinary educational achievements, many are keenly aware that they are still viewed and treated as the "other" or as "forever foreigners" (Tuan 1999; Li and Zhou 2012). Mr. Wu, former president of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in Los Angeles, expressed his frustration in an interview:

*I am a Chinese, never think of myself as an American. It's not that I don't want to be an American, but that they [Americans] don't let you become one. It has always been like that. Americans think you are a "foreigner." Even though they may call you "Chinese American," they always think of you as a Chinese first, and don't ever treat you as a true American.*<sup>9</sup>

From Kan Town migrants, the “*ai*” narrative implies the felt or experienced social status gap, indicating their social marginality and inability to attain social status in the host society. Since their status as guests from the gold mountain in the hometown is high, they naturally look to their hometown as a place that would have their social status recognized and enable them to “*tan shijie*” (“叹”世界 enjoy life in Cantonese) in their own words.<sup>10</sup>

### *Wen Town Migrants in Southeast Asia*

The Chinese call Southeast Asia *Nanyang*, a region known by the Chinese as “a culturally less developed host region” where the Chinese were able to claim certain levels of cultural and economic superiority prior to Western colonization. Chinese to *Nanyang* were initially maritime traders, and the migration of laborers occurred during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century up to the late 1930 (Wang 1991). Before Western colonization in Southeast Asia, the Chinese already established a strong foothold in the region’s economy that had expanded beyond maritime trade into cash-crop farming that yielded such products as sugar, pepper, gambier, rubber, and other land-based industries such as tin and gold mining (Wickberg 1999). The arrival of European colonists in Southeast Asia in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century shattered the economic dominance of the Chinese and transformed them into a middleman social status, serving as agents for, or partners of, European colonists and other Westerners who traded in Southeast Asia, and later as labor brokers to facilitate large-scale labor migration from China (Wickberg 1999).

The diasporic Chinese community in *Nanyang* was fragmented by different dialect groups. Hainanese is the smallest groups among the five major dialect groups (Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese, and Hakka). Most of the earlier migrants from Wen Town were uneducated, low-skilled, and sojourning laborers, except for a small group of merchants. Many resettled in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. They and those from other areas of Hainan clustered to develop the Hainanese ethnic enclaves—“Hainan Village” or “Hainan Street”—for self-help while resisting discrimination from

other Chinese dialect groups. In these enclaves, people talked in Hainanese and carried on similar lifestyles, customs, traditions, and religions to those in Hainan. Wen Town migrants whom we interviewed told us that they lived in these Hainanese enclaves, such as Middle Road, Purvis Street, and Seah Street in Singapore, when they were children. Before WWII, these enclaves were similar to the Chinese enclaves in the North America. Unlike their counterparts in America, however, the Chinese living in ethnic enclaves were not subjected to legal exclusion, and their residential segregation was largely voluntary.

After WWII, Southeast Asia witnessed decolonization and establishment of independent nation-states while the founding of PRC cut off ties between the diaspora and homeland. In order to avoid being associated with communist “Red China” and being treated as suspects of a “fifth column” in the newly independent nation-states, *Nanyang* Chinese were under the pressure to assimilate. Many took up naturalized citizenship of their host nation-states, transitioning from “overseas Chinese” (*huaqiao* in Chinese) to “people of Chinese descent” (*huaren* in Chinese) and gradually becoming an assimilated lot (*gui-fan* in Chinese).<sup>11</sup>

Wen Town migrants whom we studied are first-generation migrants. But unlike our interviewees in Kan Town, they emigrated when they were very young and have resettled in Southeast Asia for a much longer period of time. Moreover, Wen Town migrants did not suffer from the same kind of legal and social exclusion as their counterparts in North America. Instead, they were able to form families and lead normal family lives either by bringing their wives from China or by intermarrying with local women, and, for some, by establishing second homes in their places of resettlement. Over the years, they formed a more settled group with a more balanced sex ratio and a population of multiple local-born generations. Such patterns of resettlement allowed the Chinese diaspora to reproduce and prevented it from forming isolated bachelors’ societies like Kan Town migrants in the US. As a result, Wen Town migrants are less likely than Kan Town migrants to have

immediate family members staying behind and thus are less obliged to send remittances or sponsor family migration than Kan Town migrants.<sup>12</sup>

Wen Town migrants are also more integrated into host societies, in which the Chinese are less marginalized than those in the US. Their integration reveals a segmented pattern—a small wealthy entrepreneurial class, a large middle and lower-middle class, and a sizeable working class. For example, in Singapore, the dominant mode of socioeconomic incorporation into the host society is through occupational achievement via education. Wen Town migrants and their offspring have more chances to obtain the economic and political resources from the host society to realize their social status. Furthermore, Wen Town migrants experience little migrant replenishment even after China's open door in the late 1970s. The comparatively low level of emigration from Wen Town to *Nanyang* is due partly to restrictive immigration policies in host nation-states in Southeast Asia and partly to the lack of a substantial wage differential between many Southeast Asian countries and China. Because of the truncated migration history, Wen Town migrants are much older, more integrated into the host society, and more removed physically from their hometown than Kan Town migrants. In the 1980s, Wen Town migrants donated money to build or repair schools, cultural centers, elderly service centers, ancestral halls, temples, shrines, roads, and bridges out of a strong nostalgia sentiment, unreleased after thirty years of isolation, to reconnect to their hometown. However, since the 1990s, there has witnessed a waning trend of remittances for collective consumption by Wen Town migrants.

#### *AFFORDABILITY OF REMITTANCES FOR COLLECTIVE CONSUMPTION*

The social status gap, felt or experienced, in host societies increases migrants' desire to seek social status compensation via the sending of remittances for collective consumption to hometowns. In order to realize social status compensation, the cultural objects, structures and facilities created by



remittances must be recognized as social status symbols. The costs of tangible things as status symbols and social status performance via remitting vary by context. The economic capacity of migrants to afford remittances for collective consumption is not merely determined by their individual earnings, but also by macro-level factors, such as the wage differential and the strength of currency value in the host country in contrast to the sending country.

For Kan Town migrants who have resettled in the US, the costs of remittances to create cultural objects and projects in Kan Town are relatively low. First, compared to China, the host country — the US — occupies a superior position in the global geo-political system and has a much higher wage rate, especially among low skilled workers. For example, minimum wage in New York and California is at \$7 or higher. An unskilled worker in New York's Chinatown could earn at least \$1,000 per month, and most of our interviewees earned \$2000- \$3000 per month. Second, the value of the US dollar is much stronger than that of the Chinese yuan (the currency exchange was 7 to 8 yuan per dollar in 1990s and more than 6 yuan per dollar in the late 2000s). Even though the average earnings of Kan Town migrants in the US are relatively low compared to their more integrated coethnics and to average Americans, they are still significantly higher than those in Kan Town. This wage differential greatly enables even the low-wage migrant workers to send remittances for collective consumption back home, and the favorable exchange rate of US currency inflates the value of migrants' hard-earned money. Mr. Kuan, who immigrated to the US in the early 1980s, offered an example. Mr. Kuan had worked in a Chinese restaurant in Los Angeles for more than 10 years and is now retired. In 2010, he returned home for a family reunion and donated 30,000 yuan (about US\$4,400 in 2010) to the Kuan Clan Library in his hometown. He said in the interview:

*Eh, 30,000 yuan is a little more than 4,000 dollars. That amount is not unaffordable to me, just about 4 or 5 months' retirement pension and earnings from odd jobs. I don't*

*spend much in America and can save money quite easily. Since I seldom come back, it is necessary to donate to the library, to support my hometown.*<sup>13</sup>

To Mr. Kuan, whose economic situation was below average, the amount of donation was affordable and worthwhile in making his name known. To the Kuan Clan Library, however, 30,000 yuan would be a substantial sum which could benefit many people in Kan Town. This example suggests that even ordinary low-skilled migrants can afford to make donations in the amount that can produce known reputation and respected social status in their hometowns and realize compatriots' aspiration of returning home to enjoy life and "*tan shijie*."

In contrast, the costs of remittances to create tangible things as social status symbols in Wen Town are relatively high. As we have discussed earlier, Wen Town migrants are more integrated into their host societies in Southeast Asia, which has reduced the desire for social status compensation via the sending of remittances for collective consumption. The same amount of money (30,000 yuan) would appear a large sum relatively to the smaller wage differential, less favorable currency exchange rates, and higher cost of living for Wen Town migrants. Moreover, the consequent depreciation of social effects for the same amounts of remittances further weakens the compatriots' desire and ability to send remittances for collective consumption. Take the historical development of a middle school sponsored by overseas Chinese in Wen Town for an example.

In 1985, the local elite of Guannan Village in Wen Town initiated a plan to build a middle school. The Steering Committee of Guannan Huaqiao Middle School sent a solicitation letter to their compatriots to call for donations. The letter, entitled "Letter to compatriots at home and abroad for the construction of Guannan Huaqiao Middle School" read,

*... Guannan is located in the remote area with a large population. Because of insufficient public transportation, many students have to walk a long distance, more than 10km, to attend middle school, which negatively affects students' desire to study*

*while increasing families' economic burden. As a result, many students have dropped out of school, which contributes to the educational backwardness in this area.*

*... At present only 30,000 to 40,000 yuan will be needed to set up a school with two buildings — a few classrooms and several dozen desks and chairs...*

*Steering Committee of Guannan Huaqiao Middle School*

*December 14, 1985*

*Awards Offered to Donors:*

- *All donors, regardless of the amount contributed, will have their names inscribed on the wall;*
- *Donors who contribute more than 10,000 yuan will have one classroom named after them and have their jade photos hung on the wall, in addition, have two of their relatives' children enjoy three-year free education;*
- *Donors who contribute more than 5,000 yuan will have one dormitory room named after them and have their jade photos hung on the wall, in addition, have one of their relatives' children enjoy three-year free education;*
- ...
- *Donors who contribute more than 500 yuan will have ten-inch photos hung on the wall.*<sup>14</sup>

Soon after the initial solicitation letter was sent abroad, Wen Town compatriots overseas had donated 48,574 yuan, exceeding the expected goal of “30,000 to 40,000 yuan”. Three years later, Guannan Huaqiao Middle School was founded, but without the two classroom buildings in original plan. The school had to borrow classrooms from Guannan Huaqiao Primary School next door. The local elites then issued another solicitation letter in 1990 in the name of Board of Directors of Guannan

Huaqiao Middle School, *hoping* to raise more funds to build the two classroom buildings originally planned. The letter, entitled, “Notice for Fundraising for Guannan Huaqiao Middle School,” read,

*To whom it may concern:*

*The board of directors has re-calculated the costs for building the two classroom buildings. ... Estimated according to the current land values and construction cost, a minimum of 500,000 yuan is needed ... It is hoped that compatriots overseas, local elites, and people from all walks of life will show love for our hometown and care about the education of our children ...*

*Board of Directors of Guannan Huaqiao Middle School*

*January 10, 1990*

*Award Offered to Donors:*

- *Any donor whose donation is more than 100,000 yuan and enough to build one storey of the teaching building (240m<sup>2</sup>) will have that storey named after him/her and a 20-inch color photo hung on the wall, in addition, have three of his/her relatives' children enjoy three-year free education;*
- *Any donor whose donation is more than 50,000 yuan and enough to build two classrooms will have the classrooms named after him/her and a 20-inch color photo hung on the wall, in addition, have two of his/her relatives' children enjoy three-year free education;*
- *Any donor whose donation is more than 20,000 yuan and enough to build one classroom will have that classroom named after him/her and an 18-inch color photo hung on the wall, in addition, have one of his/her relatives' children enjoy three-year free education;*

- *Any donor whose donation is more than 10,000 yuan will have a dormitory room named after him/her and a 16-inch color photo hung on the wall;*
- ...
- *All donors, regardless of the amount donated, will have their names inscribed on tablets.<sup>15</sup>*

In a short period of five years, the construction of two classroom buildings needed more money, which increased the costs of remittances to build or renovate educational facilities as social status symbols. The expected amount of donations increased more than 10 times, from the initial call for 30,000 to 40,000 yuan to the second call for 500,000 yuan, and the same rewards required higher amount of monetary donations. The rising costs of remittances for collective consumption were in part due to the rapid economic development, which resulted in the rising land values, price of construction material and labor and living cost in Wen Town, The rising costs of remittances as social status symbols, interacted with greater diasporic integration of Wen Town migrants in receiving countries, served to discourage Wen Town migrants to send remittances for creating cultural objects and projects. From the historical records, we could not find any documentation to show any more solicitation of donations to Guannan Huaqiao Middle School. In fact, this middle school was eventually closed down because of the lack of funding and decreasing number of students.

### *PROVIDERS OF SOCIAL STATUS REWARDS*

Tangible symbolic objects or structures and cultural facilities must be recognized as valuable contributions to a given hometown. For compatriots overseas to realize social status compensation via remittances for collective consumption, the recipients must be receptive of this type of remittances and able to provide social status rewards expected by the migrants. Our field observations reveal three

important meso-level institutional actors: local government agencies in charge of overseas Chinese affairs, local societies, and transnational media.

### *Local Governments as Providers of Social Status Rewards*

Local governments in migrant hometowns are influential in determining the values of cultural objects and facilities created by remittances and rewarding the senders accordingly. Because of their power and political legitimacy, local government agencies are in the best position to offer the highest social status rewards among all institutional providers. In China, overseas Chinese affairs are overseen by two government agencies. One is the Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs (or *qiaoban*), which operates at the ministry-level — *qiaoban* of the State Council — on top to *qiaoban* at the provincial, municipal, or local levels; and the other is the Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (or *qiaolian*), which also operates from the national to township and even village levels. These government agencies were activated after China launched its economic reform (Portes and Zhou 2012; Zhou and Lee 2015). Prior to 1979, overseas Chinese affairs were not on the government's priority agenda, and existing government agencies were non-functional. All real properties and businesses of overseas Chinese were either confiscated or nationalized as state properties. People with overseas Chinese connections were not trusted, and many were even considered prime suspects of bourgeois elements, foreign spies, and anti-revolutionaries. Ties were severed and family communications were minimal, except that via mailed letters, packages containing food and goods for daily necessities, and monetary remittances, which were highly regulated by the government (Li and Zhou 2012; Zhou and Lee 2015).

China's policy toward overseas Chinese affairs changed from watching out for anti-revolutionary and sabotaging forces from the Chinese Diaspora to promoting complete cooperation between the homeland and the Chinese Diaspora. Overseas Chinese were considered "supporters, pioneers, and promoters" of China's economic reform.<sup>16</sup> Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the official

policy regarding overseas Chinese has shifted further, from attracting remittances and capital investment for economic development to nurturing diasporic ties to increase China's soft power globally. The policy also stresses the importance to helping overseas Chinese become naturalized citizens, participate in the mainstream society of their countries of residence, and grow roots in their new homelands.

Against this policy backdrop, the local government in Kan Town proactively engages its diasporic community in America and elsewhere in the world. A common strategy is to use public resources to create a "history of glory" for compatriots overseas. Those who have invested in local and regional economies, made donations for various hometown projects, or sent remittances to build symbolic structures, such as gates and statues, or cultural facilities, such as libraries, elderly centers, or public parks, in home villages would have their names prominently displayed in public places, such as official halls of fame and walls of honor. They would be invited, along with family members, as distinguished guests at official receptions or banquets, where they would have photo opportunities with high-ranking officials. And they would be conferred honorary titles, medals, and certificates of merits, as well as "political privileges" for future business ventures. The local government would also recommend those who have made significant contributions to hometown development to higher levels of honors, such as nominating them to be honorary members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) at the municipal, provincial, or even state level. The local government also invokes compatriots' sense of home and kinship through such narratives as "blood is thicker than water," praises compatriots' patriotism and altruistic love for hometown, and boosts the pride of being Chinese. To the marginalized migrants in the receiving country, these tangible and symbolic rewards from hometown comprise a "history of glory," giving compatriots a kind of social status that can be carried over to the diasporic community.

For example, Mr. Li migrated to the US in the late 1980s. Before emigration, he was a “nobody” in Kan Town who had never ever seen a county-level government official at close distance. In the US, he was on welfare and worked part-time in Los Angeles’ Chinatown. He traveled to Kan Town regularly, making small monetary donations to his home village and collecting donations from members of his hometown association in Los Angeles to help build a village gate. In an interview, Mr. Li presented himself as a leader of his hometown association, made no mention of his American life on welfare, but enthusiastically bragged about his “history of glory”:

*Officials in the Chinese Consulate General in Los Angeles know me. I always get invited to major parties held at the Consulate, such as the Chinese National Day reception. Only those distinguished overseas Chinese, usually those who have made major contributions to their hometowns, get invited. These days, a lot of Chinese leaders came to visit Los Angeles, and they would pay a visit to our hometown association. Our hometown association even received the very top state leaders, such as Mr. Jiang Zemin [former Chinese President] and Mr. Zhu Rongji [former Chinese premier]. The municipal government officials in Jiangmen [to which Kan Town belongs] know me too. Whenever I go back to China, I would call up them up and even ask them to pick me up at the airport. And they will do it.<sup>17</sup>*

To Mr. Li, being received by officials from his hometown and by higher-ranking leaders of the municipal and provincial governments in China was a big deal and, in his words, “a symbol of honor and a manifestation of status.” In fact, a lot of Kan Town migrants share the same mentality as Mr. Li, viewing the opportunities to meet officials of various levels of governments during their homecoming visits as an honor. They would enlarge their photos taken with high-ranking Chinese officials and hang them in conspicuous places at home in the US as well as in the home village to show off. The local government in Kan Town tries their best to offer assistance and symbolic social status rewards to



migrants when they return home, making them felt welcome and creating for them a “history of glory.” This kind of practice by the local government has not only greatly compensated for the marginalized circumstances that migrants endure in their host societies, but has also reaffirmed their claimed social status as leaders of ethnic organizations in the diaspora and raised the migrants’ social reputation in their hometown. In fact, such practice in Kan Town has been institutionalized to be a routine job for *qiaoban* and *qiaolian* officials, leading to a win-win situation — social status compensation for compatriots and nurturing and strengthening hometown-diaspora ties for the local government.

In contrast, the situation in Wen Town is quite different. The offering of social status rewards by Wen Town governments was changed from strong in the 1980s to weak since the 1990s. Wen Town migrants to Southeast Asia call themselves *huaqiao* or *huaren*, a diasporic identity with an embedded privilege as the “guest of *Nanyang*.” When China just opened up in the 1980s, these guests of Nanyang were wooed and revered in their hometown because of the need for their donations and contributions to hometown development. Chinese Malaysian Mr. Wang’s experience with hometown government reception is telling,

*I came back in 1982 for the first time, at the invitation of the State Council. At that time, I arrived in Beijing first, and was received by the officials of the State Council. Then I came back to Hainan and was received by the provincial governor. When I arrived in Wenchang, the municipal party secretary, the directors of the municipal qiaoban and qiaolian all showed up at the airport to receive me. That was quite a big event, with two pretty girls holding a banner which read, “Warm welcome to Mr. Wang X, leader of Malaysian overseas Chinese, back home.” Back in those days, every time I came back to Wen Town, I’d phone up officials at the municipal qiaoban and qiaolian, and they would pick me up and take me home. But now they are no longer doing it.*

*In the past, ... I gave money whenever the headmasters of the primary school asked me for it. Now the Chinese are too rich and live a well-off life, and the villagers no longer need your 100 or 200 yuan ... On a recent trip back to Wen Town, I invited the primary school headmaster for dinner, but he didn't show up. As he didn't come, I wouldn't donate any money. I don't know why he didn't come.<sup>18</sup>*

Mr. Wang's experiences point to the declining status of compatriots overseas and the waning enthusiasm in receiving compatriots overseas by Wen Town government. From the official "royal" treatment of Mr. Wang's earlier home visits to failing to "show up" at Mr. Wang's dinner, one can sense Mr. Wang's sense of loss and disappointment. Mr. Huang, an officer in charge of overseas affairs in Wen Town explained,

*Now our economy has developed well and the government has money, so there is no need to ask our compatriots overseas for money any more. In the past, we were poor, so we needed their donations to help keeping our schools or reading societies running. In the 1980s, when our compatriots overseas came back and found that our schools and health clinics were in bad shape, they would give some money to help fix things here and there. Nowadays, we basically don't take minor donations from overseas Chinese. When they come home for a visit, we basically don't receive them nor see them off; they could just contact their relatives here by themselves. If they are the real qiaoling [diasporic Chinese community leaders or leaders of overseas Chinese organizations], municipal government agencies may receive them.<sup>19</sup>*

Mr. Huang's remark points to the change of attitude from the local government. The causal factors were interactive. On the part of the local government in Wen Town, even though remittances from overseas are still sought after, the government expects more for economic development and less for cultural projects, because remittances to build what migrants want may be insufficient and may

require matching funds from the government. On the part of the migrants, the need for social status compensation was not particularly strong to begin with (in contrast to Kan Town migrants in the US), and their economic capacity of compatriots abroad did not match up the rising costs of the particular cultural objects or projects as status symbols. Mr. Huang remarks suggests that in order for a compatriot overseas to get an official reception in his or her hometown, s/he must be a “real” *qiaoling*, someone who has an established social status overseas and who are potentially “big” donors. The rising ceiling in social status recognition and the less receptive attitudes of the local government further reduce the appeal of hometown as an alternative site for social status compensation for ordinary Wen Town migrants. An elderly migrant explained,

*Our hometown government has money now and don't seem to need to rely on us overseas Chinese to send money. Besides, many overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia are not that affluent, we ordinary folks do not have a lot of money to donate. Even if we donate money, it is far from enough for any given project. Most of the time, the local government has to come up with matching funds for projects initiated by us overseas Chinese, not by them. So they are no longer as enthusiastic as before to attract overseas Chinese donations<sup>20</sup>.*

#### *Local Societies as Providers of Group Membership and Social Status Confirmation*

Local societies in migrant hometowns include a range of place-based or clan-based primary groups, clubs, and associations and the stay-behind family members. These closely-knit local societies are transnational with long-standing ties to diasporic communities overseas and can confirm migrants' group membership and social positions within local and transnational networks.

The Kuan Clan Library offers an example to illustrate how local societies provide social status confirmation to their compatriots overseas.<sup>21</sup> The Kuan clan is the largest clan in Kan Town. Its

overseas membership is estimated at more than 50,000, and most clan members live in North America. In Kan Town, the clan maintains the Kuanyu Temple (the Kuan ancestral hall) and the Kuan Clan Library, both function in sync as the anchor of the Kuan Clan Society, the main site in Kan Town for clan gatherings, meetings, activities, and events. The clan maintains close ties to its compatriots overseas who are members of the Kuan clan associations in major cities in the US and Canada.

With the strong support of countrymen overseas, the Kuan Clan Library was established in 1936, but was forced to close down later because of wars and political turmoil. Since the implementation of reform and opening up and implementation of policy concerning overseas Chinese, the clan members at home and abroad have advocated for the reopening of the library. With the generous donation from overseas clan members, it was reopened in 1982. Since then, the Kuan Clan Library has become an important cultural project of remittances by the Kuan Clan migrants and has played the role of social status compensation for donors who are keen on public and cultural affairs such as libraries, schools, temples and compilation of genealogies. Mr. Kuan's story is illustrative. Mr. Kuan was a mid-level manager of an architectural firm in Guangdong before migration. In the 1980s, he and his wife immigrated to the US under the sponsorship of their daughter who was married to a Chinatown worker in San Francisco. After arriving in the US, he worked in a restaurant and other menial jobs in Chinatown, experiencing a significant status loss. When we interviewed him in the US, he described his mental changes before and after his migration: "Before I came to San Francisco, I longed for it. After I came here, I hated it." Mr. Kuan came back home for a family reunion and visited the Kuan Clan Library in November 2010. Below is an excerpt from our field notes:

*... It was 10am at the Kuan Clan Library. By then, about 10 people had already gathered at the library, some of whom were directors of the library's board who seldom showed up there. Over the gate of the library hung a huge banner which read, "Welcome American country fellowman Mr. Kuan back home for a family reunion."*

*Everyone was busy decorating the library, preparing the tea set, or cleaning up, as if some important official from town was coming.*

*... Mr. Kuan arrived with his wife and second daughter-in-law at about 10:40a.m. All the directors of the library's board came out to greet the Kuans and accompanied them into the library. The Kuans were seated in the center of the table with all other people around them. This particular seating order put Mr. Kuan in a distinguished place to signal honor and prestige given to him by library directors and township officials. Mr. Kuan, appeared like a big shot, chatted with the people around him, and the directors smile and nodded in agreement. About 20 minutes into the chit-chat, Mr. Kuan took a stack of money, 10 one-hundred-dollar bills, he said, "Eh, this amount is for the Guangyu Monthly [a bulletin published by the Kuan clan]." He then he took out another 4 one-hundred-dollar bills and said, "And this is for you guys to get some good tea for the library." After Mr. Kuan presented the money, the cashier of the library instantly wrote out a receipt and handed it over to Mr. Kuan. Without giving it a glance, he handed the receipt to his wife and continued chatting.*

*... A little after 11 a.m., Mr. Kuan rose and bid farewell to the people. The librarian proposed that they had a group photo taken. Then they took the photo at the library gate and Mr. Kuan sat at the center of the group. After that, the Kuans left the library. The director, deputy directors, and librarian and other people saw the Kuans off until they were far away from the library.<sup>22</sup>*

In Kan Town, a large monetary donation would not simply be an indicator of the donor's generosity but also that of his or her earnings ability. Having more "wealthy" compatriots overseas in a primary group would strength the group's standing in the local community. Thus, local societies would give such donors proper receptions. Mr. Kuan's case

cited above reflects the type of reception that an ordinary Kan Town migrant like Mr. Kuan can get. Although Mr. Kuan made meager “hard-earned” money abroad, he could causally give out 1,400 US dollars, a sum that nearly doubled the average monthly wage for compatriots in Kan Town. The officers of the Kuan Clan Society were aware of Mr. Kuan’s hard life abroad, but they deliberately avoided asking his life circumstances in America; instead, they showed great enthusiasm in receiving the Kuan family. The reception for Mr. Kuan and his family was ritualistic: a huge banner with big Chinese characters acknowledging the welcoming of the Kuans, the enthusiastic company of clan leaders and officers, the seating at the head position of the table, and the reluctant parting... This kind of reception enables compatriots overseas who have endured hardships overseas to regain a sense of belong, comfort, and warmth and to have a real taste of social recognition.

Besides hometown clan-based societies, primary groups, such as stay-behind extended families, also play an important role on social status rewards provision. Relatives are very good at giving migrants proper family reception, which are ritualistic practices of conspicuous consumption, often in the forms of homecoming or farewell banquets, as well as advanced birthday parties and belated wedding receptions. Through these events, members of extended families in the hometown offer their relatives overseas stages to display and perform social status while acting as enthusiastic audience to such performances. Local government officials are often distinguished guests invited to these family events to offer words of praises to those who have made significant donations to sociocultural developments in the hometown.

In sharp contrast, local societies in Wen Town have long lost their significance in the local scene in the past thirty years. First, emigration from Wen Town to destinations in South East Asia has ebbed due to restrictive immigration policies of independent nation-states. Without continuous emigration, the number of compatriots who have lived experiences in

hometown has decreased. Second, diasporic ties are truncated due the ageing and assimilation of the migrant population. Wen Town migrants who are resettled in Southeast Asia have gradually shifted their national identity from *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese) to *huaren* (people of Chinese descent). The change in national identity has led to an emotional distance between compatriots overseas and those in the hometown. Wen Town migrants no longer identify themselves as “Chinese” but rather as “Malaysian” or “Singaporean.” Likewise, local societies in Wen Town can no longer call their compatriots overseas “patriotic Chinese” or “loyal countrymen” and offer social rewards to them as such. Moreover, as they climb up the socioeconomic ladder in the receiving countries, the reference group against which Wen Town migrants evaluate themselves has also shifted from their hometowns in China to their host societies. Greater integration into host societies has further decreased migrants’ desire to send remittances for collective consumption, especially for the purpose of social status compensation.

The Lin Ancestral Temple offers an illustrative case. The Lin Ancestral Temple, located in the center of Wen Town, was constructed mainly on donations from members of the Lin Clan, especially those living abroad. But now the temple is visited less frequently by compatriots overseas except during *Qingming* Festival associated with the annual ritual of Chinese ancestral veneration and the tending of family graves. Without continual funding support from compatriots overseas, the temple becomes neglected without basic maintenance. The main hall is rented out to be used as classrooms for a local school to make up for funding shortage. Lin clan members overseas are inclined to donate money to the Lin clan associations in their places of resettlement rather than to the Lin Ancestral Temple back in Wen Town because they have already struck roots in their host countries. Moreover, social reputation in Wen Town is becoming less appealing to compatriots overseas than in the past. With the shift from a mentality of the sojourner to that of the settler, more and more Wen Town

compatriots overseas have accepted the evaluation standard in their host societies and have attached less importance to the evaluation system of their hometown. They believe that they can attain social status in their receiving countries. As their desire for “leaving a name behind” in their hometown weakens, they are less concerned about honorary social rewards, such as “bringing honor to one’s ancestors” or “returning to one’s hometown in full glory,” and membership confirmation provided by local societies in hometown.

### *Transnational Media as “Collective Letters from Home”*

Overseas Chinese magazines (*qiaokan* 侨刊 in Chinese) are popular newsletters or bulletins about the daily life, culture, education, tradition, customs and rituals, and architecture in hometowns, as well as overseas Chinese affairs and news about diaspora-hometown interactions. Published in Chinese by government agencies (*qiaoban* or *qianlian*) or local societies in migrant-sending communities in China and sent to compatriots around the world, these transnational magazines serve as a form of “collective letters from home,” keeping compatriots overseas informed about what’s happening in hometowns (Hsu 2000; Mei 2007). As of 2011, there were more than 300 *qiaokan* published in China, including 186 in Guangdong Province and 86 in Jiangmen. Jiangmen, of which Kan Town is part, is known as China’s number one and largest hometown to Chinese overseas. *Qiaokan* published there are not only most numerous but also rich in content.

Take the *Guangyu Monthly*, published by the Kuan Clan in Kan Town, for an example. The *Guangyu Monthly* was first published in 1925 with a wide readership in the Chinese Diaspora where the Kuan Clan members live. In the magazine, various “letters of appreciation” can be found, extolling the virtues of donors’ remittances back home. Besides providing hometown information, this magazine, like other *qiaokan*, serves an important function of offering social status rewards to donors. For example, the *Guangyu Monthly* carried a report of Ms. Xie. Ms. Xie, a *qiaoling* living in Canada,



marries to the Kuan family. When she returned home for a visit, she made donations to the Kuan Clan Library, the Kuan Ancestral Temple, and the *Guanyu Monthly*. The report reads,

*Deep Affection of Hometown by Canadian Kuan Clan Member Auntie Xie*<sup>23</sup>

...

*Auntie Xie...invited relatives, friends, and former colleagues, a total of over 30 people to a gathering at the Canada Hall on the second floor of the Arc De Triomphe Hotel. There were three tables for tea and dinner. They chatted freely about their lives and feelings when they were parted. Ms. Xie gave each person a red envelop of lucky money. It was a wonderful occasion and all were very happy. Seven directors of the Kuan Clan Library attended the banquet. She was especially concerned about the Kuan Clan Ancestral Hall and donated 30,000 yuan to it. She also donated 500 yuan each to the Kuan Clan Library and Guanyu Monthly. The Managing Committee of the Kuan Clan Library was grateful. After discussion, we all thank Auntie Xie for her faithful support for the Kuan Clan Library and promoted the development of our library. We will always remember her. In order to thank her charity, we have decided to make a ceramic portrait of her placed in the front chamber of the Guanyu Academy to inspire future generations to learn from her noble deeds of patriotism, love for hometown, and support for education.*<sup>24</sup>

Ms. Xie migrated to Canada in the early 1980s and had worked as a shop assistant in a local supermarket for nearly 20 years. When describing her life in Canada, Ms. Xie used the word “*ai*”, which implied an experienced social status gap in the receiving country. When she was interviewed, Ms. Xie only mentioned her donation to the Kuan Clan Ancestral Hall in the amount of 30,000 yuan in passing without any emphasis. Her low-key attitude was in sharp contrast to the exaggerated praises by the *Guanyu Monthly*. Here, we observed the different “performance norms” abided by the donors and

the providers of social status compensation. Donors knew that their deeds would be acknowledged in the *Guanyu Monthly*, which was circulated to hundreds and thousands of compatriots overseas. This way, the *Guanyu Monthly* acted as an effective provider of social status rewards.

Publishers of *qiaokan* take great care to make sure that all overseas donors are given high praises and honorable mention of their generosity. In the process of editing the magazines, they also maintain and strengthen ties to compatriots living in diasporic communities. One *qiaokan* editor Mr. Zou said the following in an interview,

*If a compatriot in China donates 300 yuan or more, and a compatriot overseas US\$100 or more, his or her photo will be posted on the first page of the Guanyu Monthly. If a compatriot donates more, the photo will be bigger. This is very important to overseas Chinese. Even if you are very rich, it is useless if you are not known. If you donate more money, your photo will be enlarged and posted, and people in the whole world would know you. Our readers spread all over the world, and they can see your photos in our qiaokan and know that you are very successful.*<sup>25</sup>

Social status evaluation in the hometown requires the acts of donations or conspicuous consumption. Like Mr. Zou said that: “Even if you are very rich, it is useless if you are not known.” *Qiaokan* serve to play up the role of donors and spread the praises beyond the hometown. However, social reputation is only relevant to specific groups and within a closely knit network, like the migrants from the same town or clan. It is nonetheless very important for the migrants, especially those who cannot attain it in their host societies.

*Qiaokan* also serve as a bridge between hometown and diaspora, passing detailed information and circumstances about hometowns and the motherland to compatriots overseas, keeping alive their imagined community, the feeling of having never left home, and the sense of belonging back home so that they can develop a transnational identity of “both being here and there.”

Unlike Kan Town and many other migrant-sending communities in China, in which *qiaokan* are published regularly, few *qiaokan* are published in Wen Town. The absence of *qiaokan* in this traditional migrant-sending community is not accidental, but reflects the declining significance of local societies as the organizational basis for hometown-diaspora interactions, the dwindling institutional support for overseas Chinese affairs on the part of the local government, and the weakened attachment of the diaspora to hometown. Lacking this transnational media as an effective medium in expressing or performing social status, Wen Town migrants are further discouraged to send remittances for collective consumption.

## *DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION*

In this paper, we aim to explain what drives Chinese migrants to send remittances for collective consumption to their ancestral hometowns and how they achieve their remitting objectives. Prior research pay ample attention to migrant remittances for household subsistence and economic development in hometowns, focusing particularly on the effects of either individual socio-demographic characteristics or sending country government policies on the remittances sending. We contribute to the existing literature by zooming in on a unique form of transnational practice which involves the sending of a different type of monetary remittances — remittances for collective consumption. We do so by developing an analytical framework, taking into account the interaction between multi-level factors, to examine a social status compensation hypothesis. We argue that the sending of remittances for collective consumption is not merely associated with migrants' own socioeconomic status but also with the difficulty of having one's achieved social status recognized in the host society, and that such behavior is affected by intersecting individual, contextual, and institutional factors at multiple levels transnationally. Based on our analysis of two ethnographic case studies, we find that a migrant's

experience of a social status gap in the host society increases his or her desire for social status compensation elsewhere, and that the sending of cultural remittances to the migrant hometown serves as a mechanism for filling the social status gap. However, the realization of social status compensation requires the intersection of a number of individual and institutional factors. Our comparative analysis leads to several significant observations.

First, our ethnographic data indicate that the felt or experience social status gap in host societies is the main driver for migrants' sending of remittances to their hometowns for collective consumption. Earlier emigration from Kan Town was part of labor migration, and contemporary emigration from Kan Town, as a family chain migration, also comprise of migrants from rural and low socioeconomic backgrounds. Upon arrival in the United States, many are residentially segregated and work in ethnic enclaves. Even if they are able to achieve economic gains through ethnic entrepreneurship and employment in ethnic enclaves, they find it hard to have their social status recognized because of the marginalized group status in the mainstream host society. By contrast, Wen Town migrants are pressured to assimilate into their newly decolonized nation-states in Southeast Asia after World War II and, in the process, their group position becomes less marginalized than their counterparts in North America. So the social status gap that Wen Town migrants faced in their host societies is not as large as that faced by Kan Town migrants, and the desire for social status compensation in the hometown is not as strong.

Second, while the social status gap propels migrants to seek social status compensation through the sending of the cultural remittances, the migrant's economic capacity to do so is not merely determined by their own individual socioeconomic circumstances, but also by the relative costs of cultural objects or projects in migrant hometowns as social status symbols. Such costs are relatively low for Kan Town migrants and high for Wen Town migrants due to wage differential and difference in the strength of currency value in receiving countries. The average wages of Kan Town migrants in

the United States are much higher than those in their hometown, and the US dollars they earn can be exchanged for more Chinese yuan, making it more affordable for them, and even for low-skilled migrants, to obtain social status compensation through remitting to create cultural objects or projects. By contrast, the average wages of Wen Town migrants in Southeast Asia are not high enough to create a distinct earnings advantage, and relatively weaker currency, compared to US dollars, makes it more expensive for them to afford meaningful remittances for collective consumption.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, whether migrants can realize social status compensation in their hometowns depends on how hometown institutional actors — local government, local societies, and transnational media — act to provide social status rewards or confirmation. We find that hometown receptions differ significantly between Kan Town and Wen Town. In Kan Town, the attitude of local governments are positive and enthusiastic, offering different means to make donors feel good and envied, such as creating a “history of glory” for compatriots overseas and giving them “royal” receptions. Local societies also offer venues and platforms for clan members and relatives overseas to perform social status in full glory. And transnational media, operated by local government agencies or local societies constantly celebrate compatriots’ achievements and praise their good deeds in writing, spreading their fame through transnational networks. These institutional actors interact to facilitate the realization of social status compensation. In contrast, the enthusiasm in receiving compatriots overseas has gradually waned in Wen Town because of decreased international migration and weakened diasporic ties. The lack of institutional support at the local level in the hometown, combined with the lack of desire for social status compensation among compatriots overseas, inhibits migrants’ sending of remittances for collective consumption. The decrease in such remittances in turn negatively affects hometown reception.

In summary, the choice of hometown as a site for social status compensation is out of the migrant’s rational consideration. International migrants’ social status is less entrenched in the status

hierarchy of their hometowns in contrast to those who have never emigrated, and their identity as compatriots overseas (especially those in receiving countries that are more developed and of higher geopolitical status, such as the United States), are generally admired and respected. Thus, migrants who experience social status gaps can possibly use their hometowns in person or in spirit, as alternative sites for social status compensation or confirmation. A classic means is through conspicuous consumption, which existing studies have shown ample evidence (Durand et al. 1996; Kurien 2008; Liang and Morooka 2008). A less documented means is through the sending of remittances for collective consumption. Among Chinese international migrants, both conspicuous consumption and the creation of tangible symbolic structures and cultural facilities are utilized for displaying and performing social status, but the latter has been practiced more frequently because, compared to the former, it is more respected for its seemingly altruistic or philanthropic motive, and more acceptable by local societies and interpersonal networks without causing envy and resentment to senders.

Our findings suggest that migrants' sending of remittances for collective consumption cannot be understood either from a self-interested or an altruistic perspective. For migrants who encounter significant social status gaps, real or imagined, in the host society, the sending of remittances to create visible symbolic structures and cultural facilities in hometowns can be a feasible, affordable, and effective means for social status compensation. Unlike conspicuous consumption, remittances for collective consumption constitute a type of social status symbols which allows migrants to show off their advantaged economic status in ways that conform to the informal cultural norms in hometowns. However, whether the senders can realize social status compensation depends on whether the receivers in hometowns can provide the senders with stages to perform, as well as whether the receivers can attend the senders' performances, acting as engaging audience and referees to make judgments about rewards. As a performer, the migrant would try to build an image of the altruistic compatriot who loves

his or her hometown. The not-for-profit nature of his or her donations and remittances can generate public praises, which are transferred into social reputation. Thus, hometown reception becomes a powerful factor to explain migrants' remitting behavior and variations by hometowns.

Migration studies show that higher-status (socioeconomically more mobile) migrants are more likely than their lower-status coethnics to participate in transnationalism because they are in a better social position with greater economic capacity to remit (Portes et al. 1999; Portes et al. 2002; Portes and Zhou 2012; Zhou and Lee 2015). The notion of social status compensation enables us to go beyond individual factors to understand why some migrant groups, and why the less socioeconomic mobile members of a group, are more likely than others to send remittances for collective consumption. The analytical framework that we propose here helps us to understand the complex patterns of transnational practices. It contributes to the existing literature on migrant remittances by establishing the linkage between remittances for collective consumption and social status attainment and by offering a nuanced understanding of how individual self-interest and altruism are constrained by multi-level institutional factors in both receiving and sending countries.

Our findings are not conclusive, however, because of data limitation. Although our analytical framework may be applicable to some groups of international migrants, it needs further theoretical fine-tuning and empirical support. The current comparative analysis, which is only narrowly focused on remittances sent to migrant hometowns at the village or township level, should be considered an initial step in the development of a more sophisticated theoretical perspective that can account for diverse migrant motives in engaging in the sending of different types of remittances or in other forms of transnational practices. Future research should pay greater attention to the broader dynamic processes in which individual agency interacts with multi-level institutional and contextual factors, taking into account the differences in the histories of migration and resettlement, group positions in the

status hierarchy of host societies, and levels of economic development in both sending and receiving communities.



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## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> *Qiaoxiang* means migrant hometown in Chinese.

<sup>3</sup> "Siyi" is a traditional migrant-sending region, encompassing four counties of Xinhui, Taishan, Kaiping, Enping. Today, the Siyi region is under the jurisdiction of Jiangmen City, Guangdong Province. It is called *Wuyi Qiaoxiang* because of the large size of compatriots overseas. See <http://wqj.kaiping.gov.cn/qkxx/gdqk.htm>, last accessed on January 25, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> *Kaiping County Annals*, 2002, compiled by Kaiping Local Annals Office (Beijing: Zhonghua Publishing House); *Statistics of Donations by Overseas Chinese, Foreign Citizens of Chinese Origin and Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan Compatriots Over the Years*, 2010, compiled by Kaiping Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (internally circulated official documents); *Hainan Statistical Yearbook 2011*, 2011 (Beijing: China Statistics Press). In official data collection, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan compatriots are often put into the same category as overseas Chinese and foreign citizens



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of Chinese descent, and detailed data for Chinese emigrants are not available. However, the data for Wenchang and Kaiping are comparable since they share the same statistical criteria.

<sup>5</sup> *Wenchang County Annals*, 2000, compiled by Wenchang Local Annals Compilation Commission, Hainan (Beijing: Fangzhi Press); *List of Wenchang City's Overseas Chinese Donors*, compiled by Wenchang Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (document for internal circulation), p.17 and p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> Ethnoburb is a term coined by geographer Wei Li (1998) to refer to an ethnic suburb that has a large concentration of ethnic minority immigrants and ethnic businesses.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Ms. Chow, a Chinese American from Kan Town in Chinatown, Los Angeles, September 11, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Mr. Wu, a Kan Town migrant in Chinatown, Los Angeles, September 15, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mr. Wu, a Kan Town migrant in Chinatown, Los Angeles, October 5, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> These two are expressions in Cantonese. “*Tan shijie*” (叹世界) means to enjoy the world, or to enjoy life with glamor and glory as well as to travel around the world. “*Ai shijie*” (捱世界) means to endure the world, or to endure hardships or to suffer, an expression inherited from the older generations of immigrants who worked as laborers and coolies. Wuyi migrants often use these two opposite expressions to describe their transnational living.

<sup>11</sup> Guests of Nanyang, *Nanyangke* in Chinese, refer to those who have migrated to and resettled in Southeast Asian countries. *Gui-fan* is a term used by overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia to Chinese migrants who have assimilated into the local culture of the receiving country. *Fan* means “alien land” in Chinese, and *gui* “being assimilated to.”

<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the more integrated native-born children of Kan Town migrants also have less desire to remit to their ancestral hometown even though they have greater ability to do so as compared to their immigrant parents or grandparents. This is due to two other reasons. First, the more integrated native-

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born strive to have their achieved social status reified in the mainstream society and are thus less likely to look to foreign born coethnics as their reference group. Second, the more integrated native-born are more detached from their parents or grandparents' ancestral hometown and are less bounded by extended family obligations to send remittances.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Mr. Kuan, an American Chinese in Kan Town, Kaiping, November 3, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Reference obtained by one of the authors at Wen Town Guannan Reading Society, November 3, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> See <http://qwgzyj.gqb.gov.cn/qwhg/146/1346.shtml>, last accessed on January 25, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Face-to-face interview with Mr. Li, a Kan Town migrant who lived in Chinatown, Los Angeles, September 7, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Mr Wang, a leader of overseas Chinese in Wen Town, February 12, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Mr. Huang, Vice Chairman of Wen Town CPPCC in charge of overseas Chinese affairs, February 15, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Mr. Yan, a Chinese Singaporean in Wen Town, Wenchang, Hainan Province, February 11, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> "Guangyu Temple" is also called "Guan Clan Ancestral Hall," and is in the name of Guan Clan Temple in Kan Town. Since the Guan Clan Library is the carrier of Guanyu Temple, the two are pretty much the same in personnel, missions and functions. But in the Chinese context, as public cultural undertakings, libraries can carry out activities much more easily than a temple. Therefore, the below-mentioned Guan Clan Library also includes Guangyu Temple.

<sup>22</sup> November 9, 2010, author's field work records at the Guan Clan Library of Kan Town.

<sup>23</sup> Kuans considers the women who marry to Kuan as the Kuan Clan member, and usually call her Auntie plus her original name.

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<sup>24</sup> *Guangyu Monthly* Issue 112 (October to December, 2010), internal reference, p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with the editor of *Guangyu Monthly* in Kan Town, Kaiping, Guangdong Province, December 29, 2010.