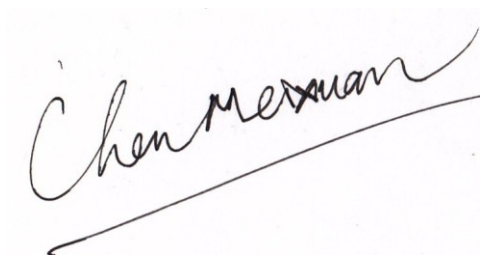


**“Eating *Huaqiao*” and the Left Behind:
the moral and social-economic
consequences of the return of Overseas
Chinese to a South China Village**

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Thesis submitted for the examination of Doctor of Philosophy
July 2013

I, Meixuan Chen, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chen Meixuan". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.

Abstract

This thesis draws on 18 months of participation observation in a Hakka-speaking, lineage-dominated village in Guangdong Province in South China. It is concerned with the perspective of the village locals interacting with the return of *huaqiao* (Overseas Chinese) since the 1980s. *Huaqiao* contribute significantly to the village infrastructure and welfare provision.

This thesis asks: do lineage-village community traditions and values necessarily hinder the individualisation process; and how do we understand the individualistic pursuits in the notionally communal projects? The thesis documents the moral, socio-economic impact of the return of Overseas Chinese on the local villagers. This is done by examining key events, individuals and rituals. The ethnographic data includes the disputed demolition of a public building and the naming of private houses; two key individuals, a vengeful son who returned and an “actually existing matriarch”; and the co-existing practices of earth burial and cremation. The thesis analyses the power of lineage elite elders; individualism and traditional collectivism; the local logic of success and bitterness; women’s power in the lineage-dominated community and social differentiation.

The return of *huaqiao* exposes the dual nature of village practices and events, which are often seen as communal and family projects. The tension between individuals’ pursuit of autonomy and their aspiration to identify with the traditional values of community is explored. I argue that the traditions and values of the small-scale community such as the lineage or village do not necessarily hinder Chinese individualisation, contrary to Yan Yunxiang’s theory. The expansion of both communal and individualistic space can mutually facilitate each other.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Allen Abrahamson (UCL) and Charles Stafford (LSE). I would like to thank in particular Charles, who has truly expanded my knowledge of Chinese anthropology. I should also like to thank my initial supervisor, Michael Stewart (UCL), for encouraging me to do a PhD in the first place. Chris Russell always provided timely administrative support.

I thank the following program for the financial support throughout my study in London: a Shell Centenary scholarship, an Overseas Research Scholarship (ORS), and a Hong Kong KC Wong scholarship.

I thank Dr. Luke Freeman and Professor Michael Rowland in the department for reading some of the chapters. I would like to thank those of my colleagues, peers and friends, who were generous in discussing ideas and reading over various drafts of my thesis: Deborah Soothil, Beata Switek, Fabio Gygi, Dimitra Kofti, Matan Shapiro, Magda Craciun, Jennie Siu, Shuli Wang, Vicki Spence, Shin Dee Liew. Catalina Tesar in Romania and Carolin Morlock in Germany read the whole draft with encouragement and critical suggestions. I would like to thank in particular Dr James Johnston (LSE) for his comments and excellent proofreading.

I am indebted to all those people in Mashan, Dabu County of Guangdong Province in China that I was able to talk to, for their generosity and laughter, and the time and patience they took to answer my questions.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents Chen Xiulan and Chen Shiquan in China and my in-laws in New Zealand, who have been supportive of my studies; and last but not least, my long-suffering husband, Ben Yong.

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Introduction

1. Prologue

During my first few months in the village in 2007, a ten-year-old girl, called Wisdom, would come to study English with me for half an hour every evening. During these lessons, she told me much about her life as a grade-five student in the village primary school, which had been a lineage school in the pre-1949 era. Among the many things she told me about her life, such as her vivid descriptions of her fierce mother and the barbaric boys from the rival lineage, were her accounts of the visits that *huaqiao* (华侨, Overseas Chinese) made to the village. She complained about her obligatory participation in the staged receptions for these *huaqiao*, which were organised by her school. “Every time some *huaqiao* come back, we have to wait by the village road to welcome them, even if it is very hot and we are sweating a lot in the sun. Sometimes we must stand for several hours. And there’s no water to drink. The school headmaster and all our teachers are there too.” When these visits took place, Wisdom and her schoolmates were told to bring a bouquet of plastic flowers, and they were lined up in single file along both sides of the road near the entrance to the village. Upon the arrival of the *huaqiao*, they raised the bouquets chanting loudly in a concerted manner, “Welcome! Welcome! A joyful welcome!” Given that the village is located in a sub-tropical area of south China, Wisdom’s complaints about the heat and suffering were by no means an exaggeration.

Before my fieldwork, when I was reading the magazine produced in the village to celebrate its Overseas Chinese connection, I had already encountered many repetitive narratives about this kind of elaborate public reception performance. Later, I also watched some videos of various *huaqiao* receptions, which featured the same classic public greeting rituals involving students and other locals lining up along the roads to welcome the returning *huaqiao*. Obviously, Wisdom did not personally know any of these returning *huaqiao*, who had left the village about 40 years earlier, long before her birth. Yet, together with the other children, she was supposed to repeatedly demonstrate her ecstasy at the “homecoming” of *huaqiao* on these official occasions. The “joyful welcome” in which she was required to

participate was probably not proportionate to any personal feeling of hers. Nevertheless, during her daily life in the village, she must have learnt about the importance of *huaqiao* on many occasions. For instance, she studied in classrooms and played on the basketball courts named after certain overseas donors. She walked on the village paths and across the bridges financed by and named after the village's overseas compatriots. Her grandparents were members of the village-based Elders' Association, the activities of which were mainly financed by *huaqiao*. The most elaborate ancestral tombs she attended to worship were re-established by *huaqiao* after the 1980s. And, as I later learnt, her mother married her father in the first place partially because of his household's overseas connection, which was perceived to be a privilege.

Faith was the 19-year-old daughter of my fifth hostess in the village. A quiet and sensitive young woman, her anxiety and ambition was shaped by her experience of growing up in this *qiaoxiang* – an ancestral village to Overseas Chinese. Most of her village peers, including her younger brother, had left to work in factories in Guangzhou or Shenzhen after secondary school at the age of 15. However, Faith was one of the limited few who had made it to university. She had gone to Jiaying University, in the local municipal capital of Meizhou Prefecture, to undertake teacher training. Yet, she was frustrated because her university was only two hours' bus journey from the village and, consequently, she was not counted as someone who had really left or “gone out the door” (*chumen*, 出门): an important indicator of someone's success. In fact, as she pointed out, her result in the national university entrance examination (*gaokao*, 高考) was better than that of another fellow student from the same village, who had gone to study in the provincial capital of Guangzhou. Despite his worse performance in the exams and the fact that his college was lower down the hierarchy than her own, he was perceived to have “gone out the door”. Faith found it unfair that she was not counted as someone who had left the village, and that her “return” therefore counted for little compared to those who had gone further away. Largely for this reason, Faith disliked Chinese New Year, when, over the “reunion meal”, she had to face her extended family members who she felt looked down upon her.

At the beginning of her second year in college, Faith had already dismissed the option of following the usual career path of graduates from her course, which was to become a primary school teacher in their home county. Despite the relatively low income that school teachers earned, it was one of the few “iron rice bowl” (*tiefanwan*, 铁饭碗) jobs left, which provided guaranteed employment and a reliable salary from the state. Despite her own desire to be closer to her parents and against the advice of her elder sister, who was working in Guangzhou after graduating from a prestigious university, Faith had resolved to try her luck in the coastal cities. She knew well this would mean eating more bitterness and much less stability than being a school teacher. When asked why she had made this decision, she said that at least this way she was giving herself a chance at achieving success and that if she made a fortune one day she would “of course” make donations to the village’s public causes, “just as *huaqiao* have done”.

For villagers living in this *qiaoxiang* (侨乡, ancestral place of Overseas Chinese), where ties to Overseas Chinese are so important, attitudes to these *huaqiao* are nonetheless complex. Evidently, Wisdom was, at least, not always happy or excited about the return visits that *huaqiao* made to the village. For Faith, the presence of *huaqiao*’s wealth in the village was both a source of pressure to leave and a source of aspiration to strive for individual success. As will be seen in this thesis, this ambivalence towards *huaqiao* and the contradictory forces of leaving and returning shaped by these Overseas Chinese lineage members, reflected in the stories of Wisdom and Faith, are shared and experienced by many other villagers.

2. Separation, Individualisation, and Homeland Philanthropy

In the remainder of this introduction, I will first briefly introduce the basic argument of my thesis. Then I summarise Yan Yunxiang’s (2003) individualisation thesis, followed by the employment of Charles Stafford’s cultural schema of separation and reunion and (to a lesser extent) Susanne Brandtstädter’s South China paradox as critiques of Yan’s thesis. The history of homeland philanthropy is also discussed. In the final section I will set out a short summary of the thesis chapters.

Individuals are related to their family and community. Separation enables autonomy and individualisation, but it can also intensify one's sense of belonging and desire for return and to become actively involved through homeland philanthropy. The contradictory pulls between independence and connection can be present at the same time within one individual. Separation and return is an effective means of capturing the reality and the sentiment of rural Chinese individuals, as people behave in contradictory ways.

As well as being part of an individual's experience, the contradictory pulls become part of the collective communal experience. In a place such as a *qiaoxiang* (侨乡, the ancestral home of Overseas Chinese), returning is frequently experienced and manifested in many ways, regardless of whether or not a particular person has ever personally undertaken migration. As I will show in all the upcoming chapters, but especially in Chapter Two, returning is not only an issue for the returnees, but also for those who stay behind. The village counterparts of *huaqiao* (华侨, Overseas Chinese) regret not having migrated in the past, because they have consequently been denied the opportunity to make a glorious return to the village. This in turn has implications for their status in the present, their opportunities for the future, and their prospects after death.

On the other hand, the prestige attached to those who do return encourages the exodus of the younger generation from the village. Faith, the student at the teacher training college mentioned in the Prologue, is an example of such a young person, who has been inspired to migrate as a result of her exposure to and interactions with past migrants. These young people are on their way to achieving autonomy and, in the eyes of the villagers, the further from home they travel, the better and the more successful they have become.

Homeland philanthropy is evidently a way of overcoming separation. People identify with their homeland. They cannot just leave. They want to return as well. They return for both the attachment and the experience of being powerful, which is demonstrated through their ability to change something in their home village. Homeland philanthropy is not in conflict with gaining individual power or prestige.

They are complementary. Indeed, feelings of belonging and being powerful are connected in important ways.

Homeland philanthropy is about the individual experience of power and prestige. It is an established way of becoming a visible individual in the community. Yet people may frame their individualistic ambitions and pursuit of self-interests in the traditional discourse of loyalty to one's hometown and lineage, and they may achieve individual success and recognition through community-oriented projects. This is one reason that returnees make altruistic efforts on behalf of their deceased parents and/or grandparents.

This thesis asks: do lineage-village community traditions and values necessarily hinder the individualisation process; and how do we understand the individualistic motivations in projects that are notionally communal? The thesis aims to document the moral, socio-economic impact of the return of Overseas Chinese on the local villagers. This is done by examining key events, individuals and rituals. The ethnographic data includes the disputed demolition of a public building (Chapter Three) and the naming of family houses (Chapter Four); two powerful individuals—a vengeful son who returned (Chapter Five) and an “actually existing matriarch” (Chapter Six); and the co-existing practices of earth burial and cremation (Chapter Seven). The thesis analyses the fragile power resurgence of lineage elite elders; individualism and traditional collectivism; the local logic of success and eating bitterness; women's power in the lineage-dominated community; and symbolic differentiations in the realm of body disposal.

The fieldwork on which this thesis draws consisted of eighteen months' participant observation in a lineage-dominated, Hakka-speaking village in South China. What sets my research apart from other research on *qiaoxiang* (e.g. Woon, 1984; Pieke, 2004) is my interest in the agency of locals—both elite and ordinary villagers. Hence, my discussion in the chapters that follow is more concerned with the perspective of villagers like Wisdom and Faith than with the perspective of Overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*). I focus on those who have been living in the village and their experiences of the period of intensive return visits by *huaqiao* that began in the 1980s, i.e. following China's period of "opening up". I explore the attitudes

and responses of these villagers, in particular their ambivalence towards *huaqiao* and their aspirations and expectations in life, considering how these emerge as a result of the locals' direct interaction with *huaqiao* and through the wider impact of living in a village which has been profoundly shaped by its connection with *huaqiao*. The ethnography is concerned with public buildings as well as family housing; key public events and discourses as well influential individuals' family histories and life experiences. During my fieldwork, I mingled with both elite lineage male elders, who continue to uphold the lineage ideals with the assistance of overseas finance, and women and children in the community.

This is a study of a *qiaoxiang* as much as it is a study of the tension between individuals and their community in contemporary South China. My focus on the village differs from research into *huaqiao* in their destination countries (Kuhn, 2009; Ong & Nonini, 1997; L. Pan & Singapore, 1998; Pieke & Mallee, 1999; G. Wang, 2001) or their business networks (Douw, Huang, & Godley, 1999; Li, 1999; Xiang, 2005). Based on ethnographic research, it is distinct from the historical studies of *qiaoxiang* in pre-1949 era (Chen, 1940; Hsu, 2000a; Woon, 1984). Oxfeld's (2004: 90-103) work is exceptional in that it does examine how locals view the returnees and other locals. She observes:

Return is also an important analytic category because each return has important political, social, economic and cultural consequences—not only for those who return but also for the sending and receiving communities” (Oxfeld and Long 2004: 4).

I will introduce more of her work in Chapter Two. In contrast to studies of “new transnational villages in Fujian” (Mette Thunø & Pieke, 2005), my study concerns an old *qiaoxiang*, which has a history of transnational emigration dating back before 1949.

The location and timing of my fieldwork village makes it different from Watson's (1975) study on the role of the lineage as a social mechanism in organising overseas emigration in the 1970s from Hong Kong to Britain. In Watson's case, the emigration to Britain of Man lineage members was at its initial sending stage and many emigrants had not become permanent residents in Britain or obtained

British citizenship. The village of my research was an emigrant community in a remote and mountainous area sending its members overseas before 1949, but, 40 years later, it has evolved so that it is now the recipient of former villager migrants. All the returned visitors have already become holders of foreign passports or Hong Kong residency permits. I will ask how the community views their visits and returns and consider what kind of interactions and implications may play out in various arenas.

The timing of the research makes the project especially interesting. Though the presence of *huaqiaos*' socio-economic power remains strong in the village, by 2008, the local community's overseas connection was weakening as the generation born in China before 1949 and who subsequently moved overseas gradually has begun to die out. In the Reform era (1979 onwards), the village community did not resume its overseas migration like that in Wenzhou, and it is not located at the forefront of the new economic zone like Guangzhou or Panyu city at the heart of the Pearl River Delta (See Hoe, 2007; Yow, 2005). As a result of its relative proximity to the industrial cities and urban centres such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Dongguan, once villagers gained the opportunity to leave in the 1990s, they have started to pursue rural-to-urban internal migration instead of overseas migration. There is a link between these two strands of migration. As the retired school headmaster acknowledged, "Before we ate *huaqiao* [华侨]; now we eat *dagong zai* [打工仔, young rural males who are migrants in the city]". In the thesis, I will ask what exactly this link is and how it has come into being.

Individualisation in contemporary rural China: the work of Yan Yunxiang

In Yan's (2003, 2009) influential work, the northern mainland Chinese villagers he studied have shifted from being collective-oriented and collectivised towards being individualised. This trend towards individualisation Yan views as characterised by egoism and a lack of civility. His description of the route to individualisation in China may be simplified as the following process: first, leaving home—if one wants to succeed, one needs to leave home and the collective-oriented place; second, embracing consumption and being exposed to modernisation. That is, one has to become a non-peasant. Put crudely, Yan sees individualisation, and the

pursuit of individual self-interest as inconsistent with—and obstructed by—forms of collectivity such as the family, village, lineage and tradition. As I have begun to suggest, my research suggests that the pursuit of individual self-interest and living within and with forms of collectivity are not always in conflict with each other. These forms of collectivity can be understood as anti-individualisation, but in the process towards individualisation, they may play a positive role.

My research is different from Yan's in two important ways. First, my fieldwork material comes from south China where lineage is historically strong and has been extensively revitalised after the 1980s. This differs from Yan's fieldwork site where lineage presence is historically much weaker. Second, the migration factor is prominent in my research, and includes two strands of migration: first, the return of Overseas Chinese migrants (*huaqiao*), i.e., the reversal of previous emigration; and second, depopulation, i.e., rural-to-urban migration after the late 1980s. In contrast, Yan's fieldwork village remains a farming village with little rural-to-urban migration at the time of his fieldwork in the 1990s. In my field site, villagers have witnessed how *huaqiao* have come back to the village in order to express their loyalty to the traditional collective and to demonstrate that they remain part of the collective. In doing so, these returning *huaqiao* are actively promoting traditional values and lineage ideals. This raises interesting questions in relation to Yan's arguments about individualisation. The emphasis placed on the collective and traditional values by *huaqiao*, who are viewed as emblematic of success and wealth, seems at odds with the individualisation processes that Yan describes for north China. Is it possible to identify individualistic agency in such a collectively-oriented setting? And how does the tension between the individual and community play out?

Yan's comments in the edited volume "iChina" (Hansen, 2010) are noteworthy, especially those on Li Minghuan's case study. Li Minghuan (LI, 2010: 250-270) studies a group of Overseas Chinese returnees who settled down in a collective farm in Fujian Province in southern China after returning from Indonesia in the 1950s. As overseas returnees, they first enjoyed a variety of preferential treatments from the state but have gradually started to lose their privilege since the 1980s. In response, they have resorted to their former socialist collective identity to fight for

their benefits in the market-oriented economy. Yan (2010: 29-30) suggests these overseas returnees are “losing individuals” rather than “rising individuals” since they reinvent and re-energise their collective identity in order to get some benefits from the state. He sees this kind of development as an “anti-individualisation” process. What does not occur to Yan is that the augmentation of a collective is not necessarily mutually exclusive to individualisation.

According to Yan, with the disintegration of the traditional communal power structure, there has been a corresponding rise of private life for the individual and the family. He juxtaposes the decline of patriarchal power and the rise of the individual. Yan claims (2003) that, “By the end of the 1990s patriarchy as an institutionalised power no longer existed in Xiajia families”. He continues, “The waning of the patriarchal order” has opened new space for the “individual-centered development” (2003:218). Yan’s argument places individualisation and traditional community power in a zero-sum opposition.

The diminishing importance of collective-oriented village tradition in Yan’s research, however, is not a result of villagers’ voluntary choice or individual action. Rather, as Yan portrays effectively, the all-encompassing socialist state after 1949 has successfully implemented a series of social engineering projects against village tradition. These Chinese Communist Party (CCP) state projects create an unintended consequence: “a new social space” (2003:232) for individualisation. As Yan comments, his finding differs from the conventional scheme in social science that the growth of individual and private life is closely linked to the arrival of industrialisation and urbanisation. Yan concludes that the Chinese individuals are “uncivil and incomplete” as they are egoistic and their individuality is limited to the private sphere (2003:225-6).

It should be noted that Yan’s long-term fieldwork material was collected in Xiajia village, which is located in north China where lineage is historically much weaker than that in most parts of south China. The cross-regional difference has long been noted by scholars on China. Duara (1990) and Rubie Watson (1990) provide a historical comparison of lineage power between north China and south China in a volume (Esherick and Rankin, 1990) on Chinese local elites. Duara (1988:86-88)

admits he hesitates to apply the term “lineage” to north China as a significant factor to analyze village politics. According to Yan, this is also true in Xiajia village, where there are more than 30 surname groups.

My fieldwork village differs extensively from Yan’s. Yan claims that the individualisation process as a general trend of social transformation is taking place at a national level despite regional variations (2009:xxxviii). This argument and analysis is convincing, but some questions have to be raised as to how we understand the individualisation process in rural areas of south China where traditional collective identity has received renewed emphasis. Is lineage-village community necessarily a hindrance to the private life of villagers? In the next section, I will link the individualisation thesis with the revitalisation of collective identity in south China.

The South China Paradox

There are other bodies of work which raise questions about the generality and validity of Yan’s individualisation theory. Brandtstädter’s ‘South China Paradox’ suggests that individualisation is not simply a matter of individuals freeing themselves from collective constraints. The paradox identified by Brandtstädter (2003) in relation to Fujian Province, where she carried out fieldwork in the 1990s, is also relevant to my research focus. What Brandtstädter called the “South China Paradox” (2003: 89-90) emerges from the following three observations about the relationship between socialism, the market economy and tradition in China: first, China remains a state socialist country; second, Guangdong Province as a whole is where the market-oriented economy has been most successful; third, the restoration of temple communities and corporate kinship groups has also been extensively visible in south China. In a similar vein to Brandtstädter, the Chinese historian Qin Hui (2003:101) also points out the seemingly “illogical” development of lineage in South China in relation with individualisation and modernisation. I will discuss Qin’s powerful work further in my concluding chapter.

It is generally acknowledged that the capitalist economy has been more developed in south China than in north China. This is echoed by Xin Liu’s discussion of space and mobility, “Guangdong and its associated images meant social prestige

and economic power” (Liu, 1997:91). The coastal cities of Guangdong Province are placed on the top of the spatial hierarchy related to economic prosperity. It is the region that has pioneered the so-called “reform and open-door” policy. Global capital and foreign investments have extensively penetrated the coastal area. The investment from Overseas Chinese constitutes the most significant part of this global capitalism: recent scholarship has focused on this. Two works which examine the enterprising spirit of Overseas Chinese include “The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism” (Redding, 1993) and “The Mandarin Capitalists from Nanyang: Overseas Chinese enterprise in the modernisation of China 1893-1911” (M. R. Godley, 2002).

Capitalism is believed to be an important element contributing to individualisation (Yan 2003, 227). The South China Paradox seems to indicate the opposite. The lineage tradition and the associated communal power structure in south China has been revitalised rather than weakened in contrast to Yan’s case in the north. Indeed, this trend is not limited to south China; the revitalisation of local communal power, or a renewed emphasis on local collective identity and lineage traditions have been noticed by many scholars since the early 1980s (See Brandstädter, 2001; Feuchtwang, 2004; Flower, 2004; Jing, 1996; Siu, 1990; Tan, 2006). A more developed capitalist economy and a more collectivist-orientation can and do coexist. To put it more crudely, south China seems to be simultaneously more modern and more traditional than north China.

Brandstädter (2003) suggests applying Elias’ neglected theory of the “civilising process” to understand the paradoxes in rural areas in south China:

Using Elias allows integrating these apparent contrasts because in his theory social institutions and the direction of social change are not the result of human intentions or values, but of social figurations of power that, in turn, shape self-interested strategies and collective moralities (2003: 87).

Brandstädter argues that the presence of lineages is not the result of “cultural lag”, but rather they have been revived as a “new social figuration of power and instrument of social control” (2003:96-99). This renewed institution allows more

trust, predictability and stability of behaviour from the lineage members in an increasingly competitive and uncertain market environment. Lineage expands “the space of pacification” in the rural areas in China. Within this space, Brandtstädter suggests, self-interest and moral practices do not have to be mutually exclusive.

In my work, I want to develop this point further. I argue that notionally community- or collective-oriented solidarity can actually be a positive factor on the Chinese route to individualisation. There can be potentially positive interactions between individualisation and community growth in the south China context. It is possible that a particular action or investment may simultaneously enhance the individual *and* the community. I will explore the probability that individualisation is rooted and embedded in the community structure and the lineage collective in south China. For example, the donations made by *huaqiao* and rural-to-urban migrants are the actions of agents pursuing self-interested strategies. Therefore, contributing to the reproduction of the traditional community is usually a highly individualistic practice.

Bray (1984) has also noted the tension between individualistic interests and communal spirit in her historical investigation of the rice economy in Asia. She focuses on the relation between technology and economy in wet rice cultivation. Small family farms are the basic unit of rice production, but to allow rice cultivation, cooperation is necessary at the collective level. She explains that, as a result, “there was an inherent tension in rice-growing societies between individualism and the spirit of communality required to keep irrigation networks functioning smoothly” (1984:170, 196). Bray does not mention the issue of large-scale peasant emigration from the wet-rice cultivation areas in the frontier region in south China that has taken place since the 19th century, but this inherent tension is evidently also present in the migrant-sending communities. Emigration itself may have been the manifestation of this tension. Bray’s point about the tension between individualistic spirit and communal spirit in Asian rice economies can therefore be extended to those villages where there are many *huaqiao* emigrants: the primary individual ambition of *huaqiao* was often acquiring land upon their return.

In south China, where my fieldwork site is located, lineage power and lineage traditions have not only been historically strong, but also extensively revived since the 1980s. Public life in the village has also been lively and active. This differs from Yan's fieldwork site of Xiajia village, where, according to Yan, lineage structure and patriarchal power does not dominate historically and public life has declined dramatically. My south China case study does not dispute the general trend of Chinese individualisation but may suggest a different 'path to individualisation' from Yan's.

To explicate the relationship between the individuals and their collective community, I will now turn to Stafford's cultural schema of separation and reunion and its related notions of autonomy and dependence. I argue that his theory of separation poses an implicit but powerful critique of Yan's individualisation thesis.

The Separation Constraint

As discussed above, Yan sees any kind of family or communal dependency as an obstacle to one's autonomy and individualisation. Stafford's (1999, 2000, 2003) systematic study of the "separation constraint" and the related notion of "autonomy and dependence" suggests flaws in Yan's proposed individualisation process. Pointing out the fact that "humans simply cannot be with everyone they know, all the time" (2003:1), Stafford stresses that separation is a "universal constraint" (2000:4). The "separation anxiety" refers to people's desire to be with those they cannot be with. As Stafford's work effectively demonstrates, in China this universal anxiety might take on a particularly elaborated and strong form.

Separation as movement away from persons and away from places often merges. For Stafford, the distinction between the literal and abstract separations can be broken down. And there is "a conceptual overlap between separations that involve the living and those that involve the dead" (2003:21). His theorisation of separation is more complex and systematic than I could summarise here, and thus here I only highlight the points that are most relevant to my own research.

First, Stafford encourages a realistic rather than idealist study of separation as “universal human experience” (2000:4). He provides two reasons for adopting this approach (2000: 26):

The first is precisely that as a material event, physical separations may call the bluff of cultural conceptualisations which deny human individuality, autonomy and corporeality. ...literal separation (and reunion) experiences often provoke crises of relatedness (i.e. crises in relation to our underlying patterns of autonomy/dependency). The second, however, is that separation (and reunion) experiences may simultaneously help to constitute precisely our sense of relatedness, i.e. our awareness (however ambivalent) of ‘non-individuality’ and dependency. In other words, the reality of our autonomy and the reality of dependency may both be dramatically brought home by contexts of literal separation and reunion (just as they are by death).

These two reasons point to the tensions between Chinese individuals and their families/community. Yan suggests that leaving home is the way forward to autonomy and individualisation. According to Stafford, the question remains for Chinese individuals as to what they would do after they achieve a certain level of economic and social independence. Would their sense of belonging to their home community intensify after their separation from it? In the case of my field site, it is exactly those who have become successful “striving individuals” in their adopted countries/cities (Yan, 2013) who then return to invest in their hometown community.

The second point I take from Stafford’s work relates to the temporal orientation that is implied by the Chinese attachment to place of origin. Stafford (1999) has suggested that in considering this issue attachment to place of origin should be compared with other ways in which place is conceptualised. He provides three different cases in which attachments are respectively related to “an imagined future, a constructed present, or a forgotten past”. In the Chinese case, he stresses “the role of separations and reunions in structuring identifications in the present and the priority of this present-orientation...over reproducing ties to the past” (1999: 317). This point is significant because it allows us to de-mystify the romanticism behind the Overseas Chinese investment and homeland philanthropy in their ancestral hometown (an issue which I will consider further later in this introduction).

Commenting on Jing Jun's (2003) research into the "back-to-homeland" movement of a group of displaced migrants, Stafford points out that the alleged "attachment to place" of Chinese should not be taken as meaning that "such attachments are primordial and unchangeable, but rather that they can be made to seem so" (2003:16). This point is important as it allows an understanding of the local ambivalence towards *huaqiao* returnees, whose individual desire for social status is wrapped in the moralistic rhetoric of communal obligation.

The third point I take from Stafford is that separation is not only an *individual* experience but also "separation and reunion can be powerful *collective* experiences as well, and often in very concrete sense". Both "personal emotional history" and "collective narratives" can be framed around and draw on "the powerful and deeply familiar tropes of parting and return" (2003: 21, original italicisation). This is one of the four key issues that Stafford summarises as being central to our understanding of the separation constraint. This idea of collective experience of separation facilitates my ethnographic accounts of those villagers who did not go overseas but who were nevertheless encompassed in the communal narrative of *huaqiao*'s return. In this light, I raise the important question of how the residents who remain in the village experience from a distance the separation, reunion and success stories of other lineage/community members.

The insights from Stafford's study on reunion and separation will be found flowing throughout the thesis. However, while his work quite rightly emphasises the emotional effect of separation, my material mostly deals with the social, political and economic consequences of locals faced with the return of overseas migrants. People's obsession with "separation and reunion" is not simply for its own sake; rather, these issues have very direct and concrete socio-economic consequences. We can see this in the interactions between *huaqiao* and those who were 'left behind': the rural villagers.

Overseas Chinese Homeland Philanthropy

Both Stafford and Freeman's work are useful in understanding the events I shall describe in this thesis: primarily, in understanding the responses of rural villagers to the returning *huaqiao*; but also in understanding why *huaqiao* return at all.

Drawing on Stafford's (2003) analysis of the separation constraint, Luke Freeman (2013) proposes there is also "connection anxiety": the desire that humans sometimes have not to be with people to whom they are connected. He uses this to study migrants' contradictory experiences of absence and presence or separation and reunion in a highland village in Madagascar. Freeman argues that the houses – grand but dilapidated and empty – built by emigrants in their village of origin are not only a confirmation of their connection with their ancestral place, but also a manifestation of their desire to keep their distance from it. As he states:

the émigré houses mediate a ranged of contradictions typical of the migrant experience: between autonomy and dependence, presence and absence, dispersal and reunion, separation and connection, individual desire and community responsibility, ancestral past and family future (2013: 107).

The kind of contradictory pulls manifested in the Madagascan case are also very much at work in my south China case. This is illustrated not only through the house construction projects of individual emigrants, but more intriguingly through the collective projects in the village, such as village infrastructure and ancestral halls. These are ostensibly projects of public good similar to the irrigation networks Bray has studied (1984).

In this part, I will contextualise *huaqiaos'* practice of investing for the public good in their ancestral village (*qiaoxiang*). In particular, I want to draw attention to the ambivalent nature of these projects which are *notionally* oriented towards the community or lineage. The village-based residents live with both the practice and the discourse of *qiaoxiang* ties which are characterised by the tensions between "individual desire and community responsibility" (Freeman 2013:107).

The question why *huaqiao*, after long-term absences, should desire to return and invest in projects for the public good in their ancestral homeland is a curious and sometimes confusing one. It should be noted in the first place that *huaqiaos'* philanthropic activity differs from that of the Good Samaritans who help strangers (Yunxiang Yan, 2009b). *Huaqiaos'* investment in the public good is almost always

directed at their fellow lineage members or villagers in their place of origin. The receivers are beyond the immediate family members of the philanthropist, yet they are not total strangers either.

Huaqiaos' philanthropy in the late 20th and early 21st century can be viewed as a continuation of their predecessors – the Overseas Chinese merchants who migrated from the village since the 19th century. Peterson (2005) identifies a shift in the ideological basis of Overseas Chinese philanthropic activities in China as having taken place at the turn of the 20th century. This ideological shift was from the Confucian cultural model to a modern nationalist agenda, i.e. “from culturalism to nationalism” (Peterson 2005:100). He elucidates the two principal functions of merchant philanthropy in dynastic China where merchants were regarded as being at the lowest level of the social stratification, below scholars, peasants and craftsmen. First, philanthropy is “a source of symbolic capital” (Peterson 2005:88) and a strategy for merchants to claim elite status and community leadership. Second, the local infrastructure they funded facilitated their commercial activities. In short, individual merchant interests and community benefits merged. He extends this explanation to the homeland philanthropy of Overseas Chinese merchants.

Peterson's historical evidence shows that it was not until the 1860s that Overseas Chinese merchants were allowed to participate in philanthropic activism as they were previously deemed to be traitors to Chinese culture. Their participation began only when leading Chinese reform officials of the Qing Dynasty sought overseas Chinese donations in return for imperial honours. The official “instrumentalised discourse of ‘*qiaoxiang ties*’” continued into the era between 1949 and the late 1970s, according to Peterson's (2012) excellent historical research on Overseas Chinese in the People's Republic of China. But it provides only a partial explanation for *huaqiaos'* investment in the public good.

Yen (1970) identifies four motives for *huaqiaos'* public donations: 1) to bring glory and prestige to one's family; 2) a “psychological need” to demonstrate success on the part of mostly self-made merchants; 3) the quest for social prestige; 4) the pursuit of perceived community leadership. Among these four motives, the

latter three are concerned with individual gratification and individual aspirations for fame.

Hsu's (2000a, 2000b) historical research and Watson's (1975) above-mentioned study indicate that absentees' ongoing involvement in their place of origin, which indicates their continuing orientation to their native-places, largely results from their social-economic status in the country of their destination. In Hsu's case, the migrants from Taishan (a county in Guangdong province) were second-class citizens in America before 1949 and had no legal opportunities for naturalisation. The Overseas Chinese magazine functioned as a virtual marketplace for them to overcome the distance between home and America. Their sense of community is measured against the degree of institutional, social and economic discrimination within American society (2000: 124-155). Similarly in Watson's case, the Man lineage members who were new migrants working in London restaurants did not see themselves becoming permanent residents in Europe. Consequently, they needed to verify their status in their home community. Watson insightfully points out that their public donations made individual migrants visible to the whole village even when they were absent. In both cases, the migrants' personal and family futures constitute important considerations when making public donations in their hometown.

A further issue pertinent to this thesis is the changing attitudes the government of the People's Republic of China has held regarding *huaqiao*. In particular, there has been an important reversal in state policies since the 1980s on the return of *huaqiao* and the acceptability of receiving their remittances or donations. As Pal Nyiri's (2002) analysis points out, the category of Overseas Chinese has been transformed "from class enemies to patriots" since the 1980s. Fan Ke (1999) identifies that an "overseas connection" was a cause of political "stigmatisation" following the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, but after 1978 these connections became a source of "social capital" (1999:156-159). This thesis will include an examination of how this historical twist has given rise to a degree of local ambivalence towards *huaqiao* in their hometowns.

3. An outline of the thesis

Introduction: Individualisation, separation, and hometown philanthropy

This has introduced the tension between individualism and communal obligation in a rural hometown of Overseas Chinese (*qiaoxiang*) may provide a different light on the Chinese individualisation process. The chapter proposes that Stafford's (1999, 2003) theory of separation and the related ideas of dependency and autonomy pose an implicit yet powerful critique of Yan's (2003) individualisation thesis.

Chapter One: Methodology and Research Setting

This chapter sets out the research background and methodology, and introduces the fieldwork setting in a Hakka-speaking village in south China. In particular, I discuss Mashan village, the geographical context, but more importantly the patterns of migration of Mashan villagers, and the more recent revival of Mashan as a *qiaoxiang*.

Chapter Two: Overseas Visits, Local Anxieties: Huaqiao Returns and the Left Behind

This chapter examines the return of Overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) as a problem for the villagers. *Huaqiao*'s financial and actual return strains the existing resources and relationships at three levels: the village, intra- and inter-households, and individuals. I present the following ethnographic examples: the controversial village archway and village path; an Overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) house full of wild weeds after its restitution; the elite elders' reflection and reassessment of past decisions on emigration.

Chapter Three: The Fragility of Lineage Elite Power: The Demolition of Happiness Garden

This chapter documents the unexpected and controversial demolition of a landmark building perceived to be a symbol of reunion between locals and their overseas community. It is the office building for the village Elders' Association which mobilises *huaqiao* to supply most of the provision of public goods in the village and set up funds for old people's medical care and funerals. This case-study is about leadership and local power, partly in relation to the state and partly in

relation to overseas connections. The demolition of this significant building resulted in and illustrated the damaged power of these local elites. Local power is historically contingent – it is not stable, even within the lifetimes of given individuals.

Chapter Four: Overseas-Dependency and Self-Reliance: Building and Naming New Houses

This chapter examines the construction of new houses and the popular practice of house naming in the village. It is about houses funded by *huaqiao* and those funded by local people. It raises general questions about self-reliance (and individualism) versus reliance on others (and traditional collectivism). The attitude of the state towards self-reliance has changed, but local people still retain the communist ideal of self-reliance. The construction of houses and housing names are closely related to the larger political economy.

Chapter Five: The Logic of Bitterness and Success: A Vengeful Son's Return

This chapter recounts the local history of a vengeful “landlord’s son” who returned to the village as a wealthy “big *huaqiao*”. This successful individual invested a great deal in projects that were notionally aimed at benefiting the community, but which also furthered his own individual self interest. His perceived involvement in the demolition of Happiness Garden has led to a heated discussion in the village about “eating bitterness”, success and morality. I discuss the local logic of “eating bitterness”. Bitterness may well contribute to success, but how stories of bitterness are understood may depend very much on the individual’s structural position.

Chapter Six: An “Actually Existing Matriarch”: A Village Woman beyond the Family Threshold

This chapter discusses the ethnographic story of an “actually existing matriarch” in the lineage-dominated community of Mashan. The public nickname of this woman was Wu Zetian – the name of the sole female emperor in Chinese history. Describing her unusual power and dominant status both inside and outside home, I use Wu Zetian’s story to discuss the general situation of women in the *qiaoxiang* community. Her marriage, housing situation, family life and potential divorce were all shaped to some extent by her husband’s Taiwanese *huaqiao* connection. The

community acknowledges and even positively evaluates her power in a way that might seem unusual to anthropologists working on China.

Chapter Seven: Social Differentiation in the Disposal of Bodies: Cremation and Earth Burial

This chapter examines the local practice and discourse of cremation and earth burial as two co-existing technologies for the disposal of foreign and local dead bodies. I describe how notions of filial piety and the local cosmology of *fengshui* (geomancy) result in both villagers and *huaqiao* having a preference for earth burial. However, official policy requires locals to use cremation, while earth burial is reserved for foreign *huaqiao* in an effort to encourage their return and integration into the community. The different treatment given to local and foreign bodies is shown to have paradoxical implications as locals resent the privilege given to these *huaqiao*. In this way, a policy aimed at integration has increased a perception of differentiation.

Conclusion

This chapter summarises my findings and discusses their wider implications. I argue that the traditions and values of small-scale communities, such as the lineage or village community, do not necessarily hinder Chinese individualisation. My village ethnography confirms the Chinese historian Qin Hui's insight that in China there is a historical possibility for a coalition between community and individuals to expand individual power or rights. The expansion of both communal and individualistic space can mutually facilitate each other. This is because community and individuals face a common enemy, i.e., the threat presented by the intrusive and omnipresent state. I also discuss the future research avenues suggested by this project, such as an investigation into the relationship between the technology of everyday life and women's status in the village.

Chapter One: Methodology and Research Setting

In this chapter I set out my fieldwork methodology and the broader historical and geographical context of the fieldwork site. In the first section, I describe some of the issues I had as a native anthropologist. In the second section, I discuss Mashan village, the site of my fieldwork. Mashan village is a *qiaoxiang* (侨乡) or ancestral homeland of Overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*, 华侨) located in South China. I describe the general geographical setting, but more importantly the patterns of migration of Mashan villagers, and the more recent revival of Mashan as a *qiaoxiang*.

1. Fieldwork methodology and data collection

Personal and family connections

The kind of official receptions given to *huaqiao*, described by Wisdom in the Introduction, were in fact already familiar to me. I had frequently seen them on local County and Municipal TV news programmes in the 1990s, when I was growing up in Huliao, the local county seat to Mashan, the village where Wisdom lived. In fact, listening to Wisdom's account, I was reminded of some of my own experiences at primary and secondary school when we too had welcomed returning *huaqiao*. Wisdom's complaints brought back memories of how as a student I had been worried about my first participation in this kind of public ritual, because my family did not have the extra money to spend on the required plastic bouquet. I remember that, on one occasion, one of my fellow students had fainted in the sun as a result of dehydration that had been caused by waiting for many hours for the delayed arrival of *huaqiao*. Wisdom and I obviously welcomed different groups of *huaqiao* at different times. But to a large extent, we shared a sense of ambivalence towards their homecoming.

I worked as a "native anthropologist" (Narayan, 1993) in the sense that I came from the local county area where my fieldwork village was located, though I knew only one person in the village before I went there for my research. My parents had moved from a hamlet in one of the local towns to the county seat in the late 1980s. It was there that I spent seven years at my primary and junior high school before leaving to attend senior high school in the municipal capital of Meizhou Prefecture.

Later, I went to university in Nanjing. When I returned to the area in late 2006 to conduct the fieldwork for this thesis, my father and my brother's nuclear family were still living there.

My family connections, in particular, were helpful. My father played a key role in enabling my entry into Mashan, the village where I did my fieldwork. The first contact I had with anyone in Mashan was with my father's cousin whom I addressed as Uncle Lai. In the 1940s, after his biological father's untimely death, Uncle Lai was sold as a male heir into a household in Mashan from his natal hamlet. His adopted father was, at the time of the adoption, living in Malaysia. Somehow in the early 1980s, Uncle Lai got back in contact with my father and two other lineage members of his biological father. He described how he had discretely visited his birth mother before her death. Following this restoration of contact, we started annual family visits during the Chinese New Year season. Over time, Uncle Lai gradually became an influential figure in Mashan, where he was a retired school teacher, and as such he was an important gatekeeper who facilitated my fieldwork in the village. Before I took residency in Mashan, my father accompanied me to visit Uncle Lai.

Access to the village through written documents

I chose Mashan as my fieldwork village after I happened to get hold of and read a Compilation of the Overseas Newsletter (*qiaokan*, 侨刊) produced in Mashan. Uncle Lai was the main driving force behind this compilation. Produced in May 2004, the collection contains all 56 issues of the Overseas Newsletter published between 1990 and 2003. It provides a record of various aspects of contemporary village life, some details on the history of the village and its dominant Zhang lineage, as well as a record of the numerous return visits that had been made by Overseas Chinese. A quarterly magazine, the Overseas Newsletter's major target audience is overseas Mashanese. In 1990, only 150 copies were produced; from 2000 onwards, 1,000 copies of each issue were distributed to Mashanese in the village, elsewhere in China and overseas. A relatively stable editorial team comprised of village-based "cultured people" (*wenren*, 文人), who took charge of its editorial work, publication and overseas distribution. Most of them were retired

school teachers and former salaried state employees. Since 2002, Uncle Lai had been the Editor-in-chief.

I continued reading the compilation of the Overseas Newsletter during my fieldwork. It provided me with an immense amount of information and facilitated my conversations with many villagers. Like all written documents, its contents are selective. It should be treated with caution rather than readily taken as objective. For example, I later learnt “negative news” such as conflicts among important Overseas Chinese would be excluded from the Overseas Newsletter. Similarly, news stories about some villagers making a fair amount of money, for instance by growing and selling watermelon, was regarded a bad choice for inclusion in the newsletter since it could deter *huaqiao* from making donations to the village.

I was also able to obtain other written documents in the village such as the old and updated genealogies and new issues of the Overseas Newsletter. The genealogies, handwritten or printed, helped me to understand the formal connections between families. However, I found most ordinary villagers did not know or care about the genealogical relationship beyond three generations. They were often surprised at my knowledge of it. I also obtained the VCDs recording previous *huaqiao* visits, ceremonies and ancestral rituals that had taken place in the village over the previous decade and in which *huaqiao* had participated. After I returned to London, I continued to receive new issues of the Overseas Newsletter which were posted to me from Mashan.

Besides these locally produced records, I also obtained a collection of magazines edited and distributed by a senior *huaqiao* from Mashan now living in Singapore. The collection, called *Voice of Mashan*, was produced from 1980 to 1992. It provided different materials from the village-produced Overseas Newsletter. Produced overseas by and for the Overseas Chinese communities in Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan, it gave the perspective of *huaqiao* and thus compliments my participant observation in the village. It records some conflicts between *huaqiao* and their home village. This collection seems to be more trustworthy than the village-based Overseas Newsletter, but I had no way of verifying this as I did not do fieldwork overseas.

The gatekeeper and access to the village public life

At the end of 2006, when I arrived at Mashan, Uncle Lai was my only contact in the village. He played a key role by introducing me to the village community and integrating me in the village kinship system. In his late sixties, he had been the Editor-in-chief of the Overseas Newsletter since 2002 and he was one of the nine members of the Elders' Association Committee (*Laoren Hui*, 老人会). A state pensioner and a retired school teacher, he was generally respected as a "cultured person" for his rich knowledge of the village's history and his writing skills. When villagers learnt that I was interested in learning about their village history and culture, they invariably said that I was in the right place staying with Uncle Lai. With his assistance, I got to know most of the village elite elders and their families. I gained access to many insiders' events such as editorial sessions of the Overseas Newsletter, the monthly meeting of the Elders' Association Committee, organisational meetings of the ancestral trusts Committee and ancestral worship rituals. I was also able to offer some help by typing the English addresses of overseas recipients of the village-produced magazines.

In my first half year in the village, most villagers remained suspicious of my presence in their village. I did not show them university or official documentation about my research. Even though I spoke the local dialect of Hakka as my mother tongue, they saw me as an outsider. They were curious about what I studied in London but did not understand why I had to live in their village for such a long time. No one heard of *renleixue* (人类学, the Chinese word for anthropology) before. To avoid lengthy explanation, I often answered I studied *shehuixue* (社会学, sociology) which was received with relative ease. Evidently, some university students had come to the village from Guangzhou not long before me to carry out a survey with a questionnaire about the standard of rural life, but they had left within a week of arriving. The longest time a *huaqiao* had stayed in the village was three months. My presence in the village evoked some memories the villagers had of communist cadres in Mao's era who descended from cities to "eat, live and labour together" (同吃, 同住, 同劳动, 三同: the "three togethers") with peasants. With this memory still alive, they found my presence more or less acceptable.

They made comparisons between my research and the then ongoing government project of “sending 10,000 county and town government officials to villages” but criticised these officials for not actually living in the village.

I participated in much of the village’s public life: e.g. in such events as the Elders’ Association’s monthly meetings, the quarterly editorial meetings for the village-based Overseas Newsletter, events at the village school, collective ancestral worship rituals and the village election in 2008.

I came from the local area, but I had also the problem of ‘going native’ (Young, 1992). The resistance I received was not less extensive than that experienced by foreign anthropologists (Steinmüller, 2011). I always asked what the proper kinship term was in addressing other villagers. At the end of my fieldwork, I was treated by many villagers as being a “same family person” (*zijiaren*, 自家人). However, despite my integration into the local kinship system, most village officials would keep their distance from me.

With Uncle Lai’s assistance, I went to the houses of the village Party Secretary and village director for some public occasions. However, all but one of the village cadres remained suspicious of me throughout my fieldwork. Luckily, my freedom to move around the village and to talk with any other villager including production team leaders was not in any way restricted.

I faced the usual dilemma of “distance and proximity in a closely-knit community” (Svensson, 2006) since there were on-going conflicts in the village. While in Mashan, the family I stayed with, the places I went, and the people with whom I talked were all easily known by the other villagers and this had implications for how I was treated. One example of such conflict in the village was in relation to the demolition of the Happiness Garden (see Chapter Two), which had been supported by the village cadres, while most other villagers strongly opposed it. Several elderly villagers expected me to help get compensation from the government. The period in 2008, when the elections for village cadres were taking place, was a particularly sensitive time. On another occasion in 2007, a group of

angry villagers blocked the new provincial highway cutting across the village to demand compensation for the damaged path nearby. The village cadres were called to the scene of the protest. This was a particularly sensitive issue, because it related to wider concerns about the corruption and failed promises of village officials. Some villagers asked me if I could find journalists or television reporters to report their protest. I decided to talk with some of the villagers involved only after the events had settled down. In relation to the often controversial and sensitive disputes over *fengshui* (风水, Chinese geomancy), I had to be careful not to openly take sides. In one *fengshui* dispute involving Uncle Lai's son and another big *huaqiao*, I had to avoid going to the houses of some of my acquaintances in the village, or I found that they would deliberately stop talking to me for a while. In general, I had to be careful what I said.

I offered to teach English for two hours a week to two classes, Grades Three and Four, at the village primary school for one academic year. This role facilitated my relationship with villagers. Many parents and grandparents taking care of their grandchildren had become aware of the advantage of speaking English through their exposure to *huaqiao*. However, this also sometimes constrained my conversations with them and I had to be careful not to refuse outright their requests for private English tuition for their children or grandchildren. I was able to intermingle with the school teachers and the school headmaster who commuted daily from the local county town. These teachers were regarded as "outsiders" by most villagers. However, the school was itself an important point of contact between the village and the imagined transnational community of *huaqiao* centred on Mashan as it remains one of the favourite projects for overseas donations.

The insider/outside boundary is a delicate issue in my fieldwork. Since I was known to have studied in London, I was perceived by the villagers to be a *huaqiao* who should finance various village projects. In my first month in the village, I was asked to donate 1,000 Yuan (£100) for the publication of a collection about the history of the village school to mark its centenary celebration held in October 2006. Uncle Lai encouraged me saying that this donation would qualify me to have my colour portrait appear in the collection. He saw it an indicator of my social status.

Since most donors of this rank were senior male *huaqiao*, I was able to decline on the grounds of my age and gender. Probably, given that the village was not my ancestral home, elite villagers like Uncle Lai did not see me strictly as ‘their’ *huaqiao*. Later, I learnt more about the various tricks employed to mobilise *huaqiao* to make donations. The sense of owning a *huaqiao* based on one’s surname or place of residence remained strong. While in the village, I did donate 200 Yuan (£20) to the Overseas Newsletter editorial fund and 100 Yuan (£10) for the annual gathering of members of the Elders’ Association in 2008. These encounters made me keenly aware of the pressure faced by *huaqiao* returnees to make donations.

I never took out pen and paper to write down notes in front of villagers. From the beginning of my fieldwork, I sensed their discomfort about this. I always went back to my room to write notes on my laptop. I was sometimes asked to act as a photographer for public or private events, which was a convenient for me way of gathering information. The locals had long been exposed to the use of cameras by *huaqiao* and were disappointed that I did not have a digital video recorder. When talking to villagers or attending events, I asked both guided and open-ended questions.

As a young, single woman, I usually had no problem talking or interacting with other women in the village. As it happened, Uncle Lai arranged for me to have a 10-year-old female companion stay with me in his house. Some of these women become close friends and confided in me about their marriage problems. Several women pursued me about my then single status, but the younger women showed understanding saying that, because of my “high-level” of education, it was all right for me to get married later than others. I interacted mostly with senior men in public venues and with old women elsewhere in the village. Most able-bodied young people only returned briefly to the village for Chinese New Year.

Moving around the village and living with five and half host/hostess

When I tried to mingle with other villagers, Uncle Lai would often advise me that talking with those “people without culture” (*mei wenhua de ren*, 没文化的人) was

unnecessary and useless. During my stay, he was working on a book about the history of the administrative village that included Mashan. I helped him type up some of the draft chapters. For Uncle Lai, the “village history” only included the past up to 1949; whatever happened after 1949 was not valuable or important enough—or possibly too contentious—to be part of his book. When it was published in 2010 as an 899-page hardback book, the major part was devoted to the 2000-year-long history before 1950, while the period between 1950 and 2010 was noted only with an appendix that listed major events.

I was warned of the problem of depending too heavily on one informant before my fieldwork. Associating with my Uncle too much limited my interactions with other villagers, who were hostile to or envious of his dominant role in the village’s cultural activities. After living with Uncle Lai for six months, I wanted to move to another household, so to avoid offending him I strategically told him that my supervisor in London required me to live in different households during my time in Mashan. He hesitantly accepted this reason. Finding alternative accommodation was difficult in the village, but it was also a good way to learn about women’s power and find out about people’s ideas about the moral associations between a house and those who live in it.

During my 18 month stay in the village, I had five and a half host families and had intimate interactions with women of several generations and children. My first and longest host was Uncle Lai as discussed above. My accommodation with the other hosts was interrupted by events such as the return of a family member, changes in their family life, or maybe something I did wrong but they did not tell me. The “half host family” was that of a powerful woman, known as Wu Zetian (see Chapter Six), who gave me her house key, most probably without asking her husband’s opinion, but I only slept over occasionally. Unlike my stay with Uncle Lai, in the other households I stayed in, it was the hostesses who played the key role first in taking me in and then later in telling me to move out. My second hostess, Auntie Ju, was like Wu Zetian, a matriarch in her household, though not as successful at making money or participating in the village public life. Some villagers vocally approved of my move saying that I “didn’t only stay with the

rich”. However, she soon told me her married-out daughter and son-in-law would come back to stay with her and I had to seek somewhere else to stay.

The third host family agreed to take me because of their connection with Uncle Lai. I stayed with the retired school headmaster and his wife in a two-storey old house, which had been built with funds from their overseas uncle before 1949, but renovated more recently. All six of their daughters and their one son worked in the cities. They were not well off. Whenever he had a chance, the former school master would stress that it was his wife who had earned money to finance the renovation of their home while working as a domestic helper in Singapore for one year in the early 1990s.

I spread the news about my search for a new place to stay around the village. My fourth hostess, Grand-aunt Liao, approached me saying I could probably stay with her after she first asked her husband’s opinion. Her husband was a respectable senior man and the accountant for the Elders’ Association. Many people told me it was a good choice. I obtained my last accommodation in the village from a shopkeeper couple via their two young daughters. The couple lived in their shop along the village main street while I stayed in their two-storey, new house. This was the only time I could cook for myself. During my stays with all my previous hosts, I ate with the host family. I gave the payment for my accommodation to the hostesses rather than the host. I always helped with the cleaning of dishes and the hanging of laundry. The fact that I was a woman was evidently part of the house-searching dynamics.

Although there were many empty houses in the village as a result of the high-level of rural-to-urban migration, it was not easy to find accommodation as a single young woman. These village houses were not regarded as commodities for rent or for sale, though Mashan’s increasing urbanisation was evidenced by the streetlights along the village’s main road. Villagers connected the kind of person I was to the house I was in or household I was staying with. For example, while at my last accommodation, an old lady I knew well asked me why I had made such a bad choice “since that family has a big gambler and they went to court with their siblings”. She was referring to the legal dispute among my host’s younger brothers

and sisters. My host was not a gambler and was not directly involved in the court case.

Villagers probably judged me differently when I stayed in different houses. However, I found it helpful for my research. Moving around and living with different families is a good method to collect oral histories of individuals and households of different social-economic standings in the village. Their houses were located at different corners of the village, thus enabling me to interact with different neighbours.

Following events and key individuals

During my stay in the village, I often came upon open or semi-open conflicts within the village and between the locals and their overseas counterparts. There were many reasons for these disputes. The demolition of the Happiness Garden (discussed in Chapter Three), the dispute over mountain land, and the competition between village cadres are just a few examples. I adopted the method of following these events and asked people's opinion about them. These conflicts are like the crisis and situation in Max Gluckman's sense (Gluckman, 1958; Kapferer, 2005). By examining them, it is possible to reveal the underlying social relations and principles. I also focused on some of the key individuals that were central to these conflicts. My ethnography of these key individuals allows me to portray the conflicting desires experienced by a person in their immediate and wider contexts.

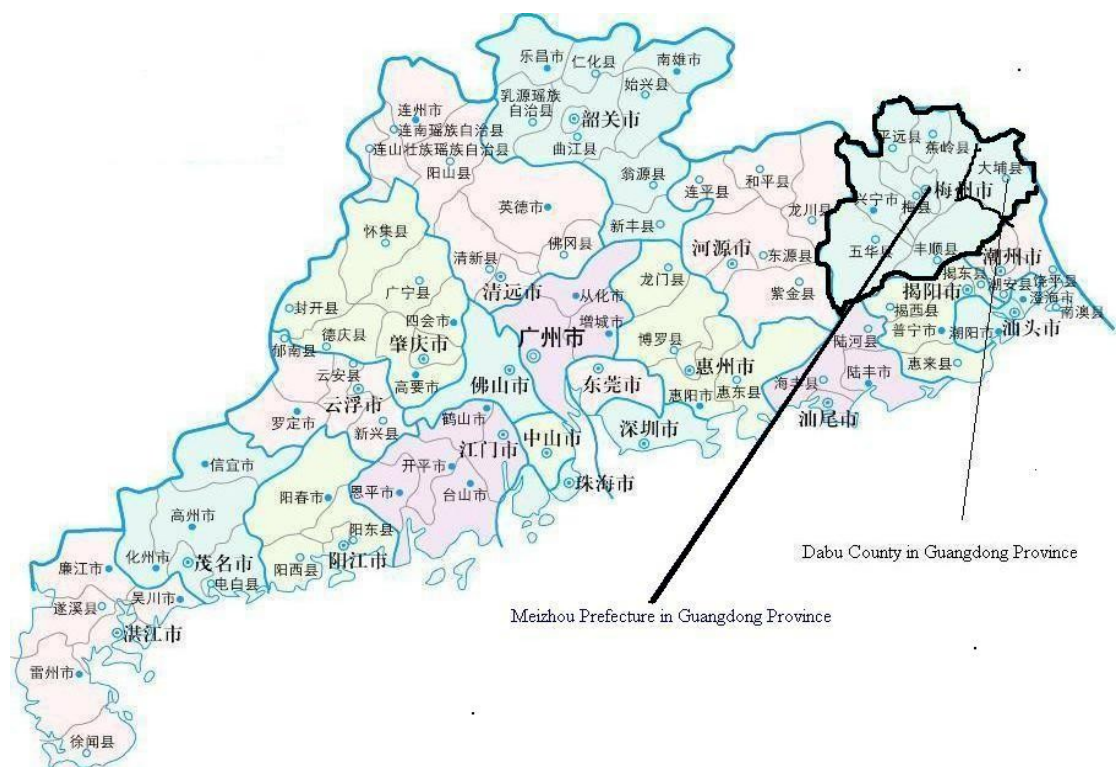
2. The village and fieldwork setting

In the following two sections, I respectively introduce Mashan village and the broader historical and geographical context.

Map 1: Map of China

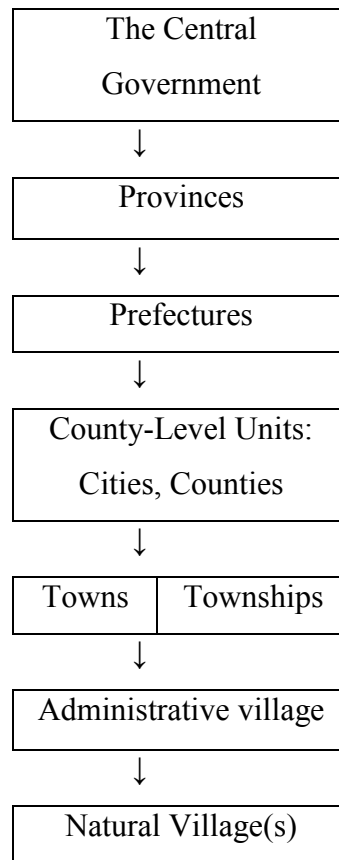


Map 2: Map of Guangdong province



Dabu County in Meizhou Prefecture, Guangdong Province

Diagram 1: China's Spatial Administrative Hierarchy in the Post-1983 Era¹
A Generalised Schema



Meizhou Prefecture and Dabu County

Mashan village is in Dabu County, one of the six counties under the jurisdiction of Meizhou Municipal Prefecture in Guangdong Province. The imperial name of the Meizhou area was Jiaying (or Kaiying), a name given to it in 1733 during the Qing Dynasty. In the early Republican era, the name changed to Meixian. The general Meizhou area is characterised as a mountainous border region that adjoins two other provinces: Fujian and Jiangxi. The municipal capital used to be eight hours' travel from the prosperous coastal cities at the frontline of economic development, such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen. A new highway built in 2005 has reduced the journey to five hours.

The revitalisation of the *qiaoxiang* identity of Meizhou provides the regional environment for similar revitalisation on the local scale in villages like Mashan

¹ Adapted from Figure 2.2 (Chan, 1994: 22)

where I did my fieldwork. The revitalisation was primarily the result of the top-down state initiative to attract foreign investment from Overseas Chinese into Mainland China. The popular official discourse about their return is that of “patriotism” and “loving one’s hometown” (*aiguo aixiang*, 爱国爱乡). Since the 1980s, with the open-door policy from the central government, the Meizhou area has received numerous *huaqiao* on return visits as well as their remittances. According to official statistics from the “Annals of *Huaqiao*, Guangdong Province Gazetteer”, there are more than three million Overseas Chinese of Meizhou origin (广东省地方史志编纂委员会 1996:178).

The municipal government and the local state at the county and township levels have actively responded to the central government’s encouragement to tap the potential of *huaqiao*. A number of local official policies relating to the economic, social and political domains are tailor-made to encourage *huaqiao* to return. Dabu government policy, publicised on their website, offers a certain percentage of commission to those locals who successfully mobilise investment and donations from *huaqiao*. Official organisational networks are set up to ease the return of *huaqiao*. The Overseas Chinese Association (*Qiaolian*, 侨联) and the Unification Frontline Bureau (*Tongzhan Bu*, 统战部) are established at every level from the provincial down to the township. The former mainly deals with *huaqiao* from southeast Asian countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Hong Kong, while the latter deals with the more politically sensitive group, i.e. expats in Taiwan. Meizhou Municipal *Huaqiao* Museum opened in 1999. The “Meixian Annals of Overseas Chinese” was compiled by the local gazetteer writers in 1991. The Meizhou Municipal Overseas Chinese Affairs Bureau has been publishing the quarterly “*Jiaying Hometown Information*” targeting *huaqiao* since 1985.

In addition to these government publications, there has been a renaissance in the non-governmental publication of magazines aimed at Overseas Chinese (*qiaokan*, 侨刊) who left China before 1949. Many of these magazines have been newly created and all are heavily financed by overseas Chinese. The appendix to the edited volume “*Qiaoxiang ties*”(Douw, Huang, Godley, 1999: 332-336) provides a comprehensive, five-page list of “non-governmental” hometown publications

currently produced in the counties or municipalities of Guangdong Province. The oldest of these active publications dates back to 1909, while the latest began production 1990 (see the table below). The list includes five such *qiaokan* publications from Meizhou Prefecture. Two of these are produced at the municipal level: “The Voices of Overseas Chinese” (first issued in 1951) and “The Hakka” (first issued in 1989). The only one listed from Dabu County is “Hometown Information from Dabu”, which was first issued in 1985. It should be noted that all five of the publications listed for Meizhou Prefecture are produced at or above the county level. Obviously, a large number of *qiaokan* produced at the township or village level are missing from the list, probably due to the methodological limitations or official constraints. These *qiaokan* play an important role in re-activating and maintaining the overseas connection with *huaqiao*. They are also an instrument to attract financial investment and donations from Overseas Chinese.

The Hometown Publications of Overseas Chinese Magazines (*qiaokan*) in Guangdong Province from 1909 to 1990 (based on Douw, et al, 1999: 332-336)

Year of First Issue	1909 to 1948	1952 to 1962	1980 to 1990	Total
Number of New Magazines	61	7	66	154

The Hakka Homeland

The majority of residents in Meizhou speak Hakka, a distinctive dialect of Chinese (ML Cohen, 1968) for a detailed discussion on the linguistic as a social variable). But their official ethnic designation is Han. Meizhou is regarded as the Hakka homeland. Their ancestors are said to have gradually migrated from Henan Province in north-central China, in a process that began hundreds of years ago. The historian S.T. Leong (1997) provides probably the most comprehensive study of the history and geography of Hakka migration. Nicole Constable (1996) offers a useful discussion on the relation between ethnicity and identity of Hakka people in different cultural and social encounters, both in China and in various overseas destinations.

It is hard to measure the extent that the return of Overseas Chinese has contributed to the intensified local awareness of their Hakka identity. However, that they have had an influence is without doubt. The often financially-powerful *huaqiao*, with their overseas experience of living and interacting with other ethnic groups, returned to Meizhou to emphasise their “Hakka culture” to the residents in the Hakka homeland (see Lozada, 2001). This has further contributed to the recent emergence of academic and popular discourses of a “distinctive Hakka culture”, which highlights the particularity of the dialect, the architecture style called Round-Dragon House (*weilong wu*, 围龙屋), local traditional music such as Han music (*hanyue*, 汉乐) and Hakka mountain songs. Based on his long-term research, John Lagerwey (2005) published a two-volume edited book, titled “Hakka Traditional Society”, which provides many detailed studies of the local festivals, religion, traditional economy and lineage society of the Hakka area across three provinces: Guangdong, Jiangxi and Fujian. With overseas finance as well as official encouragement, a Hakka Research Centre was set up in 2006 at the only local university, Jiaying University. In 2008, the municipal government opened a Hakka Museum in an elaborate new building complex at the centre of the municipal capital. The museum covers an area of 15,000 square metres and its construction cost 130 million Yuan (about £13,000,000), over ninety percent of which came from overseas.

The municipal government of Meizhou has attempted to cash in on this popular sentiment by developing a new identity for the city, branding it as “the World Capital of Hakka”. The officials probably have in mind both developing the city as a tourist attraction and encouraging the return of Overseas Chinese with Hakka ancestry. Intriguingly, this official effort places them in competition with another county – Ninghua in the neighbouring Fujian Province. Ninghua County claims to be “the Hakka Ancestral Land” situated along the Tingjiang River. It is historically recognised as the initial arrival point for all the Hakka ancestors following their migration from the north and before they dispersed into the surrounding mountains and established settlements. It is referred to as the Hakka transition centre in the sub-ethnic group’s migration history. In 1995, a wealthy *huaqiao* leader in Malaysia initiated and funded an annual public worship ritual in the name of

“Worshipping the Mother River of the Hakka”, i.e. the Tingjiang River. The ritual has been performed annually since then, mainly attended by Hakka elites from home and overseas. Some male elite villagers from Dabu County including those from Mashan attended the 2008 worship². Earlier in 2002, two Mashan elite villagers joined a “one-thousand-mile root-seeking” pilgrimage to this location³. Most villagers in Mashan, however, had never even heard of Ninghua.

Dabu County

Mashan is under the jurisdiction of the Dabu county seat (*xiancheng*, 县城), which is also the closest local market town to Mashan. In 2000, the first train ever to stop in Dabu County arrived at the new Three-River-Convergence Station on its journey between Guangzhou and Xiamen in Fujian Province. The train station, nineteen kilometres northwest to the present county seat, Huliao, is named after the meeting point of the three large local rivers. Three-River-Convergence used to be a key node in the local transportation network between Dabu and the world outside. The watercourses lead in three directions: toward Meizhou municipal capital, towards Fujian, and towards Shantou (formerly known as Swatow). Shantou was one of those trading ports opened to foreigners after the Opium War in 1842. Since the late 19th century, it was from this port that many locals boarded the steamboats or sampan and left for Southeast Asian countries. If they returned before 1949, on their journey home, their luggage would first arrive at the Three-River-Convergence. In the 1970s, the first highway entered Dabu County running alongside the river to Three-River-Convergence from the municipal capital.

“Many mountains with little ploughed land” is a phrase that is frequently used to explain the trend of long-term overseas emigration from the area since the 19th century. Dabu County has the archaic name Wanchuan (万川), literally meaning “Ten Thousand Mountains”. Official documents employ the four characters “old, minority, border and poverty” (*lao shao bian qiong*, 老少边穷) to describe the county.

² Overseas Newsletter, 2008

³ Overseas Newsletter, [2002] 2005

These four characters can be understood as follows. First, due to its peripheral nature and remoteness, the area was one of the former military bases for the Chinese Communist Party guerrillas before 1949, when the mountainous region provided an advantageous hideout from the Nationalist Party army. Hence it is an “old” revolutionary base. Second, there are a small number of minorities in the area, hence the *shao* character meaning “minority”. Third, its shifting affiliations to different administrative jurisdictions indicate its geographical marginality. Finally, the county was one of the limited few in the generally prosperous Guangdong Province that remained listed as one of the 592 state-designated “national poverty-stricken counties” (*guojia pinkun xian*) in 2004. This title enabled the county government to claim financial subsidy from the central government. Many locals are cynical about this status, saying that the government officials were unwilling to free the county from the title because they did not want to lose the financial support.

The tension between limited land and population growth remains severe. Dabu has a population of around 534,000 and ninety percent are registered as belonging to agricultural households, i.e. as “peasants”. Local industrialisation remains limited. Even the formerly flourishing ceramics business in one local town has shrunk. Since the 1980s, the county government has employed two prominent strategies: attracting business investment from Overseas Chinese and exporting labour migrants to the prosperous coastal cities. The first one has not been successful. Located six to seven hours’ drive from Guangzhou and Shenzhen, the county remains unpopular with both home and overseas investors due to its geographical remoteness. On the other hand, the county is nicknamed “Little Hong Kong” due to its high cost of living, which has been pushed up by the remittances sent back by young migrants working in the cities.

Despite the limited businesses investment, the influence of overseas donations is omnipresent in the county seat. The 21 towns and a farm, which fall under the jurisdiction of Dabu County, are the hometowns of some internationally celebrated Overseas Chinese such as Lee Kuan Yew (李光耀), the former prime minister of Singapore, Chang Pi-Shih (M. R. Godley, 2002; Yen, 1970) and Tin Ka-ping (田

家炳 MBE), the most prominent benefactor to Dabu based in Hong Kong. The local infrastructure, such as secondary schools, important bridges, highways and hospitals, has been heavily funded by *huaqiao*. One of the well-circulated stories is about Dabu County People's Hospital, which was established in the 1960s. It was re-named after Tin Ka-ping the Hong Kong donor, after he financed a new seven-storey hospital building. However, within a year, its original name was restored after many locals ridiculed the new name.

The road infrastructure of Dabu County was not improved until the 1990s. The majority of roads inside the county are totally or partially financed by *huaqiao*. Only in recent years, have buses started running three or four times a day between towns and villages. Both men and women ride motorbikes and bikes between villages and towns. Dabu County seat is also the market town for villagers from Mashan to sell vegetables, watermelons or other kinds of produce and where they buy their consumer items (see Skinner, 1964, 1965).

In the following sections, I will first give some basic information on Mashan, the village where I did my fieldwork, including an overview of the history of overseas emigration from the village. I will then introduce two themes which are particularly prominent in Mashan: 1) its revived identity as a *qiaoxiang*; 2) its active public life in a moral landscape of reunion and individual success.

General information on Mashan: an administrative place

Mashan is part of the administrative village called Wutang situated in a valley six kilometres north of Dabu County Seat in the north of Guangdong Province. The valley is surrounded by mountains on all sides. One provincial road travels in a north-south direction, coming to Mashan from the county seat and heading towards Fujian Province. Another county-level road runs west to east and links Mashan with a neighbouring town. More than 600 households from two dominant local lineages – the Yang and the Zhang – make their established settlement in the valley. These are the two “big surname groups”, which each takes up about half of the valley. My research was carried out mainly with members of the Zhang lineage.

Five other hamlets inhabited by residents of different surnames fall under the jurisdiction of the administrative village. They dot in the mountains around the valley, the furthest is 30 minutes away by motorbike. One of these hamlets did not have access to electricity until 1995. Residents there are called the “small-surname” or “mixed-surname” groups. The County government withdrew all primary schools from these hamlets over the past decade. Those households with schoolchildren have to move to Wutang, usually living in borrowed houses, for their children’s education.

The settlement in the valley is sometimes referred to as the “central village” (*zhongxin cun*, 中心村). Wutang is the name for both this “central village” and the administrative village. Villagers in this central part of Wutang often note with pride that their village is “very flat”. They claim that, “When you have to carry heavy loads of rice, you don’t have to climb a single step upward throughout the village”. A recent migrant to Mashan from a village in the neighbouring town commented that “ploughing land is much easier here” than in other villages where paths go up and down the hills. According to some senior women and a middle-aged villager, the level surface makes the village an attractive option to potential brides, even those from the county seat. There is some intermarriage between the two rival lineages, but many brides also come from outside the valley.

The village remained predominately agricultural at the time of my fieldwork in 2007. One village cadre told me with frustration that several attempts to develop commercial enterprises had all failed. The following two paragraphs are taken from the village-produced Overseas Newsletters of 1992 and 2007 respectively. They are written by the village cadres about the administrative village:

The production situation (*shengchan qingkuang*, 生产情况): a total of 675 households, [with a population of 2,960] including 1,432 men and 1,538 women; the forest area covers 230,000 *mu* and paddy fields cover 1,820 *mu*.⁴ The yearly total rice production is 1,024 tonnes and the annual average food produced per person is 289 kilogrammes. In Mashan

⁴ *Mu* (亩) is a Chinese unit of measurement roughly equivalent to 614.4 m².

there are 352 households, a total population of 1,476, including 709 men and 767 women.⁵ (1992).

The central village [i.e. the valley] has 23 villagers' groups (*cunmin xiaozu*, 村民小组). Another five groups are scattered in the remote mountain areas. There are 17 surname groups; a total of 716 households; a population of 2,840; the forest area covers 29,277 *mu*; the public forest for ecological preservation [a project initiated by the central state] covers 17,379 *mu*; paddy fields cover 1,084 *mu*. Ninety-five percent of village paths are hardened; there are a total of 195 streetlights; 386 telephones; an auto-running water supply scheme is provided with water pipes of 7.5 kilometres in length.⁶ (October 2007)

The dramatically reduced area of rice fields, 800 *mu* fewer in 2007 than in 1992, resulted from a series of construction projects. These included the construction of new family houses, the expansion of the village school complex, the broadening and hardening of village paths, the expansion of motorways running through the village and the building of a rice wine refinery operated by an “outsider”. Some of these projects, such as the first three, were financed by *huaqiao*; the motorway construction was a state project; while the last one is the local private enterprise. The shrinking area of paddy fields has been a prominent change in the village landscape over the past two decades, as a few villagers acknowledged. Villagers told me that the majority of ploughing was no longer done by water buffalo. Instead, there are at least four “iron-buffalos” (*tieniu*, 铁牛) – mechanical ploughs – in the village. Mechanical ploughing is charged for at the rate of 120 Yuan per *mu*.

It used to be normal practice in the village to grow two crops of rice per year. However, since the late 1990s, the county and town government has been encouraging the cultivation of tobacco to increase the local tax revenue. In 2007 and 2008, most of the paddy fields inside the valley were being used to grow tobacco during the first half the year, “the upper season”, which was previously used for the first rice crop. Wutang has become one of the local bases for tobacco production. However, the tobacco boss and his family came from Fujian Province. They rented an old house in which to live and sort out the harvested tobacco leaves.

⁵ The Compilation of Overseas Newsletter, [1992]2005:13.

⁶ Overseas Newsletter, 2007

Villagers told me that this “outsider” successfully rented almost all the paddy available “because villagers were unwilling to rent their land to their fellow villagers”. Growing tobacco on this scale across the village made considerable profit for the Fujianese boss when compared to production by individual households. Meanwhile, most villagers preferred renting out their fields for half the year because of the difficulties involved in rice growing, including the low profit and intensive labour required, especially when the younger generations were away in the city. The villagers were also able to save money on fertiliser, because the tobacco boss would use plenty of chemical fertiliser on the fields, which meant that the villagers did not need to buy fertiliser for growing rice in the second half of the year. The rent offered is 200 Yuan cash per *mu*, close to the profit in the market for rice from the same field. For the three to four months leading up to July, about 10 women from the village are hired at a rate of 25 or 30 Yuan per day to work in the tobacco fields.

Similar to the rest of rural China, two official institutions are present in the administrative village: the Village Party Branch of the CCP (*Cun Dang Zhibu*, 村党支部) and the Villagers’ Committee (*Cunmin Weiyuanhui*, 村民委员会). In 1998, the previous brigade office under the commune system was renamed as the Villagers’ Committee and the previous production teams are now the villagers’ groups. Since that year, a village election has been held every three years. In Wutang, the party branch is composed of four members headed by the village Party Secretary (*cun zhishu*, 村支书), the most powerful official figure in the village. The Villagers’ Committee has seven members, headed by the village director (*cunzhang*, 村长). Members of the former overlap with those of the latter. Together these office holders make up the group of village cadres (*cun ganbu*, 村干部) – the state agents in and from the village. They are not salaried state employees, but they have started receiving a monthly salary from the township government budget in the past two years and, if they are elected for three or more consecutive terms, they qualify for a state pension.

Between 1998 and 2008, all seven village cadres came from the two “big surname groups”. In 2007, there were five from the Zhang lineage and the two others came

from the Yang lineage. The Director of the Village Women's Association is the wife of man from the Zhang lineage. For the past 30 years, the village Party Secretary has always come from the Zhang lineage. As villagers remarked during the 2008 village election, the rival between these two lineages is always one of the major undercurrents running through the village elections.

Older villagers always mentioned the violent feuds that existed between the two dominant lineages before 1949, sometimes involving gun fights. The rivalry between these two local lineage groups continued during the Maoist era. For example, each had to contribute one "overseas landlord" whose property and house was to be confiscated and redistributed during the 1952 Land Reform; each had two members shot dead as "anti-revolutionary elements" in one of the radical campaigns in the 1960s. As I was told, "It was demanded that if one Zhang was killed, then one Yang should also be killed". In the 21st century, each has its own village-based Overseas Newsletter (*qiaokan*), lineage-based Elders' Association and primary school, which in the pre-1949 era had been lineage schools. Villagers know by heart the general line of lineage territory division, but there is no physical barrier between the two. Several villagers pointed out that the office block built in the 1970s for the administrative village government stands as part of the division line.

Mashan as a traditional place

As mentioned above, I carried out my fieldwork mainly in Mashan, the downstream part of the valley. The majority of residents are from the dominant Zhang lineage, while at least four other small surname groups live around the borders. The settlement is divided into a north side and south side by a river running through the middle of the village. According to the written lineage genealogy, the founding ancestor arrived in Mashan around the year 1385 to establish a settlement first on the south side and later the settlement spread to the area north to the river. The ancestral hall, built in the name of the founding ancestor, continues to stand to this day. It is inclusive of all the Zhang residents living on both sides of the river in Mashan, ranging from the 20th to 26th generations. They share common ancestors for the first seven generations. Additional ancestral halls of the third-, fifth-, seventh- and eighth-generations can

be found in the village together with a number of other ancestral halls of more recent segmentation.

There are 11 villagers' groups (*cunmin xiaozu*, 村民小组) occupying different neighbourhood corners, with four on the south side and the other seven on the north. They roughly overlap with the asymmetrically segmented lineage sub-groups of the Zhang. The only exception is the group that includes all the members from the three small surname groups (36 people in total). The sizes of these groups vary from 28 to 114 members. Two of them are named after the ancestral halls that the members reside in or around. Each has a group leader (*cunmin xiaozuzhang*, 村民小组长), who was previously known as the production team leader. Each group also has a representative in the Elders' Association (see Chapter Three).

Before concentrating on the issue of village's revived *qiaoxiang* identity in the next section, I want to first point out that the revival of ancestral worship in Wutang is closely connected with and parallel to the revitalisation of the village's *qiaoxiang* identity which took place since the 1980s. The revival of ancestral worship is uneven across the sub-groups within the local lineage, as it largely depends on the wealth of those Overseas Chinese who belong to the particular branch. Residents on the north side claim to be descendants of their apical ninth-generation ancestor – the ancestor who has been most celebrated since the 1980s. His tomb and regular annual worship was the first to be re-established as early as 1987, thanks to the initiative of those at home and the financial resources supplied by his overseas descendants⁷. In contrast, the founding ancestor was initially not given much attention. His ancestral hall was not renovated until 2001, when a villager who later became a civil war refugee returned from Taiwan after half a century away from the village. The re-establishment of the ancestral trust (*jizu jijin*, 祭祖基金) for the first seven founding ancestors was not mentioned until 1996. One reason is that the founding ancestors are considered too remote to give any effective blessings as these would be divided and shared by all the descendants living today.

⁷ Voice of Mashan, March 1987,128

The revitalisation of qiaoxiang identity

In the prologue, the 10-year-old girl, Wisdom, recounted her participation in a *huaqiao* reception event. Her account indicates that Mashan village is the ancestral land to many overseas Chinese. It was the sending community, before 1949, of a large number of its overseas villagers to *Nanyang* (南洋, literally South Ocean), i.e. Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. Since the 1980s, this situation reversed and Mashan began to receive the return visits and remittances of those who had previously migrated. As the majority of those who left and returned are male, they are frequently referred to in the Overseas Newsletter as “wondering sons” (*youzi*, see Stafford 2000: 151-152). In 1984, Mashan saw for the first time a large group of *huaqiao* returning from *Nanyang* after absences of more than 30 years. Those from Taiwan would have to wait for another four years to make their first visits in 1988 following the Taiwanese government’s lifting of martial law. Some individuals had to wait for more than half a century before returning for the first time in 2001 (Overseas Newsletter [2001] 2005,160).

Mashan claims a strong connection with its overseas emigrants in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The Overseas Newsletter stresses that more than ninety percent of the households in Mashan have overseas relatives. In 1992, the newsletter recorded that the “average overseas remittances (*qiaohui*, 侨汇) [received by the village] every year amount to over 100,000 Yuan”. In 1992, this was equivalent to more than £10,000. A recent report on the village states that the administrative village has more than 5,000 *huaqiao* while its local population is only a little over 3,000. The number of wealthy and powerful *huaqiao* is one of the arenas for competition between the two major surname groups in the valley.

It should be noted that I follow the villagers in employing the term *huaqiao* (lit. Chinese sojourners) to include all those returnees from outside Mainland China: Hong Kong and Taiwan as well as those from Singapore and Malaysia. They use this term regardless of whether they have become foreign nationals in their destination countries. The villagers do not make a distinction based on the nationality of the migrants in the way that officials and academics do (see Wang, 2001 for an overview of the official usage of the term *huaqiao*). The official

language addresses those in Hong Kong and Taiwan as compatriots (*tongbao*, 同胞, or brethren, literally, children from the same mother's womb), in an attempt to court their national allegiance. To Mashan villagers, the term *huaqiao* is primarily associated with wealth and prestige. This local usage, however, does blur the political nature of the past and current differentiations of two types of emigrants, which I will turn to introduce.

Two ways of leaving

Here I will briefly review the Mashan village history of overseas emigration from the mid-19th century until 1950. According to Pan (1998) there have been two types of Chinese “diasporas”⁸. The first of these was the “trading type”, which refers to those migrants who voluntarily chose to emigrate, for example to find work or establish businesses. The second diaspora was the “victim type”, which refers to those who were forced to leave their homeland as political refugees (Pan 1998). Mashan has seen both of these types of emigrants over the past 100 years.

The first group left from the mid-19th century to work as coolies, “sold piglets” or contracted labourers in the southeast Asian colonial countries under the British Empire.⁹ According to the Overseas Newsletter ([2000] 2005:145), in the early years, extreme poverty drove the first few villagers overseas. After that, in a similar way to the case described by Watson (1975) in Hong Kong, the lineage became the mechanism for chain emigration for members of the Zhang lineage. Many emigrants started working for some years in the rubber industry and then tried to open their own shops. The pre-1949 institutionalisation of *Nanyang* emigration in the village is manifested by the presence in the village of the two “water guests” (*shuike*, 水客) – professional couriers who regularly travelled carrying money, letters, gifts and luggage between the village and *Nanyang*. A single journey between Shantou and Malaysia would take them seven days and seven nights. After 1949, the CCP government tried to incorporate them as “couriers of overseas remittance” (*qiao pi yuan* 侨批员).

⁸ I do not use the term diaspora myself.

⁹ In these countries, the British Empire started to extract raw materials for its expansion of the capitalist economy and therefore demanded a large amount of cheap labour (Campbell, 2009; Tan, 2013; Yen, 2013). Godley (M. Godley, 1989) provides an effective overview of those who returned between 1949 and 1989 to Mainland China.

The second group of the “victim type” covers the “civil war refugees”.¹⁰ The Nationalist Party (KMT) army was defeated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) army at the end of the 1945 to 1949 civil war, thereby gaining control of Mainland China. Some KMT soldiers and officials had to go with the army to Taiwan. Other unwilling migrants were ordinary villagers suddenly kidnapped by the KMT army as it retreated to Taiwan. This historical episode has to do with the geographical location of Mashan on the main road leading to the coastal city of Shantou from where the KMT army would cross the sea to Taiwan. Many of these forced migrants left without saying goodbye to their families. Long (2009) identifies and documents at the national scale the civil-war refugee stories and experiences. It is estimated that at least 200 locals from the Dabu County area were among those captured (大埔文史 *Culture and History of Dabu*). Judging from the Taiwanese returnees listed in the Overseas Newsletter, more than thirty came from Mashan. Some died before 1988 when return became possible. Many locals aged over 60 still have vivid memories of this disruption. This sudden “forced separation” was, and still is, regarded mostly as personal and family tragedies. Though much smaller in number than the “trade type”, the experience of this group proves to be much more traumatic and emotional.

Both groups found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to return home after 1949. A gruesome story known to villagers older than 50 illustrates the risks faced by those who returned from overseas after 1949. The story is about a *huaqiao*, named Mr Zhang, who in the early 1950s travelled from Malaysia to visit his only daughter at home who had been born blind. Accused of being an “American spy”, he was captured while on his journey back to Malaysia, sentenced to death and executed within a month. The two women who told me the story emphasised that anyone who dared to return from overseas back then might risk death. As they noted, “It wasn’t even Taiwan that he came back from!” It is said that for a long time nobody dared collect his corpse which was left on the river bank at the edge of the county seat where the execution took place.

¹⁰ The term “refugee” is rarely applied to them in either official or popular discourse in Mainland China, but it is used in Long Yingtai’s (Y. Long, 2009) book of popular history, “Big River Big Sea”.

Another story demonstrates that even communication with overseas could be viewed as treason. A literate man in the neighbouring village helped other illiterate villagers write letters to their overseas relatives. He was jailed for more than five years in the 1960s when the “anti-foreign” propaganda was heightened. Even during those short periods of relatively decreased tension, connections with relatives in Taiwan were still particularly risky. If Taiwanese were able to send money and food packages to the village at all during these periods, they would still have to transfer them to some entrusted fellow villagers or friends in Hong Kong or Kuala Lumpur first, before they could be forwarded to the village, in order to avoid the village recipients being penalised.

Overseas emigration basically came to a halt between 1950 and 1978 (Godley 1989 for more details). Whether they had emigrated voluntarily or as a result of force, both groups had little chance of returning home between 1949 and the late 1970s. Various political and ideological campaigns were launched to attack the absentees overseas as well as their family members or relatives left behind in mainland China, who faced political and social discrimination. Their property and family assets were officially confiscated and redistributed to the poor. Having connections to Taiwan was far worse than having connections to *Nanyang* due to the heightened political tension across the straights between the CCP-led People’s Republic of China and the KMT-led Republic of China (ROC).

Since the early 1980s, the previous stigmatisation of those with overseas connection and their categorisation as “class enemies” was dramatically reversed. Following a major change in state policy, which now became favourable to *huaqiao*, overseas connections became a form of “social capital” and a potential financial resource (Nyiri, 2002:208-241; Fan Ke 1999). Since then, Mashan has seen the return visits of both the above-mentioned types of emigrants. As a result of the perceived and manipulated connection that the former “victim type” of emigrants from Taiwan have to the political imagination of national reunification, their return of is given a substantially different meaning by state agents than the returns of emigrants from other places (Shu, 2004:10). Despite this difference in political nature, the local imagination of all *huaqiao* is instead dominated by the

image of individual wealth and success. This is closely related to the village material landscape, which has been largely shaped by the wealth of these *huaqiao*.

A moral geography of reunion: qiaoxiang jianzhu (侨乡建筑, public buildings funded by huaqiao)

I describe in the Prologue how the 10-year-old Wisdom lived her school and family life in an environment where the influence of *huaqiao* was omnipresent. Like Wisdom, villagers living in Mashan cannot avoid exposure to the presence of *huaqiao* in their everyday life. Here, I focus on one obvious and important materiality in the village landscape: *qiaoxiang* architecture. “*Qiaoxiang* architecture” is a term the village elites use to refer to all the public buildings and constructions inside the village that have been funded by overseas Mashanese.

Evidence of *Huaqiao*s’ investment in lineage and public projects both before 1949 and after 1980 can be found in almost every aspect of the village life: agriculture, transportation, education, recreation, water, electricity and clinics. In addition, as I show in the following chapters, *huaqiao* have also financed the renovation of ancestral halls and tombs, and they have funded ancestral worship rituals, the composition of genealogies, and the re-issue and operation of the Overseas Newsletter.

I use “moral geography” in a similar way to Johnston (2013: 60-63). He uses it specifically in relation to the building of houses and tombs by absent villagers. This is directly relevant to my discussion here. He writes:

"The tombs and houses built by adult children give these absent villagers a physical presence in the village and suggest the possibility of a future return. For the audience that remains in the village, the building of these structures affirms the sense in which the parental home remains a centre to which one’s life is oriented (Feuchtwang, 2004). In this way, the centripetal morality of attachment to parents and the village is writ large on the landscape, to be read by future generations that pass by on their own journeys through the village." (2013: 63)

Roads and Irrigation Networks

One cannot walk to most households in Mashan without using paths funded by and named after certain *huaqiao*. While most paths in other villages in the local area remain dirt tracks, in Mashan, cement-paved village paths appeared as early as 1992. A stone tablet recording the donor or list of donors almost always appears at the beginning or end of the path. According to the commemorative text on the stone tablet dated 1992, a total of 12 village paved paths (totalling over 2100 metres in length) had been completed at that time with over 180,000 Yuan (about £19,000) of funding from Malaysian and Singaporean *huaqiao*. Criss-crossing neighbourhoods on the north and south sides, these paths are “broad and smooth, convenient for both vehicles and pedestrians”. *Huaqiao* tend to be mobilised to contribute to the paths close to their ancestral houses. The overseas wealth of the particular lineage segment is mapped in this way onto the residential corner inside the village from which they trace their origin. Starting from 2010, the village cadres started a project of installing streetlights for these village roads.

Villagers doing farm work on their rice fields have to use the “roads for mechanical ploughing” (*jigenglu*, 机耕路) and the paddy fields are connected by the irrigation networks (*shuizhen*, 水圳), both of which have been improved by *huaqiao*. The former refers to the hardened and broadened two-metre-wide paths cutting through the paddy fields which are suitable for agricultural trucks (the above-mentioned “iron buffalos”). They replaced the previous narrow and less stable field ridges made of mud. The major irrigation networks, which are paved with cement on three sides, were often constructed as part of the hardened road projects. An essay in the Overseas Newsletter provides information about the largest irrigation network before 1949: that of the village river ([1998] 2005: 105). The total length of the network is 800 metres, the width 2 to 2.5 metres and the height 2.5 metres. The total area covered by lime mixture and stone is about 3,200 square metres. Its construction resulted in extra paddy fields to the rear of the river and the annual produce from these fields was used to finance the lineage school and teaching staff. The fund, which was called “the river dam school fund” (*di xue kuan*, 堤学款) (Overseas Newsletter [1995] 2005), was deposited in a pawn shop in Singapore and managed by the Overseas Mashanese Association there. The

author praised the *huaqiao* ancestors who funded the irrigation as it stabilised the river bank and stopped the frequent flooding that had threatened the life of villagers and animals.

A qiaoxiang architecture cluster

I will now turn to the architectural feature most obvious to visitors: a particular congregation of *huaqiao*-funded buildings that stand in the middle of the village. During debates relating to the disputed demolition of one of these buildings (see Chapter Three), some village officials and lineage elites argued explicitly that this group of buildings was crucial to the “village face/appearance” (*cunrong cunmao*, 村容村貌).

Village face

The *qiaoxiang* architecture cluster in the middle of the village includes a bridge, the village archway (see more in Chapter Two), two decorative pavilions, the new three-storey village school complex, a tap water source for the village public, an extension classroom building now used as the recreation centre for the Mashan Elders’ Association, a basketball court, and two paved paths. In total there are eight commemorative tablets at the site. Before 2005, another two-storey building was also part of the landscape (See Chapter Three). The oldest of these structures was built before 1930 and the most recent one is the school complex completed in October 2006. The style of the buildings varies. Some, such as the school, are modern looking while others, such as the pavilions, are traditional with curved roofs.

Almost all public buildings are named after either the donors who funded them or the fathers of the donors. For the school building, each room including the auditorium and entrance lobby is named after a particular benefactor or benefactors. The *huaqiao* that contributed to these projects resided in places including, but not limited to, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. Immediately visible from the public road that links the neighbouring towns and the county seat, these structures together present an impressive view of the village to passers-by.

These buildings evidently provide convenience and benefit for the whole village community. All households with schoolchildren and elderly parents or grandparents benefit from the school and the recreation centre. For a few years, before the new highway appeared, one of the two pavilions served as the village bus stop for trips to and from the county seat. Sometimes referred to by locals as the “iron bridge”, the bridge over the village river was the first steel-cement bridge connecting the north and south residential corners. Back in the 1930s, it replaced the wooden bridge and made the crossing much safer and easier, and until recently the bridge was part of the county-level road for motor vehicles. Built and funded as a collective endeavour, the bridge has long been expounded as embodying the community spirit.

Tap-water: when you drink water think of the source

On the edge of the village school playground, a prominent stone tablet with commemorative text is situated beside the tap providing a water source for the village public. Including a water reservoir and a tap, it draws water from a source in a nearby mountain. The rectangular tablet is in dark smooth marble, framed by a line of red brick. The Chinese characters on it are all in gold. The durable material and the colours lend an air of importance and authority to the message it conveys. The first line gives the name of the project as “Yangzheng School Auto-Coming Water Project”; this is followed by the well-known four-character-phrase “When you drink water think of the source” (*yinshui siyuan*, 饮水思源) written in a larger font. Below it, in smaller characters, are the names of three overseas benefactors and the year of its construction – 2000.

Having access to tap water (*zilai shui* 自来水) is one of the perceived symbols of modernisation. Families living nearby fetch water from here for their daily use rather than going further away. The water here is both literal and metaphorical. The four characters *yinshui siyuan* sum up the popular moral principle that obliges *huaqiao* to return as they should never forget the debt they owe to their parents and ancestral land. Oxfeld (Oxfeld, 2010) elaborates effectively this point in her book: she uses this phrase as her book’s subtitle.

To sum up, such *huaqiao*-funded construction projects are eagerly sought by the lineage and village elites. They are often identified as community projects for the public good (*gongyi*, 公益). These are viewed as a moral geography of reunion and having the power of the village community to attract back their dispersed sons. The moral imperative to return is manifested and expounded in these buildings and projects for the public good. Similar to the situation in other *qiaoxiang*, the overseas funders, who made their mark on the village landscape, are praised publicly as loyal sons for their generosity to their ancestral land and for their community spirit. The village is affectingly referred to as the place where their “placenta was buried” (*baoyiji*, 胞衣迹), evoking one’s sentiment to mothers.

Using the phrase “*qiaoxiang* architecture”, the village-lineage elites emphasise the positive image of their place: these buildings are symbols of reunion and the power of their lineage as a whole. The *huaqiao* architecture cluster can be understood as the expression of the “collective enterprising spirit” which inspires more of its villagers to leave, like the college student Faith, whom I introduced in the Prologue.

It is worth noting that Mashan was one of the four villages selected by the Guangdong provincial government to receive subsidies in order to become a model village for two central state initiatives, which branded the village a “New Socialist Village” (*shehuizhuyi xin nongcun*, 社会主义新农村) and a “Harmonious, Healthy and Happy Village” (*hexie kangle xincun*, 和谐康乐新村). The other three villages selected were also *qiaoxiang*. I suspect that the material modernisation brought about by the investment of *huaqiao* in these public projects must have been the major reason that these villages attracted this upper-level state subsidy. The *qiaoxiang* landscape can be easily labelled as a socialist landscape.

Chapter Two: Overseas Visitors, Local Anxieties—The “Left-behind” Face the Problem of Returning Huaqiao

1. Introduction

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I hired a man on a motorbike to drive me from the county town to the village of Mashan. After the motorbiker learnt about my interest in studying *huaqiao* (华侨, Overseas Chinese), he immediately acknowledged that Mashan was a proper *qiaoxiang*, and then commented: “Those *huaqiao* care simply for their own reputations (*ai mingsheng*, 爱名声, literally, “love their names and voices”). That’s why they came back to give money.” His portrayal of *huaqiao*’s selfish obsession with personal gain and their reputation in the local world struck quite a different tone from the official discourse emphasising *huaqiao*’s high-mindedness, manifesting itself in their patriotism and allegiance to their hometown. This explanation about why *huaqiao* return, and the negative moral judgement implied, featured often in private conversations I had with villagers.

In Mashan the villagers have to face the return of *huaqiao* and negotiate various images of them as individuals and as a group in general. In a similar vein with Stafford’s (2003) insight that separation consists of both individual and collective experiences, return is problematic not just for the returnees, but also for the receiving community. I follow Oxfeld (2004) in focusing on “those who stay behind”, or “the left-behind” as Xiang Biao (Biao, 2005: 179-191) calls those who did not migrate. In other words, the “immobile” are affected in various ways by the return of *huaqiao*. Recall 10-year-old Wisdom who had to wait in the sun and wave to the *huaqiao* with apparent joy.

This chapter examines the various ways in which people in Mashan deal with the return of *huaqiao*. First, I demonstrate that some people have negative views of the *huaqiao*. Second, their very presence and their deeds in the village may make people reflect on their own life experiences: to this end, I provide narratives of personal reflection concerning one’s past decisions about whether or not to emigrate. Third, this process of reflection is closely related to one’s age, because

older people seem to realise how “fateful” their decisions about matters such as migration can be. These self-reflections seem triggered and shaped, but are not necessarily determined, by the “glorious” return of those from overseas.

Long and Oxfeld (2004) suggest that, as an analytic category, “each return has important political, social, economic and cultural consequences—not only for those who return but also for the sending and receiving communities” (3-4). “Return, in contrast [to notions of globalization or transnationalism], is situated in particular events and experiences. While responding to larger universal processes, returns reflect particular historical, social, and personal contexts” (Long & Oxfeld, 2004:3). In their edited volume, they consider three types of return: imagined, provisional and repatriated (6-9). They point out that state policy is critical in transforming an imagined return into a physical one.

Oxfeld’s work is noteworthy for its examination of the consequences for local villagers, rather than for the returnees. Indeed, her focus on the locals is deliberate. Her research was carried out in a Hakka village in the same prefecture, Meizhou, as my fieldwork site. There a relatively small number of *huaqiao* had returned to visit, and one had even returned for good to live in the village. I agree with Oxfeld (2004: 91) that much earlier work examining the connection between emigrants and their native villagers focuses mainly on the emigrants, particularly on their economic, social and cultural contributions to their native village: for example, whether the migrants brought ‘modernity’ to the village (Chen, 1940), or whether they helped conserve lineage or local traditions (Siu, 1990; J. L. Watson, 1975; Woon, 1984).

Oxfeld and Long also point out that “Returnees may also strain existing resources and relationships within local communities” (2004: 3). My point of departure is that villagers living in *qiaoxiang* are not the passive recipients of *huaqiao*’s return. They are active participants in the process. I examine how the existing resources and relationships are strained by the return of *huaqiao* in Mashan on three levels: village, household and individual. I will provide narratives of buildings, households and individuals to convey what seems to be a general sense of local ambivalence to *huaqiao* and their return.

2. The contradictory images of *huaqiao*

Oxfeld (2004, 2010) has examined local interpretations of *huaqiao* and of their fellow villagers' interactions with *huaqiao*. She has categorised the ambiguous moral perceptions of *huaqiao* into three types: benefactors, kin and foreigners (2010: 95-103). Her observation can be applied to understand the contradictory images of *huaqiao* in Mashan, where *huaqiao* have displayed what is considered by villagers to be their vast wealth. As some locals have laconically commented, they return simply to "show off".

The picture does indeed seem ambiguous. On the one hand, *huaqiao* as a group are depicted not only as paragons of success, but also as models which young villagers should look up and aspire to. In the narratives of the success of *huaqiao*, *huaqiao* as a group are portrayed as heroes and benefactors, and their return is a "glorious" one. Some *huaqiao* have had their biographies published in the *Overseas Newsletter*. Often dubbed the "big Overseas Chinese" (*da huaqiao*, 大华侨), they all seem successful, wealthy and appear to be generous donors. This image of the affluent *huaqiao*, however, is hardly new. It had been well established and documented in China generally, and in the village of Mashan itself, prior to 1949. Since the early 1980s, however, which witnessed an increasing number of return visits by Overseas Chinese, this group image has been renewed and reinforced in official and popular discourses. The elaborate reception staged by local state agents and villagers further confirms *huaqiao* as heroes of the community, "returning in robes" (*yijin huanxiang*, 衣锦还乡) from overseas. Their success stories abound in the village. This popular image of *huaqiao* as benefactors develops along similar lines in official discourse, which highlights their patriotism, sentimental attachment and loyalty to their home community.

At the same time, however, their return also seems to rouse anxiety in the village: criticism is directed at *huaqiao* as individuals and as a group. This is partly due to their wealth and partly because of the government policy offering "preferential treatment" to *huaqiao* (see Chapters Three and Seven).

One example of this is Uncle Guang, whom Mashan lineage elites identify as one of the three “big *huaqiao*.” He has been lauded for his generous donations to ancestral trusts, ancestral tomb reconstructions and other lineage projects in the village. In one of his annual three-month stays in Mashan, he hired a villager to set off fire crackers every evening to mark his family supper. Unfortunately, however, one day the poor villager charged with this task had one of his fingers blown off. Although setting off fire crackers is a conventional marker of important social occasions such as weddings, Chinese New Year and funerals, it must have seemed rather pompous and wasteful to have it performed daily at suppertime. One of my hostesses, Grand-aunt Liao, who had once visited Uncle Guang in Kuala Lumpur, once remarked: “Before he made his fortune, Uncle Guang didn’t like returning [to the village]. He started liking it only after becoming wealthy!” She sympathised with the villager who had lost his finger.

The impact of the return of *huaqiao*, however, is not limited to people making moral judgements. As the following dispute concerning the village arch and path will show, villagers often accuse *huaqiao* of obsessively pursuing personal fame under the masquerade of fulfilling their obligations to the community.

The arch in the middle of the village

As Stafford has pointed out, gates and public archways possess symbolic importance to the Chinese process of separation and reunion. They also delineate social groups, and supposedly “deflect the bad” from outside and “attract the good” inside (2000: 87-88). Most villages and towns in the local area do not have their entrance marked out by a designated archway, as often there is a conventional territorial border which locals simply take for granted. This border is usually historical, and related to the principle of *fengshui* (风水, Chinese geomancy, see Bruun, 2003; Feuchtwang, [1974] 2002).

Mashan, however, has an elaborate village archway as part of the *qiaoxiang* architectural cluster. It was built in 1992, but was still provoking controversy fifteen years later in 2007 when I was doing my fieldwork. Its location seems odd, as it is close to the centre of the village: that meant that many public events and

rituals passed through or close to the archway. In Mashan, elaborate public rituals for *huaqiao* (see Prologue) are also an important part of village social and public life. As I will show, the dispute illustrates some inherent tensions which are not readily observable.

The Mashan village arch (*cunpaifang*, 村牌坊) stands on the northern end of the village bridge as part of the *qiaoxiang* architectural cluster. Under the traditional curved roof of yellow glazed tiles, the village name is inscribed in golden Chinese characters on a piece of stone. Two pairs of symmetrical couplets (*duilian*, 对联) composed of sixty-four Chinese characters feature on the four poles supporting the roof. A good friend of the *huaqiao* financier of the archway composed the couplets. Written in exemplary calligraphy, the couplets expound on features of the village such as its beautiful scenery, green mountains, the clear river, as well as the industriousness of the villagers, including their overseas ventures. The couplets promote both traditional and modern values, mentioning filial piety, harmony among lineage members, law-abidingness and national prosperity. Similar arches may be found in the local county area.

The sole financier of the archway was one of the three best-known “big *huaqiao*” of the village in the 1980s and 1990s. He died in 1996 in Malaysia. The archway was one of six projects funded by *huaqiao* which were honoured with a high-profile ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by government officials, including the County Governor. It cost 19,800 yuan at a time when the average annual income per capita in Mashan was under 1000 yuan. A large group of *huaqiao* returned for the occasion which deliberately coincided with that year’s moon autumn festival. The financier of the arch and the sixteen other major overseas patrons were presented with an inscribed red silk banner by town and village officials. The banner had eight characters on it praising *huaqiao* loyalty to and sentiment for their “home mountain” (*jiashan*, 家山, i.e. their hometown community). It was immediately hailed as the landmark of the village. Although a new road circumventing the arch was built by the state in the mid-1990s, funeral processions I witnessed in 2007 and 2008 would always pass through the arch and proceed to

the conventional village entrance. The archway had obviously gained some salience in the village.

I first noticed the controversy about the village archway in a letter of apology published in 1995 in the Overseas Newsletter. The letter was addressed to the financier. This letter, written by the two most senior lineage elite villagers in late 1994, alluded to the financier's anger that "someone wanted to have the archway erased". The two writers condemned such "gossip" and extolled the financier's "selfless sacrifice" to and "high-mindedness" for his hometown. They assured the financier that the archway enhanced the village scenery. This was obviously a sensitive issue. After I arrived at the village, I waited until I had established some trust with the elders. When I tentatively asked one of the writers about the controversy, he was obviously uncomfortable with the topic.

The arch seemed to be regarded as problematic as it was not close to the conventional village entrance. Instead, the former was about six to eight minutes' walk from the latter. The conventional village entrance, though lacking any physical marking, was important to villagers. It was, for example, the point where the public greeting ritual took place in which Wisdom and other schoolchildren had participated. Located on the road on the south side leading east to the county seat.

As I learnt from senior lineage elites, the *huaqiao* financier had been criticised for two reasons. First, an arch is supposed to be meaningful for the entire village. But the two characters of the *huaqiao*'s given names were embedded in the couplet. By having his name inscribed on what was surely meant to be a community project, the *huaqiao* financier was regarded as taking too large a share of the social capital of the village. Second, its location was regarded as "no good" and "inappropriate for the village centre". As a male villager remarked, the arch indicated "inside" and "outside" and it would normally be placed "at the village entrance." In a group discussion with other members of the Elders' Association Committee members, a retired schoolmaster made the following remark: "The archway currently standing excludes the households on the south side from the village. But we have no choice. Whoever gives the money has the right to decide where to build it."

At the end of my fieldwork, several elite villagers were debating the idea of building another village archway, one which would be at or nearer to the conventional village entrance. This debate showed there was conflict, rather than consensus, between lineage elites. I then discovered that opposition had originally stemmed from another “big *huaqiao*” whose ancestral house was on the south side, where his nephew lives with his family. I was told that to mock the inappropriate location of the village arch, on one of his return visits the big *huaqiao* deliberately took a very roundabout way to his house by walking through the archway: this was unnecessary as he was coming from the road to the south. This act of ridicule was rumoured to have made its way overseas and the archway financier was upset when news of this reached him. This must have been extremely embarrassing for the lineage elites who had always encouraged donations of this kind for “public-interest projects”. The letter of apology mentioned above was probably an attempt to calm the financier down so he would continue to provide his financial support for other village/lineage projects.

The controversy about the village arch lasted for more than a decade. Some lineage elites obviously disapproved of the fact that the financier and the other “big *huaqiao*” had ended up “not talking to each other” as a result. The nephew of one of the big *huaqiao*, the director of the Elders’ Association Committee in 2007, became an active promoter of building another archway. At one of the monthly meetings of the Elders’ Association Committee which I regularly attended, the nephew spoke of a new archway “at a suitable location”. The newly elected director in 2008 confirmed that some businessmen in Shenzhen and Guangzhou were interested and willing to fund a new arch to guard the good fortune of the whole village.

Some villagers who knew of the friction between the two “big *huaqiao*” cynically commented that the village archway resembled a battlefield on which two Mashan absentees were vying for their respective personal names and reputation, rather than being concerned about contributing to the community per se. As we have seen, the tension created by this dispute strained the relationships between the wealthy *huaqiao*, and between the *huaqiao* and local villagers.

More importantly, perhaps, this conflict also shows individual self-interest masquerading as interest in the community. Villagers seem to be aware of this: as we have seen, villagers have accused *huaqiao* benefactors of obsessively pursuing personal fame under the ostensible aim of fulfilling their communal obligations. But there is also a lesson here: if any villager wishes to become visible as an individual, he or she knows he or she will have to do so by contributing to communal interests.

“The huaqiao-funded path that hurts your toes”

Local criticism may also be directed at *huaqiao* as a group. One day in the autumn of 2007, I had my bicycle and was about to set off on a path cutting through the middle of the paddy field in the northern part of the village. It was one of the “mechanical ploughing roads” that I mentioned in the introduction to Mashan. Just before I stepped onto the path, several villagers passing by hailed me: “Watch out! You’ll fall off your bike!” I stopped immediately. They then explained: “The path funded by our *huaqiao* hurts your toes if you walk on it.” “Motor vehicles can’t run on it. It’s funded by *huaqiao*, it’s just great”. They made these comments with an obvious sarcastic tone, to convey that the path did not work well and they disliked it. After I had promised not to take any risks on my bike, the villagers let me go. I then walked on the path while pushing my bike. About two metres wide, the path is made of undressed granite. Its surface is very rough. During my stay in the village, every time I turned towards to the path some villagers nearby would unfailingly warn me: “The *huaqiao*-funded road is very good. It is going to hurt your toes!”

I later learnt more about the story of this *huaqiao*-funded path from a production team leader in his early seventies, Uncle Jin. The path was built in the mid-1990s and was funded by one of the three “big *huaqiao*”. He insisted on using this particular kind of untreated granite as the sole construction material after reading somewhere that it had been used by another wealthy *huaqiao* in his hometown. Uncle Jin said villagers had told the *huaqiao* financier that they would prefer a cement-paved path, “smooth and wide enough to allow for motor vehicles one

day”. But they were ignored. He commented that the *huaqiao* was short-sighted in thinking that villagers would not need a road for motor vehicles.

Uncle Jin then proceeded to blame the two village-based overseers of the project, namely the then village party secretary, and the nephew of the overseas financier. Although he mentioned the incompetence of the nephew, he more readily focused on blaming the village party secretary for profiteering from the project. Several other senior villagers also eagerly adopted this strategy of blaming village cadres in general. The locals questioned the moral integrity of the village cadres managing the projects funded with overseas money. Whenever villagers grumbled about the path, they complained about the village party secretary enriching his own pockets and questioned his accountability as a local state agent. Here we seem to be able to see how the ‘intrusion’ of *huaqiao* leads to conflict within the village: the criticism of projects financed by the overseas Chinese extended to the moral questioning of village cadres.

The path which “hurts your toes” had evidently become a morally contested place. The financial contribution was ostensibly provided to help improve village infrastructure and ease the ploughing of the paddy fields. It was supposed to demonstrate the loyalty of overseas absentees (*huaqiao*) to their hometown. Villagers’ comments about the path indicate their moral ambivalence towards *huaqiao*, who are viewed not only as benefactor and kin, but also as short-sighted and stubborn. What *huaqiao* want sometimes differs from what locals want. The latter have to live their everyday lives at the village level, whereas *huaqiao* always leave after a short visit. I noted that the longest period of residency of a *huaqiao* in the village was three months.

Thus we can see that these *huaqiao*-funded constructions can be a source of both “collective pride - and communal tension and jealousy” (Freeman, 2013:106). In Freeman’s study, it was the private émigré houses in Madagascar which attract the criticism of villagers. In Mashan, however, these *qiaoxiang* constructions were ostensibly community projects for the public good. But to the villagers, they seem to indicate individual success, wealth and competition—difference more than reunion. The controversy surrounding the arch and path certainly strained the

relationships within and between the village community and its overseas community.

“Wild weeds grow everywhere in the qiaofang [侨房, overseas Chinese houses] today”

Since the early 1980s, the Chinese central and provincial governments have provided a series of “preferential” policies for *huaqiao*. One such policy concerns the restitution of property owned by overseas Chinese prior to 1949. The implementation of this state policy by local state agents plays a critical role in creating local ambivalence to *huaqiao* and their relatives.

Mashan also witnessed the restitution of a number of *qiaofang* (侨房) to *huaqiao*. The one which seems to have had the greatest repercussion involved the eviction around 1985 of more than fifteen households from what is known as the ‘Overseas Chinese Mansion.’ Completed in the early 1940s, the mansion, with its ornate wooden features, was then the grandest in the village. It boasted two courtyards and more than thirty rooms. In 2007, it was commonly referred to as “*Fanshen Lou*” (翻身楼, the Emancipation Building). This name, with the Communist revolutionary connotation of “liberation”, had replaced its former poetic name of South Mount with Scenery (Nanshanjuxiu, 南山聚秀). The mansion had been confiscated as overseas Chinese landlord property in 1952 by a Chinese Communist Party Land Reform Work Team. It was then allocated to poor homeless villagers. Its pre-1949 name was scratched off and the new name “*Fanshen Lou*” inscribed over it. The appropriation of the *qiaofang* and eviction of the then residents in 1985 was a historical event for the village. All but one of the households which were later evicted came from the dominant Zhang lineage.

Grandma Wa (in her early eighties in 2008) and her family of three generations was one of the households evicted in 1985, when the *qiaofang* was returned to its original owner. By 1985, she and her husband had lived there for more than twenty-three years in two rooms allocated to them. Her three children and her eldest grandson were born there. Like the majority of the households evicted by the village cadres and county government officials, at first they had nowhere else to

live. They were given 150 yuan by the local government as compensation per room, and they then had to start building a new house right away. Most evicted households managed to build new houses on the paddy fields nearby. This was made possible thanks to a special permit from the County Bureau of National Land Registration, as the law forbade wet-rice fields to be converted to non-agricultural use. Today more than ten houses stand along a path created after the eviction.

Grandma Wa recounted the circumstances of the eviction with evident resentment towards the two households which were related to the original owner of the *qiaofang*. She remembered one of them making harsh remarks to her family prior to the final eviction. She then said: “Thanks to the eviction, we all live in new houses now. But look at that overseas Chinese house today, it is cold and empty. No one lives there anymore. Wild weeds grow inside.”

Grandma Wa’s anger at her eviction was also directed to the state agents who implemented it. She said “the government was slapping its own face”. As part of the restitution of *qiaofang*, the open area in front of the mansion which was allocated to the in-coming households in 1952 was also supposed to be returned. Over the years it had been used for allotments. All the households refused to take the monetary compensation offered for the loss of this area because they believed it to be too small, and that “the village cadres must have eaten half of it” (i.e. taken it themselves) after receiving it from the County government. The village cadres insisted they had not. Some household members organised a protest in front of the County government building, but to no avail. The stand-off lasted for more than twenty years until 2004 when the front was finally returned to the overseas owner.

Grandma Wa continued to recount the story of the eviction. According to her, the two village-based descendant households “left behind” by the original overseas owner ended up in disharmony. The *qiaofang* was legally returned to the sons of the original owner (who by then was long dead). The sons who inherited the legal ownership of different parts of the mansion all lived overseas. The two village-based households with agnatic relationships with these sons were the only ones who actually lived in the *qiaofang* following its restitution, and they were entrusted with managing different parts of it. The story was that the two households had

fallen out over a television which was a gift shipped from overseas to Mashan to be shared by the two households. Later, the relationship of the two village-based households worsened due to arguing about repairs on the house. Just a few years after the *qiaofang* restitution, both households left the village to settle down in the local County Seat.

The *qiaofang* fell into disrepair and was boarded up. I was able to enter it only once. Some red Mao-era slogans remained on the walls. The once magnificent mansion stood abandoned for most of the year except for the memorial tablets and portraits of the original *huaqiao* ancestors. The name plank of the main hall with its golden characters had been stolen. Grandma Wa told me that the two households would even come back at different times on Chinese New Year's Day to hold separate worship rituals for their common ancestors. Lineage elders also said that due to this inter-household division, the much anticipated renovation project planned for the mansion never materialised, despite offers of financial support from overseas.

Relations continued to be strained between the *huaqiao*-related households and those who had been evicted, as well as between the two households with overseas connections. This was not the only example of an inter-household relationship souring as a result of disputes breaking out about the *huaqiao*s' financial or provisional generosity. While the state aimed to encourage the financial return of *huaqiao* by offering the restitution of property, it was often the villagers who suffered as a result.

3. Local state agents

As already noted, criticism of overseas-financed projects often extended to the moral questioning of village cadres, and so I address here the role of state policies and village cadres in the remittance-funded projects and in the restitution of *huaqiao* property in the village. Becoming involved in remittance-funded projects represented both a source of legitimacy, and also led to accusations of corruption in village cadres. According to Levitt (1998), moral questioning of the government often occurs in emigrant communities when what the emigrants want and what the local community wants differs. State policies are critical in incorporating *huaqiao*

and their finances (M Thunø, 2001), and it seems evident from the sections above that state agents at local government and village level play a key role in implementing these official policies. As village cadres were also lineage members, their relationships also often became strained.

When I met the former village Party Secretary at his home with two other villagers, he proudly gave me numerous accounts of how he had successfully mobilised and sometimes even tricked *huaqiao* into investing in village-lineage projects, such as the school and certain ancestral trusts. However, it was well-known in the village that he had declined the offer of a job promotion to work for the local County government because he did not want to lose the “red-envelope” money (*hongbao*, 红包, small gifts of money in red envelopes often given on special occasions) from *huaqiao*. This he now regretted as his pension as a retired village cadre was only 30 yuan (three pounds) per month. As we have seen, Uncle Jin had accused him of enriching his pocket when he was one of the supervisors of the notorious village path. The long stand-off between the households evicted from the mansion also became a source of anger directed at the village cadres, as Grandma Wa recounted.

Here in Mashan, as in many other villages in post-reform China, village cadres have lost some of their power in the transition from a command economy towards a market-oriented one (Oi, 1995). Brandtstädter has also observed that by becoming involved in local projects funded by *huaqiao*, local state representatives can “regain some of the prestige [they] lost” (Brandtstädter, 2001:18). Her observation can also be applied to Mashan in the first few years of the *huaqiao*s’ return in the 1980s and 1990s. Privileged access to *huaqiao* became a new power base for the village cadres in the era of reform. By 2007 and 2008, however, any village cadre involved in *huaqiao*-funded projects in Mashan was attracting numerous negative comments and accusations of corruption. The overseas-funded projects were popularly conceived of as a platform for embezzlement by officials.

Thus far I have recounted how the relationship between villagers and their overseas patrons, the relationship between households within the village community, and the role of village cadres could be put under serious pressure by

the presence and absence of *huaqiao* in the village. Next, I consider some villagers' individual reflections and re-assessments of their past which seem triggered by the return of *huaqiao*. This aspect is lacking from the existing literature on the impact of migration. It should be noted that such reflections do not seem directed towards *huaqiao* or other villagers interacting with *huaqiao*, but are mainly directed inwards towards the individual himself or herself.

4. Personal reflections of the “Left Behind” on the past

“If I had known [what would happen], I would have simply let myself be kidnapped to Taiwan!” With some irony in his tone, a male villager, Uncle An, now in his early seventies, made this comment. We were sitting outside one of the shops along the village's main street one day in August 2007. It turned out that he had narrowly escaped being abducted by the Nationalist Party Army (KMT) back in the 1940s. Some other local elders echoed Uncle An's comment. “Who could have imagined that being abducted by the KMT soldiers to Taiwan would turn out to be such good luck!” The “good luck” here refers to the status of Taiwanese *huaqiao* who later made “heroic” returns in the late 1980s. Most of these Taiwanese *huaqiao* were former refugees from the civil war.

The remarks made by villagers seem to indicate that what used to be regarded as an unfortunate fate in terms of individual and family life was now thought to represent a lost opportunity for emigration, and accordingly, the lost opportunity of making a “glorious” return some forty years later. However, some villagers did recognise that not all *huaqiao* had become wealthy, and not all of them had had the chance to return to China. Some of them had died overseas in poor circumstances. But these individual cases of misfortune did not alter the group image of *huaqiao* as being affluent and enviable. The state's “preferential” policy, the elaborate public receptions and the numerous buildings named after *huaqiao* all seem to confirm and reinforce this collective image of *huaqiao*.

Age seems crucial here. Among villagers, the local elders most often find themselves confronted with the narratives of the success and wealth of their overseas counterparts. Age is also an element of time. As I will outline below, the elders often lament their lost opportunity of emigrating, sometimes even to the

extent of denying their past: this I characterise using the term “temporal anxiety”, borrowed from Xiang Biao (2011). What they regret seems to revolve to a greater extent around their limited access to wealth and social prestige in the local community today. The following section examines how village elite elders’ sense of relative deprivation leads to their personal reflections.

Two biographical narratives of possible emigration

The success stories of *huaqiao* seem to exert enormous moral pressure on those who have “failed” to make a fortune—often those who missed out on their chance to emigrate. I will now look at the villagers’ responses to and interpretations of the enormous differences in wealth and status today in the local community between *huaqiao* and local elite elders. Importantly, these village elders and the majority of *huaqiao* happened to be in the same age cohort: they were former acquaintances, childhood friends or classmates before 1949. By the mid-1980s, most of them had not seen each other for over thirty or forty years as the state policies of the Chinese state had made it extremely difficult or almost impossible for the average *huaqiao* to return from the 1950s onwards.

The following two stories illustrate how two village elders came to reassess their personal or family decisions regarding pre-1949 emigration opportunities against the background of the current gap in wealth and social status between senior locals and *huaqiao*. The former have been “stuck” in the village for most of their lives. They have had little personal experience of migration in the past forty years, and now they were exposed to *huaqiao* returns. They were quite often the organisers of the public greeting rituals held for *huaqiao*. They had thus become involved in the collective experience of emigration and return. The local experience and perception of the overseas return visits are important factors in understanding villagers’ ambivalence towards *huaqiao*.

“Stupid Grandmother who took me back too early”

The first story is about Uncle Jin and his regret about a family decision to migrate in the 1940s. Now in his early seventies, he had been a production team leader for the past thirty-seven years. He was one of nine members of the Elders’ Association Management Committee. In 2007, his family had few active overseas links. Born

in Singapore, he told me several times that his grandmother had decided to take him and his siblings back to China from Singapore before 1949, when they were children. His is a story of a lost opportunity to become Singaporean in the 1940s.

“If my grandmother hadn’t brought us back, it would have been great. But then she was such an ignorant woman with a strong feudal consciousness”. This Uncle Jin repeated with visible frustration several times. With the untimely death of his father in Singapore, his grandmother was worried that her widowed daughter-in-law would remarry and take the grandchildren. Also in the hope of receiving some land from Communist Party land reforms, the grandmother then took all her grandchildren, including Uncle Jin, and returned to Mashan. He thus lost his chance to remain overseas. His mother returned for the children, but left again for Singapore a few years later. His grandmother forbade any children to leave with their mother, and Uncle Jin thus lost his second chance of going overseas. It would be another three decades before he met his mother again (she had remarried), in the 1980s in Hong Kong

Uncle Jin bitterly recounted another loss which he perceived as related to his grandmother’s “brainless decision” to return from overseas. After much hard work to obtain admission to a college in Jiangxi Province, he was sent home in 1958 halfway through college because of deliberate bureaucratic obstruction carried out by the then village Party Secretary. He thus lost the invaluable opportunity to have his household registration¹¹ transferred from “agricultural population” to “urban population”. If he had continued at college, after graduation he would have been guaranteed life-long employment in the public sector and a state pension today. This loss he blamed on his grandmother for returning when “there were no adult male members at home”. He pinpointed this as the reason for the Party Secretary’s calculated bullying of him. He summed up his loss by bemoaning his grandmother’s “short-sightedness” and “silliness” for not remaining overseas.

¹¹ The household registration system (户口, *hukou*) is an institution that works like an internal passport system inside China. It is also a resource distribution system. See a detailed discussion of this population registration system and its implication in Dorothy Solinger 1999 and Li Zhang 2002.

Uncle Jin's bitterness and frustration at his grandmother's decision made almost sixty years ago seemed largely to stem from his social-economic difficulties today, which contrast with the wealth of returning *huaqiao*. Since the 1980s, several of his cousins had returned from Hong Kong or Singapore as *huaqiao* and had contributed large sums of money to village or lineage projects: they have also had their names engraved on the marble stones besides the basketball field for all to see. One had even built a new, five-storey house, the tallest in the village.

By comparison Uncle Jin and his wife mainly depended financially on their married-out daughter, who sent about 200 yuan per month. Their extended family, including three married sons and five grandchildren, were among a small number of households that continued to live in an old living quarters built before 1949. Living in an old house is acknowledged as a key indicator of individual failure and of the relatively low socio-economic standing of the household (see Chapter Four). The only other household still residing in the same old quarter consists of a man, still single in his fifties, whom villagers generally regard as "a loser". Uncle Jin complained several times about this "drunken" man and obviously did not want to be associated with him. Living in an old house obviously contributed to his sense of being "left behind", especially when he was confronted with the existence of a considerable number of new houses funded by overseas remittances.

A senior grassroots leader who "returned too early"

Granduncle Zhenkun, who was in his early eighties in 2007, harboured similar sentiments: not towards his grandmother, but towards his own decision to return from Hong Kong in the 1940s. One day in the summer of 2007, I was talking with him while sitting on the ground floor of the office building of the Elders' Association. After the usual discussion about *huaqiao* from Mashan and their generous contributions, he asked me whether I had heard of two Hong Kong millionaires whose hometown was the neighbouring village. He was slightly surprised by my ignorance; he then proceeded to tell me how he used to work alongside those two millionaires. The three of them had worked as manual labourers back in Hong Kong. He seemed particularly keen to specify the amount one of his former co-workers had contributed to a new school complex: 1.2 million Yuan. Then he remarked, sighing: "I could have returned as one of them

millionaires if I hadn't come back from Hong Kong to look after my mother who fell sick". He thus returned to fulfil his filial obligation to take care of his frail mother. Although this discourse of filial piety retains its power, Granduncle Zhenkun privately expressed his regret for "returning too early", thereby losing the opportunity to return today as a rich *huaqiao*.

Granduncle Zhenkun's strong sense of "I could have returned as an overseas millionaire" is particularly poignant given that his relative socio-economic standing was high in the village. Unlike Uncle Jin and most of his fellow villagers registered as "agricultural population", he enjoyed a decent state pension of 800 yuan per month after retiring as a state-employed school teacher. It was widely acknowledged in the village that he stood out as one of the two key contacts trusted by *huaqiao* since the early 1980s. This perceived privilege of having *huaqiao*'s trust was based on his extensive, direct contacts with emigrants in Hong Kong in the 1940s. Being the key link between the village-lineage community at home and its overseas community, Granduncle Zhenkun's role was indispensable to the success of almost all the fund-raising drives for village projects. He is the only village-based elder who had co-funded with a *huaqiao* a paved path in the village: and the path was named after him and the overseas funder. The village-based and overseas-based magazines had several times recorded his visits to *huaqiao* leaders in Malaysia.

Well-known as the younger brother of a general of the Nationalist Party Army in Taiwan, he has prominent and active overseas connections which have remained a source of prestige since the late 1980s. But it was also because of this Taiwanese connection that he lost his job as a school teacher between the 1950s and the 1970s: he was also the target of political campaigns several times. On his seventieth birthday, some county-level government officials even came to his house in the village to mark the occasion.

Granduncle Zhenkun was respected as a senior "village leader" (村领导, *cun lindao*), though he was never a village cadre. He was the key founder of the Elders' Association, a village-level organisation for villagers of over sixty years of age

(see Chapter Three). He had been the director of the Association Management Committee since its inception in 1988, and only stepped down recently to become vice director because of his old age. He had once acted as editor-in-chief of the village-based quarterly *Overseas Newsletter*. A gifted folk-singer and performer, he never failed to impress at the two annual gatherings organised by the Elders' Association for all the village elders. His name was often mentioned alongside those of the village cadres in reports to the overseas community. His seniority in age and generation only added to his authority.

In 2007, he and his wife continued to live in their old living quarters, although all their children had successfully moved out to work in the cities. All the red couplets in each room in the old house were composed and written by him. Probably because of his obvious social-political achievements, and the general reverence shown to him by the village public, he did not mind living in an old house.

Age and reflections on overseas emigration

Both these two senior males' biographical narratives exemplify their regret for the lost opportunity of emigration/separation in an earlier era, and their strong sense of being "left behind" in their village community. The social-economic standings of Uncle Jin and Granduncle Zhengkun differ considerably. But their anxieties about the past, and dissatisfaction with some aspects of their current position, seem to stem from the same source, i.e. the presence of *huaqiao* and their wealth from Southeast Asian countries (*nanyang*, 南洋) such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. The village elders' memories of the past were triggered by the socio-economic divisions that have emerged between them and their overseas counterparts.

Their stories revealed "temporal anxieties", to borrow Xiang's (2011) term, which indicates an apprehension about a future as expressed by some prospective migrants in contemporary Northern China. Xiang observed that the prospective migrants experienced "ontological denial of the present" while looking into the future. Local elders in Mashan seem to experience a similar kind of time-related anxiety. Having been constantly exposed to the wealth displayed by *huaqiao* in the

present, many elders harboured much frustration about their past. Arguably these Mashan village elders, at least sometimes, wished to reject their past when confronted with the contemporary presence of successful *huaqiao*.

This presence of *huaqiao* did seem to upset some local elders. It threw new light on elders' past life opportunities and decisions. The personal reflections on one's life experience seem embedded in the current local economic-political context. The personal or family decision to remain and not go overseas, what was once believed to be fortunate, i.e. narrowly escaping from being abducted to Taiwan, are now seen as a lost opportunity in the form of emigration which would have facilitated a "heroic" return today. The individual experiences recorded above might seem exceptional, but they reflect a general sentiment among the village elders. Oxfeld and Long indicate that "...returns reflect particular historical, social, and personal contexts" (2004: 3). The biographical narratives presented here confirm that the response to returns was also embedded in specific historical-social and personal contexts.

There are several reasons underlying the village elders' denial of the past and their dissatisfaction with the present. First, age is a critical parameter in local elders' responses to the gap in wealth and social status between them and *huaqiao*. In Mashan in 2006 and 2007, all those villagers expressing a strong sense of being "left-behind" happened to be those whose age was similar to those of the majority of the returning *huaqiao*, i.e. in their sixties or early seventies. As the theory of age cohorts suggests, people of the same age group are usually taken as the main reference group in measuring their life achievements (Spencer, 1990). Oxfeld (2004) has observed that those locals with and without *huaqiao* relations make different and even contradictory moral judgements about *huaqiao* visitors and other locals. Although her observation is based on the level of personal access to overseas connections, my fieldwork data indicate that the reception is differentiated by the age of the villagers.

Some practices by *huaqiao* reinforced the idea of "same-age people" (*tongling ren*, 同齡人). For example, one popular method of differentiation when *huaqiao*

distributed “red-envelope money” to villagers was by age: people born in the same decade would receive the same amount of money; villagers between sixty and sixty-nine received less than those over seventy; the few villagers over ninety years of age received the largest amount. In one case, a son and his father decided to distribute “red envelopes” only to those who were of the same sign of the Chinese Zodiac as they were. The overseas gift givers were given all the “usual” praise and honour for their generosity and loyalty to the folk of their hometown: but this kind of practice may also have reminded local elders of their position as recipients, and their relative deprivation vis-a-vis their overseas peers.

The local elders’ strong sense of being “stuck” was not generally shared by younger villagers. None of the middle-aged villagers or those in their twenties or thirties with whom I spoke conveyed regret for not going overseas, though they might regret not having meaningful overseas connections. When they grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of going overseas was simply unthinkable. The option of making fortune overseas remains closed to most young villagers in Mashan today, but they at least enjoy another kind of mobility, i.e. travelling to urban areas within China. However, such opportunities for “internal migration” (see Pieke & Mallee, 1999) have come too late for the majority of the village elders in their late sixties or older, as they are obviously too old to qualify as *dagong zai* or *dagong mei* (打工仔, 打工妹, young migrant workers in the city) who would work at urban factories.¹²

Finally, the local elders’ anxieties about the lost opportunity to emigrate overseas probably goes beyond a sense of general connection with *huaqiao*. In part they may stem from an earlier social hierarchy involving the *huaqiao* being officially treated as “the enemy”. Between 1949 and 1978, overseas connections in general were treated with suspicion by officials. *Huaqiao* and their relatives were political-social outcasts. As Fan Ke (1999) argues: “*haiwai guanxi*” (海外关系, overseas connections) were stigmatised, particularly during the Cultural Revolution. It would be hard to imagine that any villagers during this period would have envied *huaqiao* or wished to be related to *huaqiao*.

¹² For more on the situation of rural-to-urban migrant workers inside China, see (Solinger, 1999; Zhang, 2001)

Gender and reflections on overseas emigration

I have been talking about men when referring to *huaqiao* and “local elders”. Elderly women do not seem to express regret about missing out on opportunities to go overseas—because they probably would not have had such opportunities in any case. Opportunities to migrate are gendered. The *huaqiao* visitors are predominately male because, before 1949 only sons left the village for overseas. Back then, women were expected to wait at home and remain faithful to their absent husbands (Szonyi 2005).

I heard two women’s stories concerning marriages with *huaqiao*. The first one, Grandma Lan, was a daughter in law in waiting, promised to a young man in the 1930s and 1940s. Her husband-to-be was overseas. She ended up marrying his locally-based brother. By 2007 she was in her late seventies, and had had six adult children and more than ten grandchildren. Her sister-in-law pointed out that Grandma Lan would never approach the *huaqiao* who was once supposed to be her husband (he had returned in the 1980s). When Grandma Lan briefly talked about it to me one evening when we were alone, she did not regret her choice.

Another story came from one of my hosts, Grand-aunt Liao, now in her seventies. She was born in Malaysia, but as a teenager she and her sister-in-law were sent back to the home village in China for a few years, with the intention that they would migrate overseas again. While waiting for the visa to be arranged by her brother in Malaysia, her sister-in-law became involved with another man. When the brother heard news of his wife’s infidelity, he cancelled the visa arrangements. Grand-aunt Liao thus lost her chance of going overseas. In the late 1990s, she and her husband travelled to Singapore and Malaysia to visit their family members there. Her husband retired as head of the County Library with a decent pension and was respected as an accountant for the Elders’ Association. One of their sons went to Singapore and worked there for five years in a shipyard before returning to marry and renovate an extension of the family house. Grand-aunt Liao looked after her grandson while her adult children worked in the cities. Generally a happy and confident woman, Grand-aunt Liao did not dwell on the lost opportunity of

emigration and she seemed more content with her life as it was. This was probably because there is no female *huaqiao* with whom to compare herself.

My fieldwork material shows that besides the political-economic impact brought about by *huaqiao*, their presence led many a villager to rethink their own personal and family past. Unlike the general “welcome home” message captured by other studies about emigrant communities, village elders in Mashan seem to have mixed and ambivalent feelings towards *huaqiao* returnees. The success narrative and the actual socio-economic disparity between the locals and *huaqiao* were both at work in producing ambivalence to *huaqiao*. The aforementioned response to one’s personal past seems closely related to the new “social divisions” (Oxfeld 2004) created by the relatively high social status that *huaqiao* returnees have enjoyed since the 1980s.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has focused on emigrants’ return and the problematic aspects of this in the eyes of those who were “left behind”. They not only have to deal with *huaqiao*, other villagers including village cadres, but also themselves. Unlike Oxfeld (2004), I have examined some specific consequences for some households and the community. Through the ethnographic accounts of the awkwardly positioned village archway, the path that “kicks people’s toes” and the eviction of households from a returned *qiaofang*, I have shown local ambivalence towards *huaqiao* and how the existing relationships and resources are strained in various ways at village and household level by the return of *huaqiao*.

I have also explored at the personal level how some male and female peers of the overseas returnees reflect on and question their own personal and family pasts in relation to lost opportunities of emigration or separation. Age and the socio-economic differentiation between locals and the *huaqiao* or *huaqiao*-connected households are both critical reasons for the local ambivalence towards the presence of *huaqiao*. In examining individual accounts of personal reflections triggered by the return of *huaqiao*, I indicate that one’s own relationship with one’s personal and family past may also be strained. Past decisions about emigration are understood in a new light brought about by the *huaqiao*’s “glorious” return. This

kind of reflection seems shaped by one's age, gender and sense of relative deprivation, reinforcing the village elders' sense of being "left-behind". These villagers' re-assessments of their earlier opportunities to emigrate overseas may have contributed to the massive rural-to-urban migration since the 1990s: the younger generation of villagers may not wish to be "left behind" like their parents. Indeed, "not exiting [the village]" bears the negative connotation of individual failure.

Chapter Three: The Fragility of Lineage Elite Power—The Demolition of Happiness Garden

1. Introduction

During my first few months in Mashan, I taught English at the village school. While working there, I heard the headmaster describe the editor-in-chief of the village-produced Overseas Newsletter (*Qiaokan*, 侨刊) as “a leader in the village” (*cunli de lingdao*, 村里的领导). The term “a leader in the village” is the same as that used to describe village cadres such as the village Party Secretary (*cunzhishu*, 村支书) or the director of the village committee (*cunzhang*, 村长). So using this term to describe the editor-in-chief of the Newsletter gives an indication of his power and authority in Mashan. The Overseas Newsletter is very influential in village life and its production is a central part of the work of the Elders’ Association (*Laoren Hui*, 老人会, hereafter LRH), a village-level organization in Mashan. The editorial staff of the Newsletter always overlapped with the nine LRH Committee members and they were often referred to locally as leaders (*lingdao*, 领导). It seemed that these village elders, whose authority was based on their involvement with this grassroots organisation, had achieved a similar status to those village cadres inside the state administrative system.

This chapter examines the power of the village elders in Mashan and considers how the status and authority of these elders was tied to the influence that the LRH has on village life. I will demonstrate that the influence of the LRH was itself closely connected to the history of the Leyuan (乐园, or Happiness Garden) building, which served as the office for the LRH. The construction of this building and its presence in the village were perceived as symbols of the reunion between locals and their overseas community. The use of this building by the LRH indicated the critical role played by the village elders in maintaining the important links between the villagers and the Overseas Chinese who originated from Mashan. Indeed, it was the LRH which led efforts to mobilise *huaqiao* to donate to village funds. They had been successful in raising finance for most of the public projects in the village as well as setting up funds for the medical care and funerals of

elderly villagers. However, just as the power of the village elders grew with the construction of Leyuan, the “grassroots leadership” of these village elders was severely diminished with the demolition of the building in 2005. The chapter therefore documents the controversial demolition of this landmark public building and examines the implications this had for the power of village elders. In doing so, it provides a case-study of leadership and local power both in relation to the state and in relation to the village’s overseas connections. My analysis of the demolition of this significant building illustrates the fragile power held by these local elites and demonstrates the importance of recognising the historical contingency of local power, which was unstable even within the short timescales examined in this case-study.

The issue of grassroots leadership is one aspect of the study of local elites in rural China. An important contribution on this subject has been made by Esherick and Rankin (1990: 1-26), who have provided a comprehensive overview of the historical and anthropological research on local elites and patterns of dominance from late imperial China to 1949. In my analysis, I shall use Esherick and Rankin’s definition of local elites to understand the village community leaders in Mashan. Esherick and Rankin define local elites as “any individuals or families that exercised dominance within a local arena” (1990:10). They also point out that local elites may dominate in overlapping arenas such as those linked to education or politics. The precise type of local elites identified by Esherick and Rankin in their historical overview has not been present in China since the end of imperial state power (Stephan Feuchtwang & Wang, 2001). However, certain similarities can be identified between those former elites and the resurgence of village or lineage elders that has occurred in the context of the revival of local tradition in many rural areas in China since the 1980s.

A number of studies have acknowledged the reinstatement of village elders’ ritual authority and their socio-political influence since the 1980s. The elders are now often recognised as the repository of ritual and local historical knowledge. Their indispensable role in reinvigorating traditions means the power structure in rural communities has changed significantly (Jing, 1996 :88).

In his powerful study of social memory in Gansu Province, Jing Jun (1996: 87-100) explains how the rebuilding of the local Confucius Temple, which was destroyed during the Maoist period, resulted in the emergence of “a strong, alternative base of power and authority” (1996:176). The reshaping of the local power structure was possible because the rebuilding of the temple led to the revival of village traditions and transformed the status of the temple managers responsible for the project, who became prominent grassroots community leaders. This was a process which partially restored the authority of the older generation in the village, because, as Jing notes, thirteen of the fourteen people who became religious leaders were local male elders.

In a similar vein, Hillman’s (2004) study demonstrates how people in a Muslim village called Balong in Yunnan Province (Southwest China) asserted their ethnic identity and strengthened their community through the local efforts to build a new mosque. He goes further than Jing Jun, arguing that this alternative power “might threaten the relevance of village governments” (2004: 67).

The insights from Feuchtwang and Wang’s (2001) study of local leaders in contemporary rural China should also be noted here. In one of their major fieldwork sites, Anxi (in southern Fujian), the reconstruction of a local temple and the restoration of ancestral worship contributed to the growing non-governmental authority of a grassroots leader. Feuchtwang and Wang argue that village leadership, which is a mixture of traditional authority and charisma, was more effective than the village cadres’ bureaucratic authority.

The three studies discussed above all examine cases in which the (re)construction of important local buildings were linked to successful local leadership and the assertion of local identity. Likewise, this chapter will also consider how leadership was linked to a key local building. However, in contrast to the studies already discussed, it provides an ethnographic case study of the failure of local leadership in Mashan and explains this with reference to the demolition of Leyuan. The conclusions drawn are correspondingly less optimistic than those cases described above. Rather than emphasising the seemingly triumphant strength of the

alternative power base *vis-à-vis* the state, it points to the fragility of the power of these local leaders.

In exploring these issues, I will use my ethnography to explore the fundamental question raised by this failure of leadership in Mashan. That is, how did the village elders of Mashan, who initially experienced a resurgence of power in the past three decades, fail to maintain an effective leadership? In this chapter, I will argue that the explanation for this has much to do with the way the elders originally gained their authority and, therefore, my discussion will include a consideration of the origins and basis of their power as well as how sustainable their power is.

2. The demolition of a significant building

On 25 November 2005, the public building, known as the Happiness Garden (*Leyuan*, 乐园), was demolished in Mashan. Even at the end of 2006, soon after my arrival in the village, it was clear to me that the villagers still felt sore about it. Villagers were eager to provide their accounts and many continued to express their disbelief at the demolition. Most described it as something “totally unexpected” and “hard to believe”. Little solicitation was needed to start a heated conversation on this issue. One 83-year-old man raised the topic with me in the hope that I might be able to help to have it rebuilt.

Though I was not present in the village at the time of the demolition, during my fieldwork I learned a great deal about the event. While in the village, I regularly talked to villagers about the issue of the demolition. In addition, I conducted some semi-structured interviews on the topic and I was able to obtain several written documents relevant to the demolition. These included the monthly meeting records of the LRH Committee for the past five years, some open letters opposing the construction of *Leyuan* at that location dating from about 10 years ago, and a handwritten copy of an official notification of the *Leyuan* demolition issued by the town government. Using all these resources, I have been able to reconstruct a narrative of the demolition of *Leyuan*.

Funded by overseas money in the early 1990s, Leyuan had been the manifestation of the transnational connections of the village community. The primary functions of the Leyuan were to provide a recreational centre for all the villagers aged over sixty and the office building for the village LRH. It stood as the most significant public building in the village and provided a focal marker for the villagers. Not surprisingly, then, its demolition provoked controversy both in the village and in the emigrant community. The two issues that emerged most strongly from the accounts of the villagers were: firstly, how the demolition had weakened the village's re-established overseas connection; and secondly, their disappointment with the leaders of LRH, i.e., the LRH Committee members. The LRH leaders failed to live up to the villagers' expectations that they would protect this important "public good": the Leyuan building. In order to contextualise such attitudes and the complaints of the villagers, in the next section, I investigate how the Leyuan building came to be demolished in 2005.

The unexpected demolition

The day of the demolition of Leyuan was always described as having been "chaotic". Most villagers described it as "unbelievable" and "sudden". Its destruction brought about considerable disruption to those who had used Leyuan. These included the owners of the four shops based in the building, one of whom had lived in the building with her family, as well as the members of LRH, which used the building for many of its activities.

On 25 December 2005, the four shop keepers who rented the four shops on the ground floor frantically moved their small businesses out of the building before they were buried in the rubble. One of them, a mother of two who had been living in Leyuan for more than five years (and who is the subject of Chapter Six), had to have all her household goods retrieved from the building and stored temporarily in her neighbour's house. She also had to find a place for her two young children to sleep for the next few weeks. "No one gave us any notice!" she said to me in 2007 in an angry tone. After a collective complaint, the four shop owners each received some 400 Yuan from the Village Committee as compensation for their loss.

A blind villager in his sixties, a devoted member of the LRH, staged a protest by standing on the stairs inside Leyuan. Two local policemen from the county seat were called in by village cadres. The blind protestor was finally persuaded to leave, but villagers who spoke of this episode all continued to praise him as a hero.

Three LRH Committee members also expressed their shock at learning of the sudden demolition that morning as they happened to be passing by. They quickly started rescuing items from the building. These included the commemorative wooden plaque from the auditorium, which had inscribed upon it the name of the father of the Malaysian *huaqiao*, who ten years earlier had been the biggest donor to the construction of Leyuan, as well as an electric water pump, electric fans and other valuable items, most of which had been gifts from *huaqiao*.

The former accountant of the LRH, Uncle Wanxiu, said he and most Committee members had not been notified of the exact time of the demolition. Uncle Wanxiu was respected as a retired teacher and the ritual leader of one of the two most prominent lineage branches of the Mashan Zhang lineage. By 2005 he had already retired from the LRH Committee. He told how, on hearing about the demolition, he rushed to the scene and once there he directly confronted the village Party Secretary. The latter had hired a village foreman to carry out the demolition. Uncle Wanxiu questioned him about the legitimacy of the demolition. “Have you notified the *huaqiao* about it?” he asked. Then, after getting a negative response, he continued, “Without their agreement, how dare you knock down the building? It was built with *huaqiao* money!” The village cadres tried to calm him down saying it was part of “the construction of a new socialist village project” and showed him a document issued by the local township government approving the demolition.¹³ These official documents were not convincing to him or to the majority of villagers.

After the demolition, the clubhouse of the LRH was supposedly relocated to a new venue, but few villagers would go there. Four old classrooms, completed in 1984, were converted into a new venue. According to several old villagers, it was

¹³ The document stated that “in accordance with the spirit of building a harmonious, healthy and happy village, in order to change village face and appearance, the town government and Party Committee have decided that the original Mashan LRH building should be demolished and replaced by a Garden of Benevolence”.

labelled by the local government as “unsafe” due to the poor quality of construction. Despite the efforts of the LRH leaders to enliven the new venue, it remained unpopular in 2008. The most frequent remark about its unpopularity was that: “Before, Leyuan was very hot and noisy (*renao*, 热闹), but this place is all cold and desolate (*lengqing*, 冷清).” Although most recreational facilities such as Mah-jong tables, chess boards, newspapers and magazines had been relocated to the new venue, villagers would rather pay one or two Yuan to play Mah-jong in the street shops rather than go to the new venue to play for free. To borrow from Chau’s (2008) analysis of “*renao*”, the new venue lacked the favourable “social heat” of Leyuan.

The ad hoc meeting

It was the ad hoc meeting of the LRH committee that took place on 21 November 2005 which doomed Leyuan to its demolition. According to the minutes, after a tense discussion, all but one of the eight LRH leaders present at the meeting gave their consent to the demolition. I obtained the handwritten minutes of the monthly meetings of the LRH Committee for 2005 and 2006, including those of the last ad hoc meeting before the demolition. The minutes recorded two previous meetings mentioning the issue of demolition (*chaiqian*, 拆迁) and from this record it is clear that the LRH leaders foresaw the trouble they would have in justifying the demolition to *huaqiao* and to other villagers. Indeed, in both meetings, the LRH leaders had said they were opposed to the demolition unless sufficient funds had been secured for a new building exclusively for the use of the LRH.

However, when it came to the final decision at the ad hoc meeting called to decide on the demolition, the LRH leaders did not persist in their opposition. The meeting was, as usual, held at Leyuan in the auditorium named after the father of the illustrious Malaysian *huaqiao*. Fifteen people of different social and political standings attended the meeting: eight LRH Committee members (the ninth had left the village to visit his son in the city); Dashan – a successful, “big *huaqiao*” (whose story is told in Chapter Five); the former village Party Secretary who retired a decade before; the current village Party Secretary; a Village Committee member; the village headmaster, Mr Lan; and two other people who were

committee members of another Mashan Association representing those who worked or had settled in urban areas. With the exception of Mr Lan, the headmaster, all fifteen were male members of the Zhang lineage. I was told that all those present, other than the LRH Committee members, had attended at the request of either Dashan or the village Party Secretary. Their attendance was probably intended to boost the level of support for the demolition.

At the ad hoc meeting, all attendees were asked to express their opinion on the issue of the demolition of Leyuan. The man who was village Party Secretary at the time gave his statement first, stressing that it was “an honour that the town government had chosen Mashan as the construction site for a ‘socialist new village’ (*shehuizhuyi xin nongcun*, 社会主义新农村)”. This was a nation-wide project engineered by the central government and aimed at improving the general situation in the rural areas. Dashan followed the Party Secretary, saying that it was a “rare opportunity” for the improvement of the “village face and village appearance”. The retired Party Secretary’s remark was interesting: he argued that “demolition was demanded by the current situation; it was planned by the upper level [government] and we should follow the Chinese Communist Party”. He was said by villagers to be a master of official-line rhetoric. His remarks suggested that those against the demolition were in fact against the government or the CCP. The others who spoke at the meeting echoed these three points.

Granduncle Zhenkun (whose story of regret for “returning too early” from overseas was told in Chapter Two) was regarded as one of the few people who might have been able to rescue Leyuan from being demolished. A prominent leader, his remarks carried great weight. Surprisingly, he said he agreed with the plans for the “socialist new village”. Following him, the LRH accountant, who had been viewed as “bold and straightforward” in speaking up, also failed to oppose the demolition.

The only attendee who expressed his disagreement was another key member of the LRH who had been involved in the founding of the association. He argued that, “the lower level should obey the upper level [of government] but it is not right that neither the LRH leaders nor members were informed of the decision beforehand.”

Obviously the LRH leaders were careful in how they phrased their responses, trying not to offend the village cadres or Dashan. In the end, 14 out of 15 attendees were recorded as “raising hands” as a sign of their agreement with the demolition.

In terms of age and genealogical seniority, the eight LRH committee leaders were the most senior. Yet, they faced pressure from two major sources: first, from the old and current village cadres—the representatives of state political power; and second, from Dashan, a powerful *huaqiao* businessman who had established good connections with both local and municipal governments. The village cadres and Dashan had obviously formed an alliance, asserting the power they derived from their political offices and personal wealth in order to pull rank on the elders.

Based on the “consensus” from the meeting, the village cadres filed a report with the town government which then issued the official document endorsing the demolition. Four days later, Leyuan was knocked down in the name of making way for a socialist new village.

The complicity of the leaders of the LRH in the demolition of the Leyuan resulted in their status and authority being diminished in the eyes of villagers and *huaqiao*. They were accused of “lacking a public heart”, an idea which has important implications for understanding the failure of their grassroots leadership and to which I will return at the end of this chapter. Before that, I want to turn to consider the emergence of the LRH leaders in Mashan and how this was itself linked to the construction of Leyuan. I begin my discussion by briefly introducing those village elders who had become village elites over the preceding two decades.

3. Grassroots power resurgence and overseas connections

The profiles of grassroots leaders

In Mashan, both the emergence of the group of elite elders and the development of village-level organisation had a strong mutual influence on one another. The rising power of the village community leadership was closely related to the establishment of the key village social institution – the LRH. As a result of these links, it is reasonable to use the terms “village community leaders” and “LRH leaders” interchangeably.

The nine-member Committee of the LRH consists of one director, three vice-directors, one accountant, one secretary, one cashier, one watchman and two others responsible for general maintenance and welfare. The six-member editorial committee for the Overseas Newsletter largely overlapped with the LRH Committee with the exception of just one or two individuals. The Committee in place at the end of 2007 was the seventh to have held office since the inception of the Mashan LRH in 1988. Altogether, in this time, more than 15 villagers had acted as LRH Committee members. In 2007, all nine LRH Committee members were male, and senior members of the Zhang lineage. In terms of age, they ranged from 60 to 85; three were in their eighties, five in their seventies and one in his early sixties. Eight out of the nine had received a school education, and this ranged from junior school to secondary school.

The majority of LRH Committee members were good at calligraphy and/or writing essays and poems in classical Chinese, which were published in the Overseas Newsletter produced by the LRH. All were born before 1949 and all claimed to know about the past of the village including its “cultural tradition and history”. Their cultural authority partly came from their old age. The idea that longevity equates to greater knowledge still carries some currency in the village. They were also managers of the key ancestral trusts of their respective lineage branches. They appeared to share some common features with the gentry group found in rural China during the late imperial period as portrayed by Esherick and Rankin (1990: 1-26).

Seven of the nine committee members received pensions (between 800 RMB to 1500 RMB per month) from the state or state social insurance system. These seven had all been members of work-units before retirement: five had been primary or secondary school teachers, the sixth the director of the county library, and the seventh an employee from a state-owned enterprise. In terms of official household registration, however, these seven pensioners were not registered in Mashan. They were registered as non-agricultural households in the county town. Their receipt of pensions particularly marked them off as different from the majority of elderly Mashan villagers who were non-pensioned “peasants”.

Heading a household with a relatively decent economic standing was regarded as being a necessary requirement for one to become a member of the committee. The relative prosperity of the members was directly related to their authority in the village. During the elections for a new LRH Committee that took place at the end of 2007, a village cadre put it this way: “LRH Committee members are expected to set a good example by giving donations in the public interest. For example, in order to attract donations for certain projects, we could go to the son of a Committee member and say, ‘To increase your father’s authority, you’d better give some money’.” Certainly, most of the LRH Committee members and their adult children lived in new houses, which served as important markers of socio-economic status in the village (for a discussion of new houses in Mashan see Chapter Four).

A strong and active overseas connection could also play a major role in getting onto the socially-privileged LRH Committee. I was twice told by two Committee members that the Director from 2002 to 2007 had held the position mostly because of the influence of his overseas uncle who was a prominent *huaqiao*. At least four of the nine serving committee members had experience of overseas travel to Singapore or Malaysia since the 1980s.

The last important characteristic shared by most LRH leaders was their past political and social humiliation before 1978. They had almost all lost their jobs and suffered political denunciation due to their overseas connections or as a result of being the sons of landlords (similar to the case of Dashan described in Chapter Five). In the previous chapter I discussed the dramatically changed status of Granduncle Zhenkun before and after 1978, when state policy had changed to favour *huaqiao* as well as their family members at home in the Mainland. In the 1950s, he was condemned as an “anti-revolutionary element” and lost his job as the village school teacher because his brother was a high-ranking official of the Nationalist Army in Taiwan. In the early 1980s, for exactly the same reason—his strong overseas connections—Zhenkun was able to regain his position as a teacher before retiring as a state pensioner. Since many *huaqiao* trusted him, he was able to mobilise funds for many village and lineage projects including the Mashan LRH.

He rose to be the most respected village community leader. However, as I will explain later, he continued to identify himself, at least sometimes, as “a person with historical stains”. This had wider implications for understanding the power of the village elites.

The life trajectory of these village community leaders in Mashan was similar to those Jing Jun studied in Dachuan in Gansu Province: these were stories of “humiliation and regained dignity” (Jing 1996:100). In the case described by Jing, the temple managers regained their dignity by rebuilding the sacred temple. Likewise, in Mashan, it was the reactivation of overseas connections which enabled the establishment of the Mashan LRH and the construction of Leyuan, which in turn restored dignity to these elders. However, the subsequent demolition of the building illustrates how this “regained dignity” would prove to be fragile and the “stained” elders would once again face criticism and lose the respect of villagers.

Establishing the LRH as an institution of grassroots power

After three months in the village, I started attending the monthly meetings of the Mashan LRH Committee on the 15th of every month. Every third month, this committee meeting was combined with the editorial meeting of the upcoming issue of the Overseas Newsletter. In several meetings, these LRH leaders emphasised that their association was a “folk organisation” (*minjian zuzhi*, 民间组织) and the Newsletter a village magazine. Mashan LRH operated as an institutional power base for these grassroots leaders. They dominated and organised the activities of Mashan LRH, the production of the Newsletter, and the contacts between the village and the overseas and urban Mashanese emigrants.

In 1989, after seeing the success that the Elders’ Association in another *qiaoxiang* village in the neighbouring town had achieved in attracting overseas funds, a small group of salaried retirees in Mashan were motivated to establish a similar grassroots organisation for the village. Mashan LRH defined itself as a philanthropic institution serving village residents over the age of 60. The first sentence of the LRH Charter stated: “This is a recreational centre for old people, a

place for the old to gather and to entertain themselves” (*laoyousuoju, laoyousuole de changsuo*, 老有所聚, 老有所乐的场所). The institution has indeed proved popular with the village elderly. In 1990, there were 196 members. By 2007, almost all of the 330 Mashan villagers aged over 60 were registered as LRH members.

The LRH Committee sets up and manages several long-term welfare programs for the benefits of its members. All of these were primarily financed by overseas donations. Ensuring a decent funeral ritual for members remains one of the paramount priorities of the LRH and, consequently, there are two programmes designed to subsidise the funeral expenses of deceased members. The first of these, the “Charitable Fund for the Bereavement of the Elderly”, relies on voluntary donations, while the second, the “Mutual Fund”, runs on the principle that each member contributes one Yuan every time an LRH member passes away. In 2007, the family of a deceased member would receive a total of about 400 Yuan towards funeral expenses from these two funds. The LRH is also now involved in the ritual practices accompanying funerals in Mashan, with three LRH Committee members attending the funerals of deceased members and the director delivering a eulogy.

Funerals were not the only occasions on which members receive money from the LRH. Twice a year, at the two annual gatherings of all LRH members that take place on “Double Nine Day” (also known as “Old People’s Day”) and before the Chinese New Year, the members receive red envelopes containing showing-respect-to-the-old money (*jinglao hongbao*, 敬老红包). This money amounts to only 20 Yuan per person, but the symbolic meaning probably matters more than the material gain. Furthermore, when a member of the LRH is hospitalised, the LRH Committee members are obliged to visit and offer 30 Yuan as “consolation money”.¹⁴ Other benefits for members include an annual, one-day bus trip to tourist sites outside the village.

The ideology behind the operations of the LRH was the notion of “respecting the old”. This ideology was encouraged by the officials and readily accepted by both

¹⁴ This is in accordance with the Charter of Mashan LRH.

villagers and *huaqiao*. The welfare provisions at the disposal of the LRH Committee members played a key role in establishing their position as village elites and in gaining the respect of the villagers. Duara's analysis of the authority of lineage elites in southern China before 1949 is helpful for understand the situation in Mashan. He observes that, in these lineages, "authority derived from the performance of roles that were seen to maintain or bring collective benefits"(Duara,1990:264). Feuchtwang and Wang (2001: 172-173) concur with him when they argue that "getting things done for the public good" is the basis for grassroots leadership in contemporary rural China.

On this basis, it can be seen that the ability of the LRH leaders to continuously attract funds, mostly from overseas, for the collective interests of LRH members and the village public as a whole, was key to their capacity to establish and retain their authority in the village. In other words, their authority largely depended on their personal connections with *huaqiao* and their stock of knowledge of village traditions and village history, which was valued by the *huaqiao*. In this context, those villagers who had personal *huaqiao* contacts before 1949 were in an advantageous position to become community leaders. This can be seen by examining the background of some of the founding members of the LRH.

The nine founders of the association were around 60 years old at the time the LRH was launched. In honour of their achievements in founding the LRH, their coloured portraits, in A4 size, continued to be displayed high on the wall of the LRH reception where they can be seen immediately by every visitor. At the time of my fieldwork in 2007, only the two most important of these nine founders were still alive. Aged 83 and 85 years old, both these men were senior according both to age and generation. They were described by both *huaqiao* leaders and locals as "upholding high moral standards and worthy of deep respect" (*degao wangzhong*, 德高望重) and I was advised to address them as "*lao shugong*" (老叔公, old grand-uncle). Since the early 1980s, it has been these two men who have been the key points of connection between the village and those *huaqiao* who trace their origin to Mashan.

Seventy-year-old Grandma Mei provided me with a good illustration of the link between these two leaders and the Overseas Chinese, “When *huaqiao* write letters to the village, the letters are always addressed to either or both of these men. *Huaqiao* only trust them.” These letters included those so-called “official letters” (*gonghan*, 公函) sent from the leaders of the ‘Singaporean and Malaysian Overseas Chinese Association for the Zhang lineage’ in Mashan. This association could exert a huge political influence on the county and town government through official letters. For example, it was under the pressure of such letters that the restitution of ownership of the Overseas Chinese Mansion (*fanshen lou*, 翻身楼), involving the eviction of 15 households as mentioned in Chapter Two, was achieved. After the LRH was established in Mashan, the LRH Committee became the recipient in the village of copies of such “official letters” from Overseas Chinese, which placed them in a strategically powerful position.

The organisational structure of Mashan LRH is also worth noting as its hierarchy demonstrates the importance of maintaining relationships to prominent emigrants who originate from the village. The Honorary Directors came at the top of the organisational hierarchy. This prestigious honorary status was awarded to number of prominent *huaqiao* leaders and successful urban emigrants as a means of courting their financial support. Their names were listed according to their residential locations, with those based overseas coming highest. At the time of my fieldwork, the last honorary director on the list was the serving village Party Secretary, who was also the only village-based honorary director. Next on the hierarchy comes the village-based, nine-member LRH Committee, who carry out the organisation’s daily operations. Below the Committee members came the leaders of the twelve small groups, which are divided along similar lines to the village production teams. At the base of the structure is the 300-strong, ordinary membership.

Once established, the LRH became an institutional power base for a small number of village elders who enjoyed formal status through their position in the organisation. The director, three vice-directors, the editor-in-chief and two vice editors were all addressed with the formal title of “Director” (*huizhang*, 会长) or

“Editor” (*bianji*, 编辑). They are referred to as “LRH leaders” or simply “leaders” (*lingdao*, 领导). Hansen (2007) found a similar phenomenon: leadership in an Old People’s Association offers “new formalised prestige” to senior male villagers.

The emergence of these village community leaders in Mashan since the 1980s was part of the “process of growing community assertiveness” (Hillman 2004) that has been observed elsewhere in rural China. However, the Mashan village leadership had its own peculiar characteristics as a result their involvement in the process of reactivating the identity of Mashan as a *qiaoxiang* (an ancestral village of Overseas Chinese), which involved cultivating the village’s overseas connections and thereby accessing important political and economic resources. In other words, the basis of the elite elders’ authority was, to a large extent, derived from their fruitful mobilisation of funding from overseas. In the next section, I explore this issue in more detail, considering how grassroots leadership in the village has been shaped by their connection with *huaqiao* and overseas finance. In particular, I consider how the LRH’s control over the production of the Overseas Newsletter provided important leverage for these LRH leaders in relation to other villagers in positions of authority.

The Overseas Newsletter as an instrument of authority

I have argued that the financial and social significance of *huaqiao* are critical to the authority of LRH leaders in Mashan. Using their position as conduits between the village and the *huaqiao*, the senior village elders were able to gain power through their efforts to strengthen the village’s connection to these *huaqiao* and to accentuate the village’s cultural and historical distinctiveness. Among these various efforts, the resumption of the village-based Overseas Newsletter (*Qiaokan*, 侨刊) was the most significant. It became a vital source of legitimacy for the LRH’s institutional importance in Mashan.

Previous studies of Overseas Newsletters have tended to focus on the impact these publications have on their overseas readership. For example, Hsu’s (Hsu, 2000:124-155) historical study argues these overseas magazines operate as marketplaces that helped overseas Taishanese in America overcome the distance,

generating loyalty and a sense of community among overseas members towards Taishan. While the Overseas Newsletter produced in Mashan certainly did aim to connect its overseas readers with the village, in my analysis, I do not only consider this overseas impact. I am interested in the impact the Newsletter has within Mashan, allowing the elite elders to control communications with *huaqiao* and thereby serving to increase their leverage *vis-à-vis* the village cadres and other villagers.

The Overseas Newsletter of Mashan had originated as a communication channel between the village and its overseas community in the early 1920s, and it was produced up until the 1950s. Its production and circulation came to a halt when the national and local political climate grew hostile to overseas connections in Mao's era. In October 1990, less than two years after the LRH had been formally launched, the Committee resumed the production and international circulation of the Overseas Newsletter. The modern newsletter was clearly presented as a resumption of the old Overseas Newsletter in order to accentuate a sense of continuity with the past. The main target audience of the newsletter were overseas emigrants in Southeast Asian countries, and the Newsletter has played an important part in the village elite's efforts to revive the *qiaoxiang* identity of Mashan.

The Overseas Newsletter has become the key medium in the village for international communication and cultivating fundraising networks. More than a thousand copies of each issue are distributed to individual *huaqiao* and *huaqiao* associations outside of China. In addition to producing and renewing loyalty to Mashan and appealing to the patriotism of the *huaqiao*, the newsletter also serves a variety of fundraising functions. Fundraising appeals for various village and lineage projects and programmes are transmitted via the newsletters to an audience of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of potential donors in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The upper left-hand corner of page three in each issue of the Newsletter features several, regularly-updated lists of the donors to the different projects. Biographies of influential *huaqiao* leaders, dead or alive, are also published in the Newsletter to court support either from the influential *huaqiao* themselves or from their offspring. In this way, the Newsletter plays an important

role in the networks linking the village with its *huaqiao* community, and facilitates the continuous solicitation from this community of financial aid for the village.

The importance of the Overseas Newsletter to the supply of overseas funds to Mashan means that the editorial team occupy a powerful and privileged position in the village. In fact, the writing, editing and distribution of the Overseas Newsletter are all done by the village-based editorial team made up of the elite elders, as they are the only ones with the historical knowledge and literary skills necessary for positively influencing the *huaqiao* readership. Consequently, the resumption of production of the newsletter greatly strengthened the authority of the LRH leaders in Mashan.

The reason why the elders' skills in classical Chinese and their knowledge of village history before 1949 are considered to be important can be understood with reference to Jing Jun's (1996:101-114) explanation of how authority may derive from particular forms of written Chinese. Drawing on anthropologists such as van Gennep (1960), Leach (1966) and Tambiah (1985), Jing Jun discusses the importance of the traditional writing system employed by the temple managers when writing ritual handbooks and the memorial elegies used in the temple's ceremonial performances. Moreover, the traditional characters of Chinese are no longer used in everyday life in Mainland China following the 1950s script reform which gave rise to "simplified" Chinese characters. This simplification process ironically has "endowed the older script with a religious quality it did not enjoy in the past" (1996:114). Jing argues convincingly that the ability to compose texts in classical Chinese and in traditional Chinese characters allows these temple managers to "acquire a recycled instrument of authority" (1996:114).

Though the Overseas Newsletter contained a mixture of essays, poems, news, and memorial elegies, Jing's observation can be usefully applied to the LRH leaders' production of the Newsletter. It explains how since 1990 they have assumed cultural authority by taking control of the Newsletter – the key communications conduit with *huaqiao*. The majority of *huaqiao* left China before 1949 and in their destination countries they continue to use the old "complex" Chinese script as they were not touched by the reforms aimed at simplifying Chinese characters in

Mainland China. The editorial team of the Newsletter belongs to the generation born and educated in classical Chinese before 1949. They enjoy the advantage of being able to write four-line poems, memorial elegies, essays and four-character phrases in a formal literary style. Many articles in the Newsletter contain esoteric historical references beyond the reach of the majority of villagers who, as peasants educated after 1949, had a very different educational experience. The LRH leaders are therefore in a privileged position as a result of their ability to write in the complex characters and the aesthetic style that are understood and valued by the *huaqiao* community.

The skills and knowledge of the elite elders have given them control over the production of the Overseas Newsletter. Without them, the emotional and financial links that the Newsletter helps foster and sustain between the village and *huaqiao* could not be achieved. As a result, the Newsletter provides these elders with a source of power and authority over the other villagers, including the village cadres.

The establishment of the LRH and the resumption of the Overseas Newsletter became the institutional bases of the village elders' power. Together, these two institutions formalised the political-social eminence of the LRH leaders. The village elders now occupied a formal platform through which to display their role as the “repositories” of local cultural knowledge and history. In this way, the village elders experienced a resurgence of power, which came to be symbolised by the building of Leyuan. However, as I will discuss in the next section, this resurgence of power was in truth always tenuous and, following the destruction of Leyuan, the villagers began to question the legitimacy of the elite elders as village leaders.

4. The failure of grassroots leadership

“I am a man with historical stains” (*wo shi you lishi wudian de ren*, 我是有历史污点的人)

The entire LRH Committee was blamed for their failure to prevent the demolition of the Leyuan in 2005, but particular bitterness was directed towards the then director of the LRH for not standing up to the village cadres. The LRH leaders

were aware that the demolition was seen by the villagers as evidence of their failure as leaders. Furthermore, the likelihood that the LRH would not be able to fulfil the desire of the membership for the rapid construction of a new recreational centre meant that there was little chance of the status of the Committee improving any time soon. Concerns about the criticisms coming from the membership led some of the Committee members to avoid taking on the role of Director of the LRH. In the 2008 Committee elections, two of the nine candidates who won the largest number of votes declined the opportunity to act as director, resorting to excuses, such as age and family obligations, in order to avoid taking on this role. Evidently, as a result of the demolition, what was once a much-coveted position had come to be viewed as a poisoned chalice.

In retrospect, the LRH leaders obviously regretted not protecting the remittance-funded office building of their organisation and the damage that was consequently done to their authority and dignity. When I talked with them, none said they agreed with the demolition. One said he only raised his fist hesitantly, “half-way” in protest. Others offered various explanations such as the official pressure to which they were subject and their fear of the influence of Dashan, the important *huaqiao*.

In Chapter Two, I described how Granduncle Zhenkun regretted the lost opportunities of his past, claiming “I could have returned as a millionaire”. He was one of the two key founders of the LRH and the veteran Director of the LRH Committee for the first 14 years after its establishment. Despite being over 80 years old, he continued to act as the vice-director in 2007.

Shortly after the demolition, Granduncle Zhenkun was questioned privately by a friend of his in the village about why he did not speak up about his opposition to the demolition. Allegedly, he confided that this was “because I am a man with historical stains”. This friend of Granduncle Zhenkun told me this conversation as part of his explanation of how and why the demolition happened. The politically-loaded phrase “a man with historical stains” comes from the Maoist period. Granduncle Zhenkun was referring to his experience of political and social humiliation in the Maoist era when he was condemned as an “anti-revolutionary

element” (*fangeming fenzi*, 反革命分子). His comment indicates his continuing fear that he might once again be politically condemned for his opposition to the policies of the Party.

In Jing Jun’s research into how the rebuilding of a temple in Dachuan, Gansu Province, helped the lineage elders to overcome their past humiliation and enjoy “regained dignity”, he commented:

As survivors of the Communist revolution, they had climbed to prominent positions in their community from failed careers, dismembered families, and political stigmatization. For these people, there was no more effective form of vindication of their personal honor than forging an alliance to rebuild, protect, and manage a sacred landmark whose fate in the recent past was so symbolically identical to their own (1996: 100).

In the case of Dachuan, the past humiliation of the temple managers united them in their efforts to rebuild the temple. In Mashan, however, Granduncle Zhenkun’s memory of past humiliation continued to unsettle him and this limited his ability to use his authority and influence in the present. Haunted by the menace of the past, he felt he was prevented from acting in the present to save what he had worked so hard to achieve: the Leyuan building. In the failure of Granduncle Zhenkun and the other village elite elders to stop the demolition, it is possible to see the fragility and instability of their regained dignity and the vulnerability that lies behind their apparent ascendancy to the status of village leaders.

In the eyes of the villagers and *huaqiao*, the veteran Director and the other LRH leaders had failed to stand up for the “public interest”. The authority of the leaders had been damaged, and villagers frequently claimed that the leaders “lack a public heart” (*meiyou gongxin*, 没有公心). Similar sentiments were shared by *huaqiao*, who resented the loss of this public building, which had been funded from their remittances. In the following two sections, I consider these issues in more detail in order to account for why the village elite elders’ authority diminished as a result of the demolition of Leyuan. The first section examines the moral ideas behind the claim that the leaders “lack a public heart”, while the second section considers the implications of this for relations between the village and the *huaqiao* community.

The question of “a public heart”

As a result of the demolition of Leyuan, the LRH leaders suffered criticism from both the villagers at home and *huaqiao* abroad. A rumour spread quickly that those attendees of the aforementioned ad hoc meeting each received a bribe in a *hongbao* (红包, small red envelope containing money) from Dashan, the influential *huaqiao*. I learnt later that each attendee only received five Yuan, but the accusation of corruption remained strong. They were now considered to be “wearing the same pants” (i.e., having the same interests) as the village cadres. A number of villagers criticised the LRH leaders for “stuffing themselves with money from Dashan” and for not standing up to protect the property of “the public family” (*gongjia*, 公家). They were seen as a selfish and greedy bunch. In particular, they were regarded as having lost the quality of “having a heart for the public” which had been an important basis of their authority.

When discussing the structure of authority in South China before 1949, Duara (1990) points out that “even if the elite’s aim was simply to protect its own interests, this elite could gain authority only by promoting, or appearing to promote, the general interests of the community” (1990: 265). The LRH leaders in Mashan were also aware of the importance of promoting the public interest. The Charter of the Mashan LRH, posted on the wall of its offices, set out the following requirement in its first paragraph: “Under the leadership of the Village Party Branch and the Village Committee, all the LRH Committee members and team heads are required to work neither for monetary benefit nor fame; to work without complaint; and to serve the public with their whole heart”¹⁵.

Through this Charter, the elite elders imposed on themselves the ideal of being selfless. The four-character phrase meaning to “serve the public with one’s whole heart” (*yixin weigong*, 一心为公) was an expression previously used to describe the ideal and virtuous behaviour expected of the Chinese Communist Party cadres during the Maoist period. By using this phrase and evoking the Maoist ideology of

¹⁵ “在村党支部、村委领导下，要求全体理事、小组长。做到不图利，不图名，任劳任怨，一心为公。”

selflessness and sacrifice on behalf of the public, it was clear that the LRH leaders were aware that their moral authority derived in part from their claim to “serve the public with their whole heart”. In the case of the LRH leaders, the “public” (*gong*, 公) refers to the Mashan LRH and all its members, which (according to the Overseas Newsletter) includes almost all the old people over the age of sixty living in Mashan. Therefore, it was essential for the LRH leaders to be seen to be acting selflessly for the benefit of the whole membership if they were going to retain their trust and thereby maintain their own authority.

In the case described by Feuchtwang and Wang (2001:173), “getting things done for the public good” was the basis of grassroots leadership. Similarly, in the words of the people of Mashan, “to have a public heart”, was the basis of the trust and respect by which grassroots leaders establish their status and authority in the village. Certainly, according to its constitution, Mashan LRH claimed to be an association designed to pursue the happiness of all its members. It aspired to a strong sense of *communitas* (Spencer, 1990) or “lineage socialism” (Faure, 1995:161-187). The LRH was referred to as a “collective” (*jiti*, 集体) or “the public family” (*gongjia*, 公家), terms taken from the discourse of the Communist Party. The same terms are also used to refer to the group ancestral trusts and the village school. LRH property was denoted as “public property” (*gongjia caichan*, 公家财产). Issues concerning the LRH are described as *zhongshi* (众事, affairs of the masses) or *gongjia shi* (公家事, affairs of the public family).

Peterson (2005) provides an analysis of the moral implications of the dichotomy of *gong* (公, public) and *si* (私, private) in Confucian thought, which is relevant here to an understanding of the idea of “a public heart” as a quality of leadership in Mashan. Peterson points out that the notion of “public-mindedness” contained in *gong*:

endowed *gong* with a moral valence and made it the virtuous opposite of *si* (私). In contrast, the “term *si* is often translated as “personal” or “private”, but it also contains within it the notion of self-interestedness or selfishness (2005:89).

Peterson's analysis sheds light on why the villagers of Mashan conceived of the completion of Leyuan as being for "the public good", while its later demolition was interpreted as a result of the selfishness of the LRH leaders.

One obvious piece of evidence of the LRH leaders' weakened leadership was the popular refusal of many elderly villagers to go to the LRH's new recreational centre located in a converted school block. This gesture of protest was against both the demolition itself and the LRH leadership. A few elders explicitly claimed that they would never step foot in the new venue. Two of those who refused used to be part of the LRH Committee. Another, who was a respected drummer who played a leading role in almost all collective worship rituals, justified his refusal saying, "Leyuan is a dead place now". As I observed throughout 2007, apart from the committee member on duty, only one or two locals would visit the new venue each day.

The failure of the LRH leaders to protect the *huaqiao*-funded Leyuan building was understood to be a consequence of their selfishness and corruption and their failure to stand up for the interests of the wider membership. Their behaviour was interpreted by both villagers and *huaqiao* as evidence that the leaders were "lacking a heart for the public". Consequently, the LRH leaders were viewed as having lost the moral basis of their authority, which they had only gained over the previous two decades. As will be explained in the next section, this loss of moral authority had serious implications for the capacity of the LRH leaders to secure resources for the village from overseas. This is because it was the belief that the LRH leaders were motivated by "a public heart" which had encouraged *huaqiao* to trust them to use their donations for the public benefit.

The metaphor of the "broken bridge"

The demolition of Leyuan was perceived by most villagers to have damaged the village's *huaqiao* connections and threatened the village's identity as a *qiaoxiang*. Their concerns about this were captured in the poignant expression, "The bridge (*qiao*) is now broken". The full meaning of this sentence relies on a pun, with *qiao* meaning both a physical bridge (桥) and the Overseas Chinese (侨) connection.

The expression should therefore be understood as alluding to the damage the destruction of Leyuan has done in breaking this metaphorical bridge that connected the village to its overseas communities. The popular concern for the social and economic significance of Leyuan in terms of relations with the *huaqiao* is clear from this expression and it is not difficult to understand why. Leyuan served as a memorial place, almost a museum, paying tribute to selected ancestors and *huaqiao* and thereby gave material form to the personal connections between the villagers and with the *huaqiao* patrons of the building. The destruction of the building was readily interpreted as the annihilation of this vital connection.

Knocking down Leyuan erased from the village social memory the contributions that *huaqiao* had made to the funding of the building. The memorial rooms named after these *huaqiao* contributors or their ancestors disappeared with the demolition. The *huaqiao* patrons of the old school classrooms, which were renovated to provide the new recreational centre and offices, were also erased. This angered the village kin of *huaqiao*. Quite a few of them openly expressed their dissatisfaction. Wu Zetian, the above-mentioned female shopkeeper (and the subject of Chapter Six) told her granduncle in Taiwan to discontinue giving donations to any projects in the village. She allegedly said to him, “With the demolition, your portrait is now nowhere to be found.” She later told me this was not true, but she certainly was angry about the demolition.

The strong sense of disenfranchisement expressed by another villager was probably representative. He was the nephew of the Hong Kong *huaqiao* who was the sole sponsor of the water tank on the roof of the Leyuan building, which was named in memory of the parents of the donor. The water tank was destroyed in the demolition, but no notification or apology was offered to the nephew or his uncle. He framed the demolition as one of the major reasons for his uncle’s deliberate absence from the village school’s centenary celebrations in 2006. The requests of *huaqiao* and their village-based kin for an apology should be seen as a moral questioning of the LRH leaders and the village cadres.

The ability to tap into overseas finance, closely associated with the elite elders’ authority, was thus brought into question. All the elite elders with whom I talked

expressed anxiety that no more overseas finance would flow back to the village. Their worries were well grounded. The strong link between the Leyuan building and the elite elders' continuous success of fundraising was made clear by an informant who said, "Over the past few years, Leyuan has become a cash cow for the LRH!" Talk of *huaqiao* disapproval of the demolition and the LRH leadership travelled back from overseas to the village via their families. The issue of trust between the hometown and overseas communities had always been a delicate one. The village elders' failure to preserve Leyuan deepened the distrust of *huaqiao* towards their village counterparts. As a villager commented, "why would *huaqiao* fund another building just for it to be demolished?"

Villagers conveniently construed a link between the demolition and the drop of overseas donations that occurred shortly afterwards. In fact, the demolition in 2005 coincided with the period when the older generation of *huaqiao* were beginning to pass away. The majority had left China before 1949 when in their teens and by the early twenty-first century they had reached their eighties or nineties. Born overseas, the majority of their children had never visited Mainland China or Mashan while growing up. From conversations with elders in Mashan, it was clear that the second generation of *huaqiao* were mostly indifferent to and harboured a "lack of feeling" for the home village of their parents. Most showed little interest in giving donations.

Nevertheless, many villagers observed there was a change in the attitude of *huaqiao* towards their home village, which was described as going from a "warm heart" to a "cold heart". This comment was frequently repeated: "Many *huaqiao* say their heart has grown cold with this flattening and they won't be sending back any more money". Records show that there was indeed a corresponding drop in overseas donations.

The LRH membership faced a possible decline without sufficient funding from *huaqiao* as a result of the demolition. The village elders' financial worries were confirmed at the 2007 annual gathering when the LRH accountant announced that "only three Yuan was left in the LRH account". He reported that few donations had been received in the year after the demolition and lamented the loss of the annual

rental income from the four shops on the ground floor of Leyuan. These financial difficulties meant less welfare provision for the members, who constantly made negative comparisons with other LRH organisations in the local area. One female member had already made an informal enquiry to the LRH director about whether it would be possible for her to transfer her membership to another Elders' Association, which was located in the same administrative village but run by the rival lineage to the Zhang, in order to gain more monetary benefits. This can also be read as the weakening of the ability of the LRH leaders to maintain the unity of the LRH membership and perhaps points to a consequent decline in the importance of lineage membership to the identity of the villagers. It appears that not only was the bridge between the LRH committee and the *huaqiao* broken, so too was the bridge between the elite elders and the other villagers.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has provided an ethnographic case study of the rise and fall of the village elders' power. The construction of the Leyuan building was an integral part of the story of the emergence of the grassroots leadership of the elite village elders. However, their subsequent failure to protect this key building, which was so critical to Mashan's identity as a *qiaoxiang* village, severely damaged their authority and led the accusations that they lacked "a public heart".

On the basis of my analysis of the involvement of the LRH, a village-level organisation, in the construction and demolition of Leyuan, I would argue that although there was a powerful resurgence in grassroots authority in China from the 1980s, this authority remains very vulnerable to the bureaucracy of the local state and the influence of powerful *huaqiao*. In other words, the power of the village grassroots elite is fragile and is not as powerful as some analyses have claimed.

There are several factors explaining the instability and fragility of the grassroots power of the elite village elders. The first of these is that, unlike the lineage elite of pre-1949 south China, there is no solid economic basis to the leadership of the contemporary village elders. In the edited volume by Esherick and Rankin (1990), Watson's (1990) and Duara's (1990) chapters are worth noting in this respect. Both feature studies of village leadership in pre-1949 rural China in relation to corporate

property, i.e. property owned by the lineage or lineage segments as a whole. Watson (1990) emphasises the key importance of corporate property to the formation and maintenance of the elite families in Hong Kong's New Territories, where lineage is the major social-economic institution. However, Duara's case study of the role of the middleman in four villages in North China provides a contrast to Watson's case. Duara (1990) argues that in these villages there was far less corporate property than in the lineages of south China and consequently "the elite's grip over the structures of local authority was correspondingly weaker" (1990:261).

These two studies provide useful contrasts to the formation and strength of grassroots leadership in contemporary Mashan. The community leadership found in Mashan differs in many aspects from both the above-mentioned cases. In contrast with Hong Kong's New Territories before 1949, in Mashan there has been no lineage corporate property since the land reform programme in the 1950s (see Chapter One). Even though lineage ideology and rituals have been revived, the lineage corporate property once vital to villagers' livelihood and everyday life has not been re-established. The lineage elite's leadership in Mashan in the 21st century is no longer supported by corporate land ownership, and therefore their leadership is, like in the villages described by Duara (1990), relatively weak.

A second factor explaining the fragility of the power of the elite elders stems from the diminishing value of their links to influential Overseas Chinese. As I have argued, much of the legitimacy and authority of the elite elders comes from their ability to "get things done for the public good" and this requires them to make use of their connections with the overseas Chinese who supply funding. However, their efficacy in this has been gradually weakening over time as the older generation of *huaqiao*, with whom they had closest contact, has been dying off. Furthermore, the dependency of the elite elders on *huaqiao* for their status has led to additional challenges for the elders and threats to their power when they have tried to balance the conflicting demands and expectations of *huaqiao*, the village cadres and local state.

The third reason for the fragility of the power of the LRH leaders relates to their personal historical experiences. Hansen (2008) provides a case study of Elders' Associations (LRH) in Fujian Province. Hansen sees in these associations an example of how "male seniority" as traditional local authority has been "reactivated in the process of modernisation and incorporation of China into the global market" (2008:1058). He views the association mainly in relation to local state agents, whose authority and prestige has been weakened by market-oriented reforms (1076). From this perspective, the strength of the LRH is a reaction to the weakness of local government power.

That may be so, but in the case of Mashan, some of the elite elders' private memories of past humiliation keep their fears of political criticism alive. This fear has stopped them from fully exercising the influence they might otherwise have, and explains their reluctance to challenge local government officials and stand up for the public good. LRH leaders like to brand their organisation as a "folk organisation" (*minjian zuzhi*, 民间组织), implying that it is not subject to the control of the local state. However, I would argue that in reality the LRH is neither autonomous nor independent from state co-option.

Chapter Four: Overseas-Dependency and Self-Reliance— Building and Naming New Houses

1. Introduction

A 65-year-old villager, Uncle Zeng, once explained to me the importance of houses: “No one knows what you eat for your dinner, but everyone can see whether you are living in a new or old house!” He was one of a small number of villagers who continued to live in one of the so-called “old houses” (*laowu*, 老屋). As his remark indicates, villagers drew a clear line between what they classified as old houses and new houses (*xinwu*, 新屋), using them to judge the social standing of a household in the village. From this remark we can also see that from the local perspective a new house is desirable, while an old house is not.

The previous chapter examined the destruction of the Leyuan building, which had served as a space for the village public. In this chapter, I turn to look at the construction of another type of “group space”: the houses of ordinary villagers, which are the collective space of the family group.

This chapter examines the local dualism of old and new houses, the financing of new houses, and the popular practice of house naming in the village. As mentioned above, the villagers of Mashan attach great significance to the distinction between old and new houses. In addition, locals also distinguish between those new houses which are funded by *huaqiao* (Overseas Chinese) and those which are funded by local people themselves. By examining the processes through which houses in this community are funded and built, I will consider important questions about the values attached to self-reliance (and individualism) versus reliance on others (and traditional collectivism). I will argue that, although the official rhetoric of the Chinese state towards self-sufficiency has changed, local people still appear to retain a communist ideal of self-reliance. It should be noted, however, that the communist ideal focuses on self-reliance at the level of the collective, while the locals today emphasise individual self-reliance. I will also demonstrate that both the construction of domestic houses and the naming of houses in Mashan are closely related to broader, political-economic conditions.

In this chapter I adopt and modify Santos & Donzelli's (2009) idea of “rice intimacy” to understand the taxonomy of houses in Mashan. Santos and Donzelli describe how communities have historically been bound together in an economy driven by the production and consumption of rice. In these communities, rice has been central in terms of the local economy as a whole, and it has also been a marker of status for individual families within the local society—since those who can eat rice on a regular basis are of a higher status than those who cannot. Santos and Donzelli noted, however, that they had begun to see the beginnings of a shift towards a money-oriented economy.

In Santos and Donzelli's comparative work on rice intimacy and houses, they see houses as “spaces of intimacy”, but this does not imply “a hidden private sphere” (2009:37). Instead, by defining intimacy as “a form of relatedness entailing material or virtual proximity” (2009: 37), they emphasise the links to the wider kinship group that houses embody. Drawing from Levi-Strauss' (1987) work on the “House” (capital H) as a social institution and “houses” (lower case h) as everyday dwellings, Santos and Donzelli (2009) show that both in Toraja, Indonesia, and in Guangdong, China, the lower-level domestic houses are strongly linked through the rice economy to the high-level kinship institutions, such as lineage or the “origin-house”. Thus, an essential aspect of intimacy is hierarchy, both in the economic and kinship domains.

On the basis of the data from their two fieldwork sites, Santos and Donzelli emphasise the centrality of rice as a marker of status in local societies. Drawing on Bray's (1986) influential historical work on the Asian rice economy, they are able to describe a common, historical “rice intimacy”, which cuts across class boundaries and features “the combination of equality and difference, attachment and distance, attraction and repulsion underlying the production, consumption, and redistribution of rice (Santos and Donzelli, 2009:41). There is an inherent tension to “rice intimacy” as described by Santos and Donzelli. On the one hand, in order to continue with irrigated rice cultivation, individual households have no option but to depend to some extent on the collective, yet hierarchical, organisation of the lineage. Yet, on the other hand, households do operate as relatively independent units of rice production and consumption. Thus, in the Asian rice economy, there

has been an historic tension between “the individualistic spirit of the small family farm and the communal spirit of collective organisations” (Santos and Donzelli 2009: 60-61; also Bray 1986: 170).

Santos and Donzelli (2009) did their fieldwork in the 1990s. At the time of Santos’ fieldwork, the effect of rural-to-urban migration had just started to show in the construction of the first new “mansions” in his field site. Both authors note rice cultivation now no longer plays a vital role in the villagers’ livelihood as they leave their villages to take part in the increasingly capitalist economy. This leads Santos and Donzelli to ask, at the end of their article, “what will happen to this tension as ‘money’ seems to be replacing ‘rice’ in people’s *oikonomias*¹⁶ of intimacy?” (2009:61).

The case of Mashan, which already had extensive levels of emigration pre-1949, may provide an answer to this question. I noted in Chapter One that the people of Mashan have had direct engagement with the capitalist economy since as early as the mid-19th century as a result of continuous overseas emigration. The flow of villagers and money between Mashan and the countries of Southeast Asia was well established in this community until it was interrupted in the early 1950s by the Chinese Communist regime. Since the renewed return of *huaqiao* (Overseas Chinese) in the early 1980s, overseas money has once again continuously flowed into the village for lineage/village projects as well as for building family houses. The significance of money, and hence the cash economy, to the villagers can be seen, for instance, in the local saying “no money, no worship”, which has emerged in relation to ancestral worship.

The comment from Uncle Zeng quoted at the beginning of this chapter clearly indicates that to the villagers of Mashan where one lives is more important than what one eats. As in Santos’ fieldwork setting in northern Guangdong, rice was the staple food for villagers in Mashan. However, at the time of my fieldwork in 2007, rice was not a marker of status. Instead, the villagers’ overwhelming concern was the roof under which they lived.

¹⁶ The Greek term is used to refer to both the micro- and macro-kinship formation and the link between them. See Santos and Donzelli (2007:40) for a detailed explanation.

Nonetheless, despite the decline in the importance of rice, the historic tension between household individualism and the spirit of communality, highlighted by Santos and Donzelli (2009) and Bray (1986), can still be identified in Mashan. Even in this money-oriented village, this tension continues to unfold between “houses” – understood both in the sense of everyday domestic dwellings (houses, lower case) and in the sense of the larger kinship institution of the lineage (House, capitalised). Indeed, this tension has given rise to an intriguing paradox: nobody wants to live in the old houses any more, but the salience of the ritual functions served by these old houses has been reemphasised and rituals associated with these houses continued to be maintained.

In order to explore these issues in greater depth, in this chapter I will consider the following questions: How has the distinction between old and new houses taken on such salience? What can be learnt about people’s values from the renunciation of old communal houses as living places, yet their continuing importance as ritual sites? What do villagers’ attitudes towards the two types of house tell us about the importance they attach to the competing values of traditional collectivism and individualism, which I will argue are embodied in old and new houses respectively? And, finally, what has been the impact of state policies and discourses about *huaqiao* on villagers’ attitudes towards collectivism and individualism? This final question must be considered in light of the involvement of *huaqiao* in the construction of new houses, and the different and contradictory attitudes the state has taken towards *huaqiao* at different times, sometimes encouraging them and sometimes rejecting them.

On the basis of my ethnography of Mashan, I will argue that the increasing emphasis on the importance of houses in the village marks the disembedding of villagers from a rice-based economy to one that is more fragmented, with various means and modes of production and types of capital. I begin my argument by examining the continuing uses of old houses alongside the rapid emergence of new houses, which has occurred as a result of the socio-economic and political interaction between local and overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*). The chapter then looks at locals’ representations and practices regarding the new houses, including the

practice of naming a new house and how this varies depending on whether the house was funded by money from overseas or by villagers themselves.

2. Old Houses (*laowu*)

Old houses (*laowu*, 老屋) stand in tension and association with new houses (*xinwu*, 新屋). In this section, I will first document how old houses were no longer desirable as places of residence, but their ritual role continued to be maintained and even accentuated. In this part, I also briefly discuss the materiality of *laowu*, the rejection of *laowu* as places of residence, and the continuity of their ritual role.

By the term *laowu*, villagers were referring to the living quarters symmetrically attached to the two sides of a central hall. All except one of the *laowu* in Mashan were built before 1949. These living quarters were usually one-floor high, with a distinctive style of curved roof covered with black tiles. The physical structure of the *laowu* was similar in design to the U-shaped compounds described by Cohen (1976:22-24) in a Hakka village of rural Taiwan, which had wings of living quarters situated on both sides of a central room. However, unlike the compounds described by Cohen, in Mashan, all the U-shaped compounds were enclosed by an “outside gate” and the common courtyard was divided into two or three parts. There also was no tobacco drying chamber in the *laowu* in Mashan as tobacco growing was not part of the village economy until the 1990s (see Bray 1997:70-76, for a detailed description of the material design of houses).

Laowu featured wooden or stone latticed windows, which were generally smaller than the glass windows of new houses. The construction materials came mainly from the village itself: river stones, sand and wooden beams. The existing structures were usually the result of cross-generational efforts. The exceptions to the description above were six houses, which had been constructed before 1949 in the style of traditional houses and funded by an earlier generation of *huaqiao* from Mashan. These six houses are also recognised as *laowu* today, yet they feature wings that were two-stories high and brick and cement were used in their construction.

The name of the central hall at the centre of each *laowu* was used to identify members of the lineage sub-group living there. Bray(1997:126-127) discusses how the principle of family division and inheritance ensures that the residents of a house would be from the same ancestor. In Mashan, even after a person had moved to a new house and not lived in the old house for more than 20 years, they would continue to be linked to the *laowu* in which they used to live: for example, they might be referred to as “an XX Hall person”. Sometimes all the descendants from a certain hall may be identified to have some common inherent characteristics, such as being greedy for food or heavy drinkers. From this, it seems that the links between *laowu* and the kinship identity of villagers were more salient than new houses.

With one exception, all the *laowu* in Mashan were built before 1949, usually being dedicated to the memory of a particular ancestor. However, not all of the central rooms of the *laowu* contained ancestral tablets. Villagers older than 70 recalled that only two *laowu* had functioned as ancestral halls (*citang*, 祠堂) in the pre-1949 era. These ancestral halls had been where group ancestral worship would be held according to the local ritual calendar, and they were also the places which new brides had to visit before entering her husband’s house. This situation changed drastically due to the various campaigns against ancestral worship that took place during the era of high socialism. As a result of these campaigns, all the ancestral tablets were dismantled from the central halls. Some were burnt; some were used in the paddy fields to block the temporary water openings of each plot, while others were hidden away.

The ancestral halls in use in the village today do not necessarily correspond to those ancestral halls used in Mashan before 1949. After the early 1980s, when people started to bring out the old tablets that had been hidden or made replacements for the lost ones, they placed the ancestral tablets in the central room of the *laowu* in which they were living, rather than returning them to the original ancestral halls. As a result, many *laowu*, which in the pre-1949 era did not house tablets, began to resemble ancestral halls. On separate occasions, I heard two male

villagers made similar comments about their respective *laowu*, “it is *becoming* an ancestral hall” (*kuaiyao biancheng citang*, 快要变成祠堂).

In the early 1980s, these *laowu* still served both residential and ritual functions. In the next section, I first describe the process by which *laowu* lost their function as places of residence while continuing their ritual role, before turning to consider the new houses that were built in Mashan.

The changing functions of laowu

In the past three decades, more than ninety percent of households in Mashan have left their old houses and moved to new houses. The unpopularity of *laowu* as places of residence was evident in contemporary Mashan. According to the estimates of several senior villagers, the average number of residents in each *laowu* had dropped, from over 100 to under 10 today. The majority of households in Mashan lived in *laowu* before the 1980s. For example, Shanji Hall was a *laowu* consisting of three courtyards and four wings of living quarters (two on each side of the central hall). Built more than 100 years ago, it had 32 residential rooms and two storage rooms. Until the late 1980s, it used to contain 18 households including a total of over 270 people. Each household would have had only one or two rooms, depending on their social standing, and these were not necessarily adjacent to each other. In such circumstances, it was difficult to carve out a separate space for each family in the living quarters of a *laowu*.

Today, most *laowu* are inhabited by only one or two households who were often identified as “people unable to build their own (new) house”. The majority had moved out either to a new house in the village, or had relocated to towns and cities. Again, to take Shanji Hall as an example, by 2007, 11 out of the 18 households had moved out to new houses, while some others households settled down in the cities or towns. Only two households continued to live in this *laowu*: one a mature unmarried man and the other an elderly couple whose adult children had moved to cities. This situation was not uncommon. In 2007, I visited most of the *laowu* in Mashan and I did not see any that housed more than two households or ten residents. In five of the *laowu* in the village, the only residents were solitary

unmarried (*guanggun*, 光棍) aged 50 years or over. The meagre prospects of these five unmarried men, be that for future marriage or fathering offspring, were regarded as unfortunate and a breach of lineage ideals.

Living in a *laowu* is an indicator of the household's relatively low social-economic standing in the village, and it is often associated with negative moral judgement of the household head. Inhabitants of *laowu* are regarded and regard themselves as incapable (*mei benshi*, 没本事) or improper people. Murphy (Murphy, 2002) has observed that in a town in Jiangxi, where many migrants have returned and built new houses, the house in which one lives is closely associated with one's self-esteem. After returning to the countryside, migrants build new houses in order "to achieve the goal of self-respect" (Murphy 2002:104). In Mashan, those who continued living in old houses conceived of themselves as being geographically and socially marginalised, or "left behind", in the village community.

Villagers' everyday discussions on the disadvantages of *laowu* and the convenience of new homes are shaped by a discourse that links people's homes to moral judgements about their capability and questions about whether their behaviour is fitting of a decent person. One morning, I joined three elderly women for their morning stroll along the main road in the village. One of them, Grandma Fu, lived with her adult son's conjugal family in a *laowu* while the other two lived in new houses. Grandma Fu drew my attention by pointing towards a two-storey, new house and commenting on what a capable person the owner of the *xinwu* (new house) was. Immediately she made a comparison to her *laowu* residence, "Only we incapable people are still living in *laowu*. Nowadays, nobody wants to live in such houses anymore." She went on to complain about how wet it could get on rainy days in *laowu* and how many doors there were to lock at night compared with the single entrance of new houses. The other two women nodded in agreement with her. For most villagers, *laowu* have lost their former function as everyday living spaces.

Laowu, however, are not cut off from the lives of those now living in new houses. The close ritual ties between old and new houses are manifested in the annual

parade of “lighting lanterns” (*diandeng* 点灯) that takes place in Mashan on the 15th day of the first month in the Chinese calendar. A group of people from a particular Hall or *laowu*, including adults and children, would beat six or eight gongs and a large drum and carry six or eight lanterns with them on the parade. The parade always started with an ancestral worship ritual at the *laowu*, and then proceeded to visit all the new houses to which the former *laowu* residents had moved. At each new house, the family living there would prepare a reception for the parade, setting off firecrackers, and distributing some sweets, wine and sometimes red-envelope money to each member. The parade always returned to the *laowu* from where it has started, arriving at about midnight, and there the drum beater attempted to bring the evening’s festivities to a climax. In and through this parade, the old and new houses continued to be both physically and socially linked.

As a result of their large size, the *laowu* seem inherently “communal”, whereas new houses containing only one household would seem to suggest individuation and freedom. This dualism of old and new houses does not imply that one has replaced the other. Instead, they are maintained in close association and tension. In contrast to its drastically reduced residential function, the ritual functions of *laowu*—the meaning of which was now conflated with the central room or ancestral hall—has been renewed and reinvigorated. In the next section, I examine how this increased ritual significance has been brought about by the cooperative efforts of local and overseas elites.

Laowu as ritual places

From the above discussion, it is evident that most locals no longer want to live in *laowu*. However, after the early 1980s, during the same period that people were moving out of the *laowu*, ancestral tablets were moved back into the *laowu*. The central rooms of the *laowu* thus acquired the new ritual function of housing ancestral tablets. The occupants of the new houses continue to return periodically to the *laowu* for ancestral worship. Another key ritual function of the *laowu* was as the location for mortuary rites. It is, however, rare nowadays for villagers to hold wedding banquets in *laowu*, because new houses or restaurants have become the preferred venues among the younger generation for these events.

The ritual functions of the ancestral halls of *laowu* ceased between 1949 and 1978 as a result of Maoist political campaigns. The ancestral tablets were thrown or hidden away, and any traditional calligraphy reflecting ancestral ideology was erased or covered up with whitewash. The main halls were put to other uses such as warehouses or cattle pens. At least four main halls in Mashan became public canteens in the first three months of the Great Leap Forward.

The current revival and even promotion of the ritual significance of *laowu* is largely due to the political-economic intervention of Overseas Chinese together with the cooperation of local elites. *Huaqiao* provided the finance required for the renovation of the central halls of *laowu*, while the local elders managed their actual operation. Members of the village's cultural elite actively cooperate in each *laowu* renovation project. Committees and funds have been established for the maintenance and management of *laowu* of apical ancestors of the third and ninth generations. Most of the ancestral halls in the village have now been.

The locals were well aware of the value of the *laowu* as representing a material link between *huaqiao* and the village. The *laowu* provoke the sense of belonging and nostalgia of *huaqiao* towards their ancestral home. The editor-in-chief of the Overseas Newsletter related an anecdote to illustrate the significance of *laowu* to *huaqiao*: one day, a few years back, a *huaqiao* came to Mashan especially to take a photo of himself in front of the *laowu* to which his family belongs. *Laowu* function as a source of traditional and local identity. Like ancestral tombs, *laowu* were viewed by both local government agents and villagers as an instrument to attract *huaqiao* to make return visits.

The renewal of *laowu* as ritual places is particularly evident in those that are no longer used as residential premises because all the former inhabitants have moved out. These empty *laowu* have become places solely for the purposes of housing ancestral tablets and performing ancestral worship activities. Even without residents, these *laowu* remain very meaningful to the villagers and *huaqiao*, because of the ritual functions they serve, and they continue to be cleaned and

cleared once a year in preparation for the short period during the Chinese New Year when collective ancestral worship rituals are carried out in the hall.

One old man residing alone in the living quarters of the ancestral hall of the ninth-generation Zhang ancestor complained about a production team leader who used the room in the front of the ninth-generation ancestral hall as a water buffalo shed. He angrily remarked, “It is very disrespectful to the ancestors!” Another woman in her late sixties complained about her agnatic brother-in-law who kept two goats in one of the rooms in their *laowu*, saying he is “making our *laowu* stink! But won’t we all be parked in the *laowu* after our death?” She was referring to the practice of placing the bodies of the dead in the central room of the *laowu* for the mortuary rites. Despite these complaints, it was actually not uncommon for those who had moved out to use their residential room in a *laowu* to then use the room to raise domestic animals like hens and ducks.

To most villagers and *huaqiao*, the elderly bachelor’s complaint would seem reasonable: the spirits of ancestors are believed to exist in the tablet on the altar in the hall of *laowu*¹⁷ and should be accorded due respect. Indeed, showing respect to one’s ancestors was one of the reasons employed by the community elites to mobilise overseas financial contributions to renovate *laowu*. The names and brief biographies of major overseas donors were inscribed on the wall of the main hall, at a prominent and highly visible spot.

The renovation of a *laowu* was often celebrated with a big banquet and ritual which was locally called *zhuanhuo* (转火, a re-inauguration ceremony which literally means “changing the fire”), the traditional practice marking “a new birth” of an old house. In one case, where the major overseas donor was the leader of the overseas Chinese community in Malaysia, the inauguration ritual of the *laowu* was attended by local dignitaries, including the county government officials, elite *huaqiao* who flew in from Singapore or Taiwan especially to attend the event, elders from the neighbouring area, and production team leaders. Whereas once the *laowu* had been continuously targeted as “backward and feudalistic” in official and

¹⁷ The soul of an ancestor exists in three places: in the ancestral tablet, in their tomb, and in the underworld.

intellectual discourse, the ritual functions of *laowu* have now been consciously revitalised.

Spending money on renovating the *laowu* might seem to be contrary to the aspirations of most villagers towards owning and living in new houses. As already noted, it is evident that most villagers today would not opt to live in *laowu* as they are regarded as “backward” and a marker of “incapable people” compared with new houses. However, the particular socio-economic dynamics of the *qiaoxiang* (hometown to overseas Chinese) culture has resulted in a huge amount of money coming from overseas being poured into the renovation of *laowu* in Mashan.

In fact, to villagers, these two strands of development are not contradictory but complementary. Alongside the trend described above, in which *laowu* are marginalised as residential places yet renovated for their ritual functions, another trend has seen increasing numbers of new houses built in Mashan. These two parallel processes are actually interrelated. The cooperative efforts of *huaqiao* and the locals to preserve *laowu* and renovate the central hall aimed to promote the lineage ideology of ancestral worship and the spirit of traditional collectivism. The involvement of villagers in the *laowu* renovation projects should be understood as part of their efforts to gain the trust of their *huaqiao* relatives who, in turn, may be able to provide funds needed by their village relatives to build new houses in the village. This way of using *huaqiao* connections to fund the construction of a new house was just one of the two different ways in which the villagers funded new houses. In the next section, I compare these two different ways of financing new houses and consider how this influences the names that are given to these new houses.

3. New houses: Overseas-funded houses (*qiaofang*) versus self-reliant houses (*zili gengsheng fang*)

Huge changes in Mashan: ...New houses used to be mainly funded by overseas brethren in southeast Asian countries (*nanyang qiaobao*). But in the past decade, a considerable number of peasants have built new houses with wealth accumulated through their diligent work. (Overseas Newsletter, October 1990)

Among the 101 new houses that have been built so far in our village, 74 were completed with wealth earned through labour (*laodong zhifu* 劳动致富) and self reliance (*zili gengsheng* 自力更生). (Overseas Newsletter, January 1991)

The construction of new houses (*xinwu* or *xinfang*, 新屋/新房) has taken place in parallel with the trend of gradual withdrawal from *laowu* as places of residence. As is demonstrated by the above two extracts from the Overseas Newsletter from the early 1990s, the contemporary local conception of new houses has evolved with the involvement of *huaqiao* in village life. Locals identify new houses as belonging to one of two categories: overseas-funded houses (*qiaofang*, 侨房) or self-sufficient houses (*zili gengsheng fang*, 自力更生房). In this section, I will examine the economic and moral implications of these two categories and illustrate the different house-naming methods which have been shaped by the interactions between villagers and returning *huaqiao*.

I have already noted that ninety percent of households had moved from a *laowu* to a new house. Mashan, like many rural areas in China, has seen the mushrooming of new house construction in the past three decades. The gradual development of a market-oriented economy since 1978 means that construction materials have become accessible to ordinary villagers. Visitors from other villages were, more often than not, impressed to see the large number of new houses standing along the main street and dotted in almost every corner of Mashan. The villagers would immediately explain that many were funded by the overseas relatives of the resident. New houses are a recurring theme in both official and popular discourse.

The Overseas Newsletter, which reaches thousands of overseas lineage members, also reported the completion of any new house.

A new house is generally desired and regarded as essential in order to maintain the status of a respectable household. Convenience, hygiene, freedom and a less quarrelsome relationship with neighbours often came up in elicited and non-elicited conversations about the advantages of new houses as well as in the more discrete conversations I had with villagers. Sitting, drinking tea in his new house, Uncle Wanxiu, a man in his early seventies, who was a lineage head for one of the major lineage branches, talked to me and compared his old house and his new house. He had moved out of Shanji Hall, the large *laowu* discussed above, in 2003, and stressed three key differences he had found between his old and new houses. He explained, “Of course this new house is better. First, there is only my household living here, just one family; at the *laowu*, many people lived together. It was inconvenient doing certain things. Second, it is cleaner and more hygienic here. At the *laowu* everyone raised chickens and ducks. Third, there is more freedom and opportunities for leisure here, I can turn on the radio and TV whenever I like. At the *laowu*, if I turned on the radio or TV, people complained it was too noisy.¹⁸” Another retired school teacher, in his early eighties, mentioned his feeling of “shame” (*cankui*, 惭愧) about living in a *laowu* where chicken droppings could be seen everywhere. He said, “I am much happier after moving into our new house.”

The social significance of building a new house in contemporary rural areas in China has been researched by a number of sociologists and anthropologists (Yan 2003, Murphy 2002, Sargeson, 2002). Whether or not a household lives in a new house has become the most significant means by which the locals judge their socio-economic standing. The village barber, who was in his forties, lived with his wife and mother. The new three-storey house, named after his grandfather, was funded by his two uncles, one of whom was living overseas and the other in a city. He told me that living in a new house for him was like “a mute eating bitter medicine” (*yaba chi huanglian*, 哑巴吃黄连, lit. “a mute person eating

¹⁸“当然是住这里（新楼房）好。第一，这只是我自己一家，在老屋，很多人一起住，做一些事情可能不方便；第二，比较干净，老屋大家都养鸡鸭；第三，比较自由自在，我要开收音机或电视，随时开，在老屋有人说太吵了。”

Berberine”). The other half of this popular saying is “one cannot tell the bitterness that he/she is suffering” (*youku shoubuchu*, 有苦说不出). In using this phrase, he meant that nobody would believe that his household was in economic difficulty, since other villagers would see his new house and simply assume that this meant his family had a decent life. As it happened, he had been left disabled as a result of a house construction accident in which he had injured his leg, and he did not earn much through his present work as a barber in the village. As a result of his injury, his wife had to take on most of the agricultural work in the paddy fields.

The increasing number of new houses in Mashan has brought with it a high degree of anxiety about housing and, in particular, the meanings and values that are communicated through people’s houses. As described above, villagers wish to be perceived as “capable and proper” persons living in new houses. However, there are other possible meanings attached to houses and, in my discussion of the material from Mashan, I want to emphasise that what it means to build a new house may be deeply ambiguous. A new house for many villagers represents a step forward in material comfort and the modernisation of family life. The new house could also be a gift that symbolises the link between overseas relatives and village-based kin, or it could be a demonstration of one’s ability to be self-reliant. It may be built to achieve influence and gain the approval of the local government, or it may be built in the hope of bringing about political reconciliation following past family trauma. A new house may even be left empty and used as a memorial to ancestors. All these are possible and a single house may have multiple meanings. I discuss these issues further in the following sections.

Local official endorsement of new houses

Officially claimed as a big step towards civilisation and modernisation, new houses have been endorsed by the local state and village cadres. To encourage the emergence of new houses is overtly political. New houses, like the paved road discussed by Flower (2004), are considered one of the key symbols and measures of modernisation in the current national and local official discourse on development. Murphy (2002) observed during her fieldwork that a new house was regarded as an important element for the official classification of “a civilised

household” (*wenming hu*, 文明户). Mashan saw something similar. To continue with the example of Shanji Hall: this name of this building was also used as the name of a production team which was formed from the neighbourhood corner (or a natural village) around the *laowu*. In 2004, the county government bestowed upon Shanji Hall the official award of “*wenming cun*” (文明村, a civilised village) due to the large number of new houses, together with of the number of motor vehicles and the length of cement-paved footpaths in the village.

In the early 1990s, as part of the official efforts to encourage *huaqiao* of local origin to make financial contributions to the development of local areas, the county government issued a set of policies that gave preferential treatment to *huaqiao* in relation to the construction of new houses. Mashan villagers were familiar with these policies. An application for a housing plot submitted in the name of a *huaqiao* in almost any location would be given priority and readily granted, while villagers without viable *huaqiao* connections had great trouble ensuring the acceptance of their application. The housing plot would be free of charge to an overseas applicant, while local applicants had to pay about 4,000 to 5,000 Yuan. Furthermore, *huaqiao* could apply for a larger plot of land than the locals, who could only apply for the standard size of 120 square meters. New houses that have emerged under this preferential policy are called *qiaofang* and I will discuss these in more detail below.

This recent official endorsement for new houses stands in stark contrast with the policies of the 1960s and 1970s. Few houses were built in Mashan between 1949 and 1978 due to various policy restrictions and the economic poverty of the commune system. One villager now in his early sixties told me that, in the 1960s, his father managed to build a few wooden rooms, but the village Party Secretary at the time ordered them to be pulled down on the pretext that building new houses represented the “tail of capitalism” which should be cut off.

In contrast, the current state policy prioritising *huaqiao* and encouraging new houses as a symbol of material modernisation has directly contributed to the emergence of new houses in Mashan. The policy has probably encouraged local

families to go out of their way to reactivate and strengthen their overseas connections. In fact, the policy has been readily manipulated by the locals for their own benefit. For instance, a villager who was a grandnephew of a *huaqiao* told me that he had mainly funded his new house himself, but he still asked his granduncle in Singapore to submit the housing plot application so that he could get it for free.

The characteristics of new houses

New houses are also referred to as “small, foreign-style houses” (*xiao yangfang*, 小洋房) or “steel and cement houses” (*gangjie shunifang*, 钢筋水泥房). They are usually two- or two-and-a-half-storey rectangular buildings. They are self-contained, detached houses. There is always a living room, a designated kitchen area, two to four bedrooms on each floor, a bathroom and an indoor toilet. Villagers often characterised new houses as bright and spacious with relatively large glass windows compared with the dark and small-sized rooms in the *laowu*, which have wooden windows. Most new houses have their own water supply with a stainless steel water tank standing on top of the flat roof, which contains water that has been pumped up with an electric water pump (see Wu 2008 for more on electric water pumps) for use by the family. The electric pump runs about three times a week. New houses feature a flat, cement roof, which is used by members of the household to dry harvested grain or their laundry.

The flat roof is considered a crucial symbol of material modernisation. At the end of 2007, the roof of the village committee headquarters, which was built in the 1970s, was transformed from its previous traditional, black-tiled, curved roof into a flat cement one. With the other parts whitewashed, it was claimed by the village director that the building had been modernised. Intriguingly, half a year before this renovation took place, the appearance of the roof had already modified using Photoshop in a colour photo that was published in the Overseas Newsletter.

The presence of an indoor toilet in the houses is a very significant difference from the *laowu*, where the toilet is located in an outhouse. New houses built in the 1980s were originally designed without such toilets, but they were subsequently added in the late 1990s or in the early 2000s. Outhouse toilets, practical storage places for

natural fertiliser, were now portrayed as “unhygienic” in official discourse. In 2007, as part of the efforts to “build a new socialist village” in line with a project initiated by the central state, a number of outhouse toilets near the main village street were demolished. This forced some residents living nearby to use neighbours’ toilets on a regular basis. Nevertheless, indoor toilets had become the desirable standard of hygiene. Even some households which continued to live in old houses have upgraded them so that they include an indoor toilet; indeed, some of these new toilets were initially built for the convenience of their *huaqiao* visitors.

Building a new house is costly. In 2008, the cost of a new house came to at least fifty to sixty thousand Yuan (£5,000 to £6,000), a large amount for a rural household. The village director (*cunzhang*) reported that the average annual income of a villager in 2007 was 4,000 Yuan (about £400), a figure that was probably inflated to meet the target set by the upper-level government officials. Most new houses were built on the household’s vegetable plots reserved for family use (*ziliudi*, 自留地), which were allocated to each household during the Commune era. Securing a plot for a new house can be an ordeal as one household’s vegetable plot would usually border other plots and each individual plot is often smaller than the 120 square meters desired for the new house. It was legally forbidden to use paddy fields for housing plots.

In Mashan, villagers in general were well informed about which households received the support of *huaqiao* and how much support they received. The presence or absence of overseas aid was readily acknowledged in everyday conversations about a new house. “Overseas-funded houses” (*qiaofang*) and “self-reliant houses” (*zili gengsheng fang*) are a pair of dualistic categories used by the villagers to differentiate between the two distinctive ways in which new houses (*xinwu*) are funded. *Qiaofang* refers to those houses which were fully or partially supported by overseas connections through financial remittances or the submission of housing plot applications. In contrast, the funds for self-reliant houses come from villagers’ own pockets. As I will elaborate, the two categories also carry social-moral implications.

Qiaofang: *Eating* huaqiao

According to reports in the Overseas Newsletter, the first few new houses in Mashan were all funded by *huaqiao*. Today, more than one third of Mashan's new houses are funded with overseas money. These *qiaofang* are more elaborate than the *zili gengsheng fang*. *Qiaofang* are usually decorated with an elaborate setup of colourful lights and white or pink tiles on the outside walls. The construction materials are imported from the cities. One of the earliest *qiaofang* to be built cost more than 300,000 yuan. This two-storey house was funded by a *huaqiao* from Singapore for his married sister's family.

The property ownership of *qiaofang* can be ambiguous. Unlike properties in the cities, there is no legal certificate of property ownership or real estate license (*fangchanzheng*, 房产证) for rural houses. The only official document is the "Land Use Certificate" (*tudi shiyong zheng*, 土地使用证) issued by the National Land Bureau, which is granted to the person applying for a housing plot. In the case of the newly-built *qiaofang*, if the application is made by a *huaqiao*, as often happens in Mashan, then according to the official records the house is owned by the absent overseas benefactor.

The majority of the residents of *qiaofang* were the village-based relatives of the overseas donors or applicants. Living in a *qiaofang* can be a source of pride, but it can also attract negative moral judgements from other villagers. *Qiaofang* are the explicit objectification and materialisation of the overseas connection. As mentioned above, *qiaofang* are employed in the discourse of local state agents as positive, political exemplars of patriotism, native-place loyalty and economic advancement. On the one hand, as a new house, *qiaofang* and the overseas connection embodied in them can officially be declared vital to the project of village modernisation. For this reason, the presence of *qiaofang* in Mashan is the outcome of what the village elite elders and village cadres have worked hard to encourage in the past few decades. Quite a few villagers living in *qiaofang* took pride in telling me about the success stories and glorious returns of their overseas relatives from whom they gained support for the new houses. They were sometimes envied by other villagers without similar access to overseas finance. On

the other hand, villagers living in *qiaofang* could be described by other locals as *chi huaqiao* (吃华侨), literally “eating the Overseas Chinese”. For instance, the 70-year-old accountant for the Elders’ Association Committee described a family, who lived in a *qiaofang* funded by their overseas siblings, by saying “They just sit there for the whole day ‘eating *huaqiao*’. The whole family does nothing and still have something to eat.” Obviously he disapproved of fellow villagers “eating *huaqiao*”, implying their over-dependency on overseas funding and their laziness. In the local Hakka dialect, *huaqiao* are also called *fanke* (in Hakka, ‘*Fanhak*’, 番客) or foreign guests, which sounds similar to *fanya* (in Hakka, ‘*Fan’ak*’, 番鸭), or foreign ducks. “Eating foreign ducks” (meaning “to get money from *huaqiao*” or even “rip off *huaqiao*”) is a phrase which is still used among villagers.

The mobilisation of funding for a *qiaofang* depends on the older generation, who were in their sixties or seventies in the 1990s and personally known to *huaqiao*. Most villagers of the older generation, born before or soon after 1949 and having spent 30 years under the collectivisation era had not accumulated much in the way of savings. The overseas connection was often the only channel through which they could have access to any cash or financial support. They capitalised on their rapport with overseas relatives. In some cases where the older generation had died out, the younger generation were still able to mobilise some funds from *huaqiao*. In one case, a man in his early fifties received some overseas funds simply by sending a letter and photos of his long-deceased parents to his overseas uncle. It was more difficult for the younger generation in their thirties and forties to build a similar rapport as they had little direct personal contact with their overseas relatives and vice versa.

Without a viable *huaqiao* connection, some elderly parents would find it difficult, if not impossible, to finance a new house for their children, because the cost of at least 100,000 Yuan (£10,000 pounds) in 2007 was prohibitive. A sense of insecurity was created in relation to the unequal access to overseas finance of the older generation of villagers. A villager in his seventies expressed his uneasiness as a father in not having the money to pay for a new house for his adult son. He and his wife lived in a *laowu* the management right of which had been delegated to him

by its overseas owner. He remarked that, “Other parents have built new houses for their children, but here I am still living in a borrowed house. No house will be going from my hands [to my children].” To him and some others, being able to build a new house is the benchmark used to measure one’s parental viability. The presence of a large number of elaborate *qiaofang* in Mashan brought their perceived status as failed parents into sharper contrast, resulting in them being seen as “people without doors and paths” (*meiyou menlu*, 没有门路), that is, people without useful connections. Yan (2003) discussed how the parents in the village of Xiajia in northern China, faced with an “old-age care” crisis, tried their utmost to give their adult children gifts in order to ensure that these children would later reciprocate by taking care of them in the future. One of the most prized gifts parents could give their children is a new house.

A new house is also the biggest gift that a local household can receive from their overseas relations. Often named after the overseas funder or his immediate ancestor(s), the *qiaofang* becomes the visible, material evidence of the connection between the villagers and their overseas relations. Before discussing the naming of *qiaofang* in greater detail, let us take a short detour and look at *zili gengsheng fang*.

Houses built with one’s own effort: zili gengsheng fang

Self-reliant houses were built mainly by the younger generation of villagers. This was in contrast to the overseas-financed houses (*qiaofang*), which were often the achievement of an older generation in their sixties or seventies, who had established rapport with *huaqiao*. This is confirmed by the statistical records and reports in the Overseas Newsletter which show that most of the *zili gengsheng fang* were financed by villagers in their late thirties or forties, who would be the adult children of the aforementioned village elders. Born in the 1960s or early 1970s, they made their wealth from rural-to-urban migration, which became possible for them after the mid-1980s. Some *zili gengsheng fang* were only one-storey buildings, while the décor was often simple and plain compared with the more elaborate style of *qiaofang*.

In contrast to *qiaofang* which had ambiguous connotations, *zili gengsheng fang* (“self-reliant house”) is a positive term. Grandma Fu, an old village woman who still lived in a *laowu* pointed out a new house to me and commented about its owner: “Without the aid of any *huaqiao*, he and his wife built it with their own hands. They were totally self-reliant.” Her remark acknowledged the pervasive presence of overseas funding in the construction of new houses, but it also showed her moral approval towards the couple who funded their new house through their own effort. She clearly praised the hard work and economic independence of such households.

It is worth pointing out that the term *zili gengsheng* (self reliance/ self sufficiency) first became part of the everyday village vocabulary in the 1960s and 1970s, during the Maoist regime’s extreme political campaign against dependency on any overseas aid. The full version of the slogan consists two four-character phrases: “self reliance ensures adequate food and clothing (*zili gengsheng, fengyi zushi*, 自力更生, 丰衣足食)”. Quite a few villagers still remember when these official policies railed against accepting any overseas financial aid, which was considered politically damaging to the image of the People’s Republic of China as a socialist country. Any *huaqiao* donations to public projects was to be rejected¹⁹. The former director of the Elders’ Association Committee told me an anecdote about an embarrassing situation which occurred in the 1970s when the village schoolmaster had to decline an unsolicited donation from a *huaqiao* whose family member tried to hand him the cash under the table. He remarked that such an occurrence would be unthinkable today. The past official hostility towards *huaqiao* during that period remains part of the collective memory of those locals who were more than 50 years old in 2007.

The term *zili gengsheng fang* once carried political associations of xenophobia, the rejection of foreign aid, and the implication that it was better to go hungry and tighten one’s belt than accept such aid. Intriguingly, even after the top-down, government hostility towards foreign aid had long been officially dropped, the

¹⁹ The only exceptional period was the early 1960s, when money and food packages from overseas Chinese were acceptable to avoid the worsening situation of starvation brought by the Three-Year Famine (1958-1961).

locals continued to be critical of the dependence of other villagers on *huaqiao* in order to build new homes. I would argue, that the villagers have in fact internalised the state's former discourse and rhetoric on self-reliance and now creatively redeploy it in order to criticise the actions of villagers in a very different political-economic context. Indeed, from the way the phrase *zili gengsheng* was used by the villagers, it was apparent that the villagers have, to a degree, retained the older, morally-positive attitude towards self-reliance, and also the contrasting, morally-negative attitude towards dependency on help from overseas. This explains why those who live in self-financed houses often stressed the absence of overseas aid and how their own efforts and frugality enabled them to complete the construction of their new homes. One example is the accountant for the Elders' Association committee, mentioned above, who once proudly told me, "I did not receive a penny from *huaqiao* in building my house!"

It was difficult for many villagers to build their self-reliant houses, however. Elsewhere in this thesis, I provide accounts of the efforts two households had to go to in order to build their self-reliant new homes. In Chapter Two, I described how 15 households were evicted from *Fanshen Lou* (翻身楼, the Emancipation Building) in the mid-1980s as part of a programme of restitution of *huaqiao* property. After negotiations with county government officials, these households were each granted housing plots on their paddy fields in violation of the central government policy of "protecting agricultural land". However, most of these evicted households had to self-finance each stage of the construction of their new houses, which were mostly completed by the mid-1990s. The director of the village Women's Association belonged to one of these households. She told me that she and her husband first built one room and then gradually added the other parts of their house. For several years, every morning after hand-washing clothes on the river bank, she would fill one of her buckets with river stones and carry them home so they could be used for the construction of the house. In Chapter Six, I describe how a fierce woman, nicknamed Wu Zetian had to borrow 80,000 Yuan to build her new home and how she had to negotiate with four other households in order to secure a plot for the new house.

Whether they are *qiaofang* or *zili gengsheng fang*, the majority of new houses in Mashan are each given a particular name. In the next section, I look at the variety of ways in which these names were decided through processes of negotiation between locals and their overseas relatives or among the locals themselves. However, there are some houses which remained ambiguously unnamed and I also consider the reasons for this.

4. Naming Houses

Naming new houses

New houses each stand as independent and detached buildings. This provides an opportunity for each household to mark out their residence with a name which imbues a new house with a separate and unique identity. In the past, there was no such opportunity. In *laowu*, the rooms occupied by an individual household could be at different locations within the building, which might accommodate anywhere between 10 and 30 households.

The names given to new houses in relation to the names of the old central halls should be noted. Choosing the name of one's new house can be one way of shaping one's own identity in relation to the fixed identity that one gains as a member of a lineage sub-group. The name one chooses may reflect one's (desired) individual characteristics rather than those characteristics (perhaps undesirable) associated with one's hall.

The naming of a family house became a widely-adopted, local fashion during the new wave of house construction that began in the late 1980s. The practice probably started with the first few new houses that were built back then. All of these were *qiaofang*, funded by overseas Chinese for their village-based kin. The practice of house naming probably derived from the standard practice in *qiaoxiang* of naming numerous public buildings and construction projects, such as roads and classrooms, after the overseas donors who funded them. For example, as described in Chapter Three, each room in the Happiness Garden was named after an overseas donor or their ancestor. It might have also be a response to the names of the halls in the *laowu*.

The characters of a building's name, painted in red or gold, are carved on a piece of stone placed on the top of the front gate of the house. The naming patterns for *qiaofang* and *zili gengsheng fang* are similar to some extent. A name usually consists of three or four Chinese characters. The third and/or fourth characters are usually one of a number of synonyms indicating a type of residential building, for example a residence (*ju*, 居), a house (*lou*, 楼), a mansion (*dasha*, 大厦), a maisonette (*xiaozhu*, 小筑) or a villa (*shanzhuan*, 山庄). The first two characters are often a matter of negotiation. With only a couple of exceptions, they are made up from the character(s) of the genealogy name (*hao*, 号),²⁰ or the given name, of one or two people, who may be village-based or overseas, dead or alive.

Villagers take this seemingly small architectural feature of their house very seriously. Stafford (2000: 87-98) details the ritual significance of gates for Chinese people and spirits, while Murphy (2002) observes that the front of a house is regarded as the “public face” of a household. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that house names in Mashan were treated as the defining feature of the house gate. On the issue of naming, Blum (2009) and Watson (1986: 619-631) discuss the significance of people's names and the power of words in China. They both mention that changing the name of a person is a popular method used to change the fate of that person. Names for houses in Mashan were sometimes treated in a similar way.

Two cases from Mashan illustrate this. The first involved the long-term conflict over the name for the outside gate of a *laowu* which was considered by some to bring bad fortune to the lineage sub-group members. In 2006, one of them, a powerful *huaqiao* named Dashan, whose story is told in Chapter Five, employed another alcoholic agnate to scratch the second character of the name and cover it up with red paint. The second case involved a new house named after a man, whose wife scratched the whole name off when their marriage ran into trouble.

²⁰ The genealogy name is the name given to male members of the lineage only, and differs from their given name: see Rubie Watson 1986.

Viewing the landscape of Mashan in 2007, it is probably the 100-plus new family homes, each with their own unique name, which stands as the most visible transformation in the village over the past three decades. These newly-named houses are not merely the manifestation of reactivated overseas connections or the achievements of hard work. Some of them must be understood as representing attempts at political and social reconciliation following historical conflict. In the next section, I consider the choice of the first two characters for the names of new houses, and demonstrate that such names emerge from negotiations among family members and, as such, they are related to the historical and socio-economic context of the new house.

Negotiation of house names

House names are chosen as a result of negotiation. The dominant trends are to use the single name of a male ancestor or a male household head, or to use the combination of two names, for example, those of the husband and wife, or those of the father and son. As the tables below show, the names for *qiaofang* place more emphasis on ancestors than the names of self-reliant houses. Seven out of the eight *qiaofang* houses with husband-wife combined names were actually using the names of deceased grandparents or parents rather than the couple currently in residence. Eight out of the eleven male names were those of deceased grandfathers or fathers. In sum, *qiaofang* were usually named after people who are shared ancestors of both the *huaqiao* donors and their village-based inhabitants.

Names of overseas-funded houses (*qiaofang*) in Mashan 2007:

Living and deceased ancestors

Name Number	Deceased ancestor- related	Living ancestor- related	Unknown origin
Total: 25	15	4	6

Names of overseas-funded houses (*qiaofang*) in Mashan 2007:

Characters' origins

Name Number	Husband-wife	Father-son	Single name: Male	Single name: Female	Unknown origin
Total: 25	8	0	11	1	5

Names of self-reliant houses in Mashan 2007:

Living and deceased ancestors

Name Number	Deceased ancestor- related	Living ancestor- related	Unknown origin
Total: 18	0	16	2

Names of self-reliant houses in Mashan 2007:

Characters' origins

Name Number	Husband-wife	Father-son	Single name: Male	Single name: Female	Unknown origin
Total: 18	6	4	6	0	2

Note: this is not an exhaustive list of all the house names in Mashan. They are the names that I collected during my fieldwork or from the written documents to which I had access.

The naming of the new house after a common ancestor of both the absent funder and actual occupants is easily justifiable and acceptable. By naming the house after recent ancestors, the ideology of ancestor worship is accentuated in the process of building new houses. Such a house is regarded to have “added to the glory of the ancestors” (*guangzong yaozu*, 光宗耀祖). The overseas benefactor is also conveniently commended in the village and overseas community for his display of respect to ancestors by “commemorating one’s parents or grandparents” with a

new house named after them. He accumulates both social and moral capital as the news of the completion of a *qiaofang* named after ancestors always gets reported in both the home and overseas communities.

The precise relationship between the overseas financiers and the village-based recipient(s) who are the actual house residents varies. It can be between sibling pairs, between cousins, or between overseas uncles or aunts and local nephews. Two cases in the village involved overseas granduncles and village-based grand-nephews. The financing for one house came from the money left by a Taiwanese soldier who died in Taiwan before 1988, the year when it would have become politically possible for him to make a return visit to Mashan. The village-based recipients are invariably junior to the overseas benefactor in terms of age or generational rank. Nevertheless, a sense of solidarity is created between the two parties local and overseas, usually spanning two or three generations.

The attempt to link the construction of new houses with the tradition of ancestral commemoration through naming is a product of two sets of competing interests. On the one hand, it reflects the wishes of *huaqiao*, which local people try to accommodate. On the other hand, for the local people themselves there is the pressure to leave the old houses and move into a new house. The village-based households benefit from the material comfort of a new house, but they are also thereby bound by the obligation to worship the ancestors. In this way, the practice of ancestral worship is maintained, accompanied by the realisation of the individual's pursuit of acquiring a new independent house. The maintenance of the traditional community order does not necessarily exclude the process of the individualisation of households, and vice versa. On the basis of my ethnography from Mashan, I want to emphasise this important point that progressive individualisation and the maintenance of tradition are not necessarily contradictory. Indeed, in respect of *qiaofang*, the latter may actually be a strategy for facilitating the former.

In contrast with *qiaofang*, there is much less emphasis on ancestors in the names given to self-reliant houses. Villagers confirmed that self-reliant houses are named after people still alive at the time of house completion. The six husband-wife

combination names given to self-reliant houses referred to the conjugal couple who actually worked together to build the house. Wu Zetian (discussed in Chapter Six) remarked that this type of name indicated that the wife had significant status and power in the household. She criticised the suggestion that women's names should not form part of house names, saying such thinking was an example of "male chauvinism" (大男子主义).

Several villagers confirmed that ideally, if the parents were still alive upon the completion of the new house, then both of the parents' names or at least the father's name should be included. Uncle Wanxiu, who earlier in this chapter summarised the three advantages of new houses, named his new house after himself and his son. Interestingly, he commented that a house name containing a women's name indicated that it was the wife who ruled the house. In respect of another house with a father-son name, the son told me that he originally wanted to name the house after both his parents even though they had "only contributed 180 Yuan" to the new house, which had cost over 150, 000 Yuan to build. However, his parents disagreed with this plan and his wife agreed to his suggestion of a father-son name instead.

Self-reliant house names are mostly the product of a negotiation following family disputes or friction. A father in his eighties told me the story of the names of the two new houses that had each been individually funded by his two adult sons, who became successful as migrants in the city. Both houses contained the second character of the sons' given names (i.e., not the middle characters) and another Chinese character meaning "prosperity", which had positive connotations. The father had originally wanted a father-son house name, but his daughter-in-law had disagreed. She wished for a husband-wife house name, the suggestion of which led the father to express his displeasure to me. The father said he kept his anger in check and helped his two sons to come up with a good name for their houses: the sons' two names, each combined with the character "prosperity", thereby achieving a balance of exclusion and inclusion. After all, both the father and the wife can theoretically make a claim on the property of their respective son and husband. This individualistic way of naming is the result of the socio-economic

conflicts and compromise reached inside the family. This episode also echoes Freeman's argument that all kinship is about friction, "Fissure and fracture are an inherent part of all kin relations, and building houses is one manifestation of this" (Freeman, 2013:102). This differs from Carsten & Hugh-Jones (1995) who argue that the house is a locus of producing relatedness.

One house was named after a female *huaqiao* who helped the nephew of her natal family in Mashan. Another house was curiously named after the well-known phrase *chunhui* (春晖, literally, spring sunshine) taken from a classical Tang poem (see (Stafford, 2000: 151-152 for a full translation). When asked, the owner told me that it was solely financed by his daughter who married a Taiwanese businessman while working at the now notorious FoxConn factory in Shenzhen (Y. Pan, 2012). This unusual house name was suggested by the retired school master. Hinting at children's never-ending debt to their mother, it diplomatically avoided a female name. My point here is that even when a woman, here a married daughter, was the sole person responsible for funding the construction of a house, the house was still not named after her. The written, formal expression of women's power is still limited in public and less likely to be stabilised on a piece of a stone (on women's power, see Chapter Six).

Previously in this chapter, I introduced the important tension between new and old houses and their different materiality and functions. In this section, a second dichotomy of houses in Mashan has been introduced, which distinguishes between *qiaofang* (houses financed by overseas Chinese relatives) and self-reliant houses. I have discussed the additional complexity this adds to the values and meanings attached to houses in the village. Using data from Mashan, I have shown that the *qiaofang* houses are named with an emphasis on ancestor worship. Dependence on overseas connections should therefore be understood as a form of traditional collectivism. In contrast, the self-reliant house names only sometimes reference parents and never reference deceased ancestors. Nonetheless, ancestors of the self-reliant households may still be acknowledged by keeping tablets in the old house. While different resolutions may be achieved, households living in both *qiaofang*

and self-reliant houses are still caught in the tension between the collective and the individual household.

Whether *qiaofang* or self-reliant houses, in the process of naming they become linked to certain ancestors or a particular family, and they are consequently less likely to be converted into a commodity that can be bought or sold on the market. I heard of only one case in which a new house was sold to another villager. All *qiaofang* are named, but there are some self-reliant houses that remained unnamed. This namelessness creates space for ambiguity and flexibility about family structure and kinship relations. An unnamed house usually indicates some unresolved family conflict or dynamics. This is an issue I will return to discuss in more detail in Chapter Six, where I consider the example of Wu Zetian's unnamed house.

5. Conclusion

A senior villager told me that, in the past, the popular ambition of the earlier generations of *huaqiao*, who returned to the village in the pre-1949 era, was to “buy a paddy field and build a big house” (*maitian zuodawu*, 买田做大屋) in the village. As I introduced in Chapter One, the large-scale of the pre-1949 irrigation network in Mashan was the product of the collective efforts of overseas Mashanese. This kind of collective venture and the idea of “buying a paddy field” as the primary ambition of an individual fits well with the historical tension between the collective and individual highlighted by Bray (1986) and Santos and Donzelli (2009) in their analyses of the rice economy. What is evident from the ethnographic data I have presented in this chapter is that by 2007 no *huaqiao* or villagers who had become wealthy through migration would now buy paddy fields. Nonetheless, the ambition to build a new house remains strong.

This chapter has been particularly concerned with three aspects of new houses: the intimacy between the new and the old houses (*laowu*); the financing of new house-building; and that small, yet significant architectural feature on top of the house entrance –house names. In the introduction, I discussed Santos and Donzelli's (2009) research on the interaction between lower- and higher-level houses within

the rice economy and the tension between the collective and individual households that arises from this interaction. On the basis of my ethnography from Mashan, I would argue that even in a context in which the importance of rice to the economy has been largely reduced, a similar tension between the collective and individual household remains in relation to housing.

In this concluding section, I will make some additional points about intimacy, hierarchy and the social, political and economic context of housing in Mashan. There is *intimacy*, i.e. “a form of relatedness entailing material or virtual proximity” (Santos and Donzelli, 2009: 37), but also *hierarchy* among those who identify themselves as Mashan people. Despite their residence in old or new houses, villagers continue to be connected to their old ancestral halls: in this way they remain linked to their ancestors and (where they have them) to their overseas relatives. Yet it is recognised that those living in new houses occupy a higher standing in the village social-economic hierarchy than those left-behind in the old houses. To those living in *qiaofang*, intimacy is achieved—or forced upon villagers—through financial dependency on their overseas relatives. Thus this intimacy between *huaqiao* and locals has an element of economic and kinship hierarchy, as the overseas funders are invariably in the senior position in terms of economic power and generational or age rank.

Bray (2008;1997) highlights intimacy as part of the wider moral and political economy. She argues that when considering imperial China the public and the private domains cannot be easily delineated, “precisely because the house was not a separate, private domain, but formed a political and moral continuum with community and state” (1997:172). A similar argument can be made about houses in the contemporary context of a south China village like Mashan. In Mashan, house construction and associated discourses are entangled with ideas about the lineage community, the financial contribution made by *huaqiao*, and state policies towards housing and the acceptability of overseas aid.

Bray’s (1997) historical research on Chinese houses as a technology shaping and producing social relationships provides a useful perspective with which to understand the names given to houses in Mashan. Bray raises the key issue of

“how technologies contribute to producing people and relations between people” which requires us to “look at technology as a form of communication” (1997:3). House names can be considered as one of the “technologies of intimacy” that “mediate between structures of feeling and political economy” which in turn “encourages us to link the micro- and macro-politics of technology” (Bray 2008:163).

The different strategies employed to finance new houses, as well as the particular frictions present in a family, together give rise to specific house names. The names chosen will often reflect the fact that *qiaofang* usually link together two or three generations of adult villagers, whereas the self-reliant houses tend to be restricted to one couple and their children. By looking at houses and house names in this way, the distinct boundaries of intimacy for each particular family can be seen as embodied in the house itself and made public through the name that is inscribed on the new houses. Yet, it is important to remember that the scale and boundaries of intimacy of each household are not fixed even after the house name is inscribed on the stone, and hence remain vulnerable to conflicts within families and in the wider community.

Chapter Five: The Local Logic of Bitterness—A Vengeful Son's Return

1. Introduction

This chapter tells the personal and family history of a *huaqiao* named Dashan, and considers the role he was perceived to have played in the demolition of Leyuan (乐园, literally, the “Happiness Garden”). As described in Chapter Three, Leyuan was the office building for the village-based Elders’ Association (*Laoren Hui*, 老人会, hereafter LRH) and was therefore a public building of practical and symbolic significance to the lineage-village community. Its demolition in late 2005 resulted in a public controversy, which caused much damage to the locals’ transnational ties and affected the power of the elite lineage elders. Dashan, who was known locally as a “big *huaqiao*” (*da huaqiao*, 大华侨), indicating that he was a wealthy Overseas Chinese, was perceived by many to be the main culprit responsible for the demolition. Indeed, he remained at the centre of this controversy in 2006 and 2007, two years after the demolition, when I was conducting fieldwork in the village.

Dashan’s life was widely remarked to have undergone a transformation from his early experience of “eating bitterness” in China, when he endured great hardship, to his achievement of success and wealth as a result of overseas migration. In this chapter, I will consider the following three questions. Firstly, why does the theme of “eating bitterness” emerge repeatedly in local narratives of Dashan’s success? Secondly, how do the locals negotiate the multiple images of Dashan that were present after the contentious demolition of Leyuan? And, finally, how do people in the local community make ethical evaluations of him?

By identifying a prominent *huaqiao* as the main wrongdoer, the locals subverted the conventional image of *huaqiao* in their community. The usual images of *huaqiao* entrenched in official propaganda, museums, popular culture and in anthropological studies are dominated by patriotism and hometown loyalty, or the positive role *huaqiao* play in the revival of traditions in *qiaoxiang* (Brandtstadter, 2003; Siu, 1990). Oxfeld (2010:152-171) is one of the few authors to have noted

the existence of deeply ambivalent attitudes towards *huaqiao*. She recognises that contradictory images of overseas returnees can be found locally, with *huaqiao* variously viewed as kinsmen, foreigners and public benefactors (2010:154).

This chapter illustrates the changing relationship over the past four decades between a villager, who had become an affluent *huaqiao*, and his native-place community. The destruction of the Leyuan building had critical implications for Dashan's social and moral standing in the village. The locals' changing moral evaluation of Dashan raises the question of ethics and wealth: in destroying an important public building, Dashan's actions stand in opposition to the general expectations of *huaqiao* held by the local community in a *qiaoxiang*. The wealthy are expected to give something back to the community, not take something away (Anagnost, 1989).

The oral history of Dashan's life provides a case more extreme than the general ambivalence typical in Mashan towards wealthy returnees. It is possible to study the villagers' responses to his life-story as examples of "ordinary ethics" (Charles Stafford, 2013) in the context of a *qiaoxiang*. Borrowing and extending the notion of "ordinary ethics" proposed by Lambek (2010), Stafford emphasises the individual and the agentic side of a person's moral life. He also "highlight[s] the fact that *explicit* ethical reflection, *explicit* discussion of ethical matters, and *explicit* judgement and decision-making in relation to ethical demands are also 'ordinary' aspects of human life" (2013:5, my emphasis). In this chapter, I will show how the locals openly made moral assessments of Dashan and exchanged moral ideas with each other at home and abroad.

This chapter therefore examines the changing moral evaluation of a successful and influential *huaqiao*. The local understanding of the relationship between Dashan's individual suffering in the past, his subsequent success, and finally his wrongdoing in relation to Leyuan are worth noting. It involves issues of bitterness and success and how these are related to morality. Yan (2013:263) points out that "the drive for success" in contemporary China "makes its way into the core of being a moral person, i.e. the process of *zuoren*" (2013:265). *Zuoren* (做人) or 'being, making or

becoming a person' is an important Confucian concern (see Stafford, 1995:56-57; Wang, 2013: 29). Yan (2013) has analysed the logic of eating bitterness and its link to success with reference to a popular phrase in China: one who can eat bitterness can become “a person above other persons”²¹ (*ren shang ren*, 人上人, 2013:271). He rightly points out that in China the definition of success is measured by economic and political power. He stresses the element of hierarchy as expressed in the phrase “a person above other persons” in the Chinese idea of successful people.

Yan's points are important and helpful for understanding stories about the achievements of “big *huaqiao*”, such as those told about Dashan, who not so long ago suffered as a political and social outcast in the community. However, Yan pays insufficient attention to the flexible relationship between the notion of “eating bitterness” and the ethics of success. The local logic of bitterness and success, which is reflected in the stories told about Dashan, needs further elucidation. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the rhetoric of bitterness can be used flexibly to evaluate the ethics of successful people. Crucially, the experience of bitterness can be used to explain both people's success in life but also their ethical failures.

In order to make this argument, I begin, in the next section of the chapter, by giving an ethnographic account of the family and personal history of Dashan, as provided by villagers. Then, in the second section of the chapter, I examine how most locals came to the conclusion that Dashan should be blamed for the demolition of Leyuan, and how this involved a transformation in the values attributed by the villagers to Dashan's history of “eating bitterness”. Finally, at the end of the chapter, I return to consider the logic of “eating bitterness” found in popular narratives of success.

²¹ “吃得苦中苦，方为人上人。”

2. The biography of a “big *huaqiao*” Dashan

Dashan’s father was overseas at the time of the Land Reform [around 1952]. The political status or class label (*shenfen*, 身份) given to his family was that of a “landlord household” (*dizhu*, 地主). Because of this, he and his mother used to be “struggled against” (*dou*, 斗) in front of the villagers, along the main village road. But now he returns as a *huaqiao*. He’s got money and wants good *fengshui* [Chinese geomancy] for his house. He is taking his revenge (*baofu*, 报复) on Mashan.

With slight variations, similar biographical descriptions of Dashan, the “big *huaqiao*”, appeared repeatedly in locals’ accounts of the demolition of Leyuan. The villagers portrayed Dashan as someone who used to have a harsh life, emigrated overseas and then became a wealthy and successful returnee. Two contrasting themes were stressed: firstly, the humiliation he and his family had endured in the past, when they had “eaten plenty of bitterness”; and secondly, his wealth and influence in the present.

Here, it is important to note that “eating bitterness” is considered to be a virtue and this idea is embodied and communicated in daily life. “Eating” here can have both literal and symbolic meanings. A popular saying used to teach children to endure hardship goes, “Even though it is bitter you should eat bitter melon; even though it is sweet you should spit out the sugar cane! (*kuguaku tunxia du, ganzhitian tuchu zui*, 苦瓜苦吞下肚，甘蔗甜吐出嘴)” A whole range of bitter-tasting foods can be found in local cuisine besides bitter melon: for instance, bitter bamboo shoots and bitter tea leaves. Another commonly used saying goes “Effective medicine tastes bitter; Good advice is unpleasant to the ears” (*kukouliangyao, zhongyanni’er*, 苦口良药，忠言逆耳). Bitter things, in contrast to the sweet, are believed to be particularly beneficial to one’s physical health and mental strength.

It is worth noting that the local aesthetics of “eating bitterness” and of suffering exhibit strong parallels with the narrative of past humiliation of the Chinese nation as a whole (Callahan, 2004; Cohen, 2003:148-184). Strikingly similar to the local narrative of success, the national narrative describes how the “Chinese nation” will rise one day from the past humiliation bestowed by the West towards a future of

revival and dominance. As I will demonstrate below, the ability to eat bitterness is believed to be a necessary condition for success.

Dashan would seem to fit perfectly the profile of someone who becomes “a person above other persons” after, or as a consequence of, eating much bitterness. The accounts of Dashan’s life primarily illustrate a dramatic rise in the political and economic status of Dashan and his family in the village over the past five decades. However, this status as “a person above other persons” is not easily reconciled with the criticism aimed at Dashan as a result of his involvement with the destruction of Leyuan. As I have argued in Chapter Three, the demolition of Leyuan proved to be a critical dispute straining the relationship between the villagers and the village’s Overseas Chinese community, which had funded the construction of the building. This in turn had severe consequences for the flow of resources into the village, and the majority of villagers primarily blamed Dashan for both the destruction of the building and the loss of resources.

The realities of Dashan’s individual and family history were seen as the most significant factor explaining his motives for the destruction of Leyuan. Villagers went to some effort to bring up the history of Dashan’s family and the local area when judging Dashan’s recent behaviour. In fact, Dashan’s personal and family past in the village might not have come up at all during my fieldwork had Leyuan not been demolished in November 2005. When I arrived at the village at the end of 2006, about one year after the demolition, I was initially only told about the demolition itself. Only later, when villagers began gradually to trust me did I learn about Dashan’s past. It was in their attempts to make sense of the loss of the focal marker that Leyuan had provided that the villagers repeatedly brought up Dashan’s story.

The local oral history of Dashan and his family, which I describe in detail below, was not constructed in a social vacuum. The villagers’ recollections of the events were directly stimulated by the demolition of Leyuan and by Dashan’s perceived involvement in this event. When discussing the transmission of knowledge of the 1958-61 Famine caused by the Great Leap Forward, Feuchtwang (2013:224) suggests that “everyday judgements of action and everyday actions themselves are

historically saturated”. The various judgements occasioned by the demolition of Leyuan were also “historically saturated” in the way Feuchtwang (2013) describes: when making moral judgements about Dashan, villagers dug up his individual and family past. Similarly, Oxfeld (2010) observes in another village in Guangdong Province, that “in sorting out claims and counterclaims to property, people inevitably invoked their past history with each other as well as their ideas about obligation and memory” (2010:187).

It is important to note that the account of Dashan’s life below is based on what villagers have told me. Obviously, there may be many reasons why individuals would see him, or wish to present him in a bad light (e.g. jealousy, personal gripes from the past, etc.). However, my interest here is not in portraying him as good or bad, but in talking about (1) the complex histories through which people end up being “powerful *huaqiao*”; (2) the ambivalent reactions local people can have when such “powerful *huaqiao*” return to their places of origin and have a significant impact on these relatively small, close-knit, rural communities.

A landlord’s son who used to eat bitterness

Dashan used to be a political and social outcast, having led a harsh life before 1978. Locals stressed Dashan’s past identity as a *dizhu erzi* (地主儿子, a landlord’s son) and contrasted this with his present status as *huaqiao*. Both these categories had been politically and socially stigmatised after the 1950s, but the latter was dramatically transformed into a favourable category starting from the late 1970s (see Chapter One). During the 1952 Chinese Communist Party Land Reform, Dashan’s village-based mother was given the bad-class label “landlord”. Dashan was the younger son of his father’s third wife (multiple marriages being an indicator of his father’s wealth). The “landlord” label was the worst of the five class categories²² (Unger, 1984) that households could receive from a Land Reform work team. Families who received this label had their houses and other assets, including furniture and rice stock, confiscated and reallocated to other households.

²² The five categories were employed to label households of different political-economic standing. The five categories were hired labourer, poor peasant, middle peasant, rich peasant and landlord.

When recounting Dashan's family history, villagers stressed how this class label had resulted in the family suffering terrible misfortune. This included the violent, "bad death" of Dashan's father, which in turn left his young, widowed mother to look after her young children by herself. As many villagers over sixty recalled, Dashan's father was a "water guest" (*shuikē*, 水客, equivalent to a sea-crossing postman),²³ travelling between Nanyang and the village. It was said that he died overseas, vomiting blood in fury at receiving letters from the Land Reform work team²⁴ demanding extra money. The work team claimed there was insufficient "fruit rice" (*guoshi mi*, 果实米) to be shared with the poor and asked for more from him.

In their accounts, villagers and former classmates always noted those times in the past when Dashan had "suffered bitterness" (*shouku*, 受苦). Like others in China falling under the category of the "five black elements" (黑五类),²⁵ Dashan and his family suffered from political persecution, economic deprivation and social discrimination during most of Mao's era in power (1949-1978). Indeed, the label "landlord" was hereditary until the early 1980s, so this discrimination was suffered by multiple generations of families, including those born after 1949.

Many stories were told of the disadvantages Dashan and his family had endured during his youth. The director of the Elders' Association (LRH) in 2008, who was a former secondary school classmate of Dashan, remembered how Dashan's marriage prospects were deemed ill-fated. "We all said he had little chance of marrying the girl he liked," he recalled. This confirms Jonathan Unger's (1984:139) observation that "bad class elements", including the sons and grandsons of former landlords, were among the least desirable marriage partners in China at that time. Dashan's widowed mother was subject to political "struggles" in various political movements during this period. A story circulated that, as a teenager, Dashan had

²³ *Shuikē* literally means "water guest(s)". It describes people whose work involved travelling between home and overseas to bring goods, money and letters for migrants and their families.

²⁴ For further details on the official overseas letter writing campaign in the People's Republic of China, see Peterson (2012:28-36)

²⁵ The five black elements (*heiwulei*, 黑五类) refers to the five groups of people identified by the Communist Party as politically unclean: landlords, rich peasants, anti-revolutionary elements, generally bad elements and rightists.

asked to take his mother's place when she was going to be bound up with ropes in one of the public struggle sessions. Like other children who had overseas connections, Dashan was institutionally banned from the three ladders of social mobility: pursuing schooling beyond junior high school (let alone university), joining the army, and seeking employment in the public sector. Another frequently invoked image of Dashan was that of him as a teenager dragging a heavily-loaded, three-wheeled wooden cart along the steep mountain path north of the village.

Dashan's life changed when he seized the opportunity to leave for Hong Kong. In 1979, he and his family were the first to leave the village after the relaxation of government policy on emigration, which allowed those who had direct overseas relations alive to emigrate. Moving to Hong Kong, Dashan's family left the "landlord" label behind them. The departure was the vital step towards his ensuing wealth, but it did not come easily. Stories circulated that Dashan and his brother had worked extremely hard after moving to Hong Kong and that they and their family of more than ten members had lived in the same crowded flat during their first few years in Hong Kong.

Dashan's personal and family suffering is just one part of the village and national histories of suffering in Mao's time. Many other villagers also led a difficult life of deprivation during this period, but the suffering of no other villager has received the overwhelming public attention and discussion that Dashan's has. Why, then, did the "bitterness" that Dashan previously "ate" become the focus of so much attention in Mashan in 2006 and 2007? Below, I will argue that the attention given to Dashan's past suffering is largely related to his relative wealth and his perceived influence in the local area, in particular in relation to the contested demolition of Leyuan in 2005.

Returning in glory

Dashan's return to the village after the mid-1980s is regularly described as a case of him "rising head and shoulders above others" (*churen toudi*, 出人头地). This is a common phrase used to refer to those who experience a transformation from past humiliation to present success. Yan (2013:272) is right to suggest that individual

success is primarily defined by one's wealth and political power in contemporary China. He also proposes that "the new role model of successful people... negated the traditional ethic of glorifying one's ancestors. (2013:271)" But as I will show later in this chapter, and as I previously argued in Chapters Three and Four, this is not necessarily true. At least in this *qiaoxiang*, a major way to display individual wealth is via donations to public projects including ancestral-related ones such as renovating ancestral halls, ancestral rituals and ancestral trusts. This is precisely because the wealth and power of *huaqiao* are sited elsewhere, outside of the village.

Before continuing with my account of the dramatic transformation in Dashan's personal and family fortune that took place in the 1980s and 1990s, it is necessary to explain that this took place against the background of a major restructuring of the political economy at both national and regional levels. The policy relaxation which allowed the departure of people like Dashan came hand-in-hand with a series of policies encouraging the return of Overseas Chinese. Both were part and parcel of the "reform and open-door" scheme launched by the central government after 1978, which was aimed at achieving a market-oriented and modernised economy. As a result of these policies, the values attached to *huaqiao* as a political-economic category changed. The political status of *huaqiao* was greatly enhanced, as they went from being stigmatised as "state enemies" to being viewed as potential investors in the new Chinese economy. Anyone wearing the label of *huaqiao* became highly valued by the state agents at all levels of government (see Chapter One) as well as by their family members who remained in China.

The transformation in Dashan's personal and family fortune took place in a context of changing political attitudes towards *huaqiao*, which had important implications for *qiaoxiang* like Mashan. In response to the new preferential state policy introduced from the late 1970s, individual *huaqiao*, with origins in Mashan, began tentatively to return. However, it was not until May 1984 that a group of *huaqiao* made the first "organised, large-scale group visit to their home village" (*zutuan huixiang*, 组团回乡). A total of over 80 *huaqiao* flew back from Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong and to join this organised visit to Mashan. Accounts and photos of this visit abound in both the memoranda of the village school history and

the local periodical, *The Voice of Mashan*²⁶. The main purpose of this 1984 visit was to celebrate the completion of a two-storey school building containing 16 classrooms, each of which was named after those *huaqiao* benefactors whose individual donations reached or exceeded 8,000 Yuan (about £750 in the early 1980s). The building was the very first collective endeavour by overseas Zhang lineage members in the reform era, when overseas financial aid again started to flow back to the village.

Although not one of the 16 chief donors and despite having only been away for six years, Dashan nevertheless joined this group of overseas Chinese, receiving an elaborate reception at the village entrance on his return (as described by Wisdom in the Prologue). It is not surprising that the officially staged reception for the group was a deliberately high-profile public event. Local government officials and village cadres carefully planned and staged the receptions to give *huaqiao* a joyful welcome. Senior villagers, students from the village school wearing their school uniform, school teachers, and a parade of villagers playing drums and gongs all lined up along the main road. Such visits are important local events, which create key moments, redefining and reinstating *huaqiao* as a category of prestige in Mashan and in the local area.

By joining this group of *huaqiao* on the visit to Mashan, Dashan dramatically elevated his status in the village. In just six years, he had transformed himself from a disadvantaged “landlord’s son” into a “glorious returnee”. Unlike Dashan, the majority of the returnees were long-term, established overseas residents coming home for the first time after three or four decades’ absence. Among them were the most prominent *huaqiao* leaders of the overseas Chinese communities linked to the village, such as the heads of the Overseas Chinese Associations for the Mashan Zhang lineage members residing in Singapore and Malaysia. This coincides with Murphy’s acute observation that migrants who return to rural areas “enjoy a de facto model status” (2002:137). The status attributed to this group is created by the local officials who offer both social-economic resources and political endorsement to some selected returnees.

²⁶ This is a periodical circulated among overseas Chinese of Zhang lineage members from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. It is written, edited and circulated by one single *huaqiao* in Malaysia.

Dashan's re-entry into the village as one of the official invitees to the reception for *huaqiao* thereby inaugurated his new image as a *huaqiao* officially entitled to "preferential treatment" in the local area. Being part of the prestigious "organised overseas group" was vital to villagers' re-reading of Dashan's life and image and their perception that Dashan and his family had achieved a new status.

Becoming a big huaqiao

After this first re-entry into the village as one of the illustrious "glorious returnees", Dashan continued to return to the village as a public benefactor, a lineage brother (*xiongdì zishū*, 兄弟梓叔) and as a foreign businessman. He gradually earned himself the name of a "virtuous *huaqiao*" (*qiaoxian*, 侨贤), a written term associated in the local discourse with the quality of loyalty to one's hometown.

Dashan responded to the fundraising appeals from elite village elders and other prominent *huaqiao*, contributing to almost all *huaqiao*-funded lineage and village projects as well as projects of public interest such as the launch of the village school, student scholarships and various ancestral trusts. His name appeared regularly in the public notices of thanks and the village-based Overseas Newsletter, which reserves a page for a list of donors' names.

Locals probably acknowledged Dashan as a "big *huaqiao*" after he provided all the funds for three public projects, which were named after Dashan and his family members and which feature prominently in the village landscape today. The locations of all three of these projects were strategically important: two were located near the village school in the centre of the village and the third near the branch ancestral hall where Dashan's family used to live. The prominent role of the family in funding these key projects was indicated by the carving of names of *Dashan*, his brother and his parents in large, gold characters on two pieces of shiny, black marble placed on or beside the funded projects. The Overseas Newsletter provided frequent publicity for these projects, providing a detailed record of the ongoing success of Dashan's return to Mashan and his rising status in the village. In the early 1990s, the three "big *huaqiao*" identified by the lineage elites were all

from the older generation and did not yet include Dashan. However, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, he was regularly referred to as a *huaqiao* leader (*qiaoling*, 侨领) on various public and formal occasions.

In 1988, Dashan financed the first set of streetlights in the village, which were dedicated to his once-humiliated mother. Placed on what was the only village street until the early 1990s, the streetlights were described as a symbol of “village modernisation”. This project received much publicity in the Overseas Newsletter and was listed as one of the highest accomplishments of the time by the recently established Mashan *Laoren Hui* (the Elders’ Association), which had mobilised the contribution from Dashan. In 1995, Dashan and his brother financed a basketball field to be named after their father. Upon its completion, it soon became a popular venue to hold sports competitions and occasionally also for showing movies. During my fieldwork, I passed this basketball field almost every day.

I also walked across Dashan Bridge on numerous occasions during my time in Mashan. The completion of this bridge, named after Dashan himself, was one of the five *huaqiao*-funded projects celebrated in a ribbon-cutting ceremony on the day of the Moon Festival in 1992 (the 15th day of the eighth month in the Chinese calendar). The ceremony was obviously the climax of the village’s celebrations of its strong overseas connections, as evidenced by the organised *huaqiao* visit that coincided with the occasion. The event was attended by county and town government officials, village cadres and the leaders of the Elders’ Association. The village Newsletter recorded that Dashan was one of the seven overseas recipients of an exclusive red-silk banner handed over by the village Party Secretary. Eight Chinese characters in gold were written on it saying “Enthusiasm for Public Service in One’s Hometown”²⁷.

In addition to his donations, Dashan’s role as a business investor was also highly valued by local government. Dashan was the only *huaqiao* of Mashan origin to

²⁷ “热心桑梓公益事业”. I saw one of these banners hanging on the wall of the house owned by a former Nationalist Army official who was an exile to Taiwan in the late 1940s and only returned temporarily in 1988.

have returned to set up businesses in the local county. In 1992, his family emigrated again, leaving Hong Kong for New Zealand. He returned in 2000 to operate as a “foreign businessman” (*waishang*, 外商), investing in the construction of a three-star, five-storey hotel complex. He also ran a factory producing handbags for export. The names of both the hotel and of the factory were a combination of the given names of Dashan and his wife. As a New Zealand passport holder, his business was endorsed as an “enterprise of foreign capital” (*waizi qiye*, 外资企业) in line with municipal and local government policies aimed at attracting foreign direct investment. These policies ensured that Dashan and his business enjoyed the exclusive “special preference” that will be discussed further in Chapter Seven. Several villagers spoke with awe about how the business premises owned by Dashan received particular protection from the local government and how even the county-level Industrial and Commercial Bureau was not allowed to investigate the sanitation provisions within.

Dashan’s ever-increasing political influence in Mashan and the local area is evidenced by the following two instances. A well-circulated story told how in 2004 a lineage member, who was also a village cadre, started the only restaurant in Mashan. He was bitter and angry about his failure to secure a share of the catering work for the 100-table banquet that was held for the village school’s centenary celebrations in October that year. Dashan’s restaurant, though located much further away outside of the village in the county seat, was awarded the entire contract. Several villagers remarked that Dashan’s business monopoly mainly came from his strong connection with the village Party Secretary. The second instance relates to a dispute about *fengshui* (风水, Chinese geomancy) that took place in 2008 between Dashan and another Mashan local who had left the village and become a millionaire in Shenzhen. In order to threaten the village Party Secretary and prevent him from favouring his opponent, Dashan quoted the local government policy of “protecting *huaqiaos*’ special interests”. Allegedly, Dashan told the Party Secretary, “I am now speaking to you not as a lineage brother, but as a *huaqiao*.” Caught between these two wealthy Mashan absentees, the village Party Secretary was left with no choice but to avoid any involvement in the dispute.

Dashan obviously went to more effort to win official recognition and build connections with the local government than the *huaqiao* of earlier generations, who left China before 1949. This was partially because of his local businesses. The donations from the older-generation of *huaqiao* rarely went towards projects outside Mashan. In contrast, Dashan's public contributions and investments extended beyond the village boundary. Besides his hotel and factory, a pavilion funded by and named after him stands in the park at the centre of the county seat. It was not clear to what extent his past humiliation might have made him strive harder than other *huaqiao* for official endorsement, but it was clear to villagers that he wanted to overcome the humiliations of the past.

Villagers viewed Dashan's investment in the three projects (the streetlights, the basketball field and the bridge) as efforts to bring credit to his parents and himself, all of whom had previously been on the lowest rung of village society. In the reports published in the Overseas Newsletter, the lineage's educated elite never failed to employ traditional *chengyu* (成语, fixed expressions of a literary and poetic nature) to praise Dashan for his moral virtues such as filial piety and native-place loyalty. However, most villagers unanimously employed the local, colloquial phrase "fighting for a breath" (*zheng kouqi*, 争口气) to understand his investments. This phrase implied that one was striving to improve one's status following personal and family disgrace in the past. By adopting the popular local mechanism of making philanthropic contributions to the village community, Dashan worked hard to reinstate himself and his family as successful and respectable people in the village, even though they were no longer local residents. All three projects enjoyed a high degree of visibility in the village. Their physical presence was a constant reminder of his personal and family wealth, which he converted into social capital.

3. Mixed feelings about Dashan's rise

The response of villagers to Dashan's rise was mixed. On the one hand, many acknowledged that Dashan had successfully transformed himself from a former landlord's son into a *huaqiao* and a community leader. After he opened his local business in the late 1990s, he became more noticeably involved in the public affairs of the village than other *huaqiao*. His participation as a community leader

was substantial. He made use of his economic resources, his knowledge of home and overseas, and various other skills and resources. For instance, his English language skills and his overseas contacts enabled him to lead the fundraising team that travelled overseas between 2001 and 2002 seeking financial sponsorship for the new village school building. The team consisted of the former and the current village Party Secretaries and another village cadre. As the former Party Secretary of the village said, “Without Dashan, we wouldn’t have been able to raise so much money. He has a ‘hot’ heart (*rexin*, 热心, enthusiastic).” Dashan’s effort was recognised as indispensable for the successful collective fund-raising drive that raised a total of 1,500,000 Yuan (about £100,000 in 2005) for a school building project. The retired school master commented that Dashan was probably one of the few lineage members who featured among both the hometown and the overseas elite groups.

On the other hand, many villagers were extremely conscious of and some were even cynical about Dashan’s transformed social, economic and political standing. Mr Cao, a man in his sixties from one of the smaller surname groups, started telling me about the “untrue reports” published in the Overseas Newsletter, which was always fulsome in its praises of *huaqiao* (the main targeted readers). He contrasted the different attitudes held by most of the Zhang lineage members towards Dashan before and after he made his fortune. In an ironic tone he said, “Before [in the 1960s], when he and his mother were struggled against on the street and they had all their hair removed they shouted loudly, ‘Down with Dashan!’ Now everyone can’t stop saying ‘great-great-great granduncle Dashan from New Zealand!’.” In this commentary, Mr Cao was not only acknowledging Dashan’s changed social status, but also evaluating his fellow villagers’ changing attitudes towards Dashan. Obviously he disapproved of those fellow villagers who had changed their attitude to Dashan so drastically in response to his changing fortunes.

The Standardised Bitterness-Success Narratives

I have told the story of how Dashan has risen, as a result of overseas emigration, from being a political-economic outcast before 1978 to become a successful *huaqiao* returnee and a locally well-known philanthropist and a foreign investor.

Through donations and investment, he saw to it that the presence of his personal and family wealth was clearly marked and felt in the village landscape.

My account of Dashan is the story of a “successful individual” or a “striving individual”. His story is just one example of a number of local narratives that link bitterness and success, with success being understood primarily as the accumulation of economic and political power (Yan 2013). These narratives are used to describe and understand the experiences of wealthy and successful male *huaqiao* who have made positive contributions to their home villages, for example, through public donations and investments. Such accounts can regularly be found in the periodicals distributed in the hometown and overseas communities, which include reports on successful *huaqiao* males written by village scholars or literati. It is interesting to note, however, that I never saw any stories about successful female *huaqiao* in the Overseas Newsletter.

Narratives of success were very popular with the general public, and continued to be told to children in the village. On a number of occasions, I heard parents or grandparents in their everyday conversation trying to educate their youngsters on the value of hard work by drawing on these stories and emphasising the links between present success and past bitterness.

In fact, the structure of both the elite, written narratives and the popular, oral narratives of success are fairly standardised. Two principal characteristics should be noted. The first is that bitterness in the past is invariably recounted as an important and positive factor leading to future success. As with Dashan, these narratives tell the trajectory of the villagers who have risen from poverty-stricken childhoods to become wealthy *huaqiao* today, or how villagers who had left in poverty had later returned in glory. Stories about these “big *huaqiao*” or similarly successful rural-to-urban migrants from Mashan are always about people who “started from scratch”, “left with two empty hands” or “built up their fortune with nothing but the ragged clothes they wore”.

In these accounts, the departure from one’s parents and native place is portrayed as the undesirable but necessary first step towards one’s future prosperity. The four-

character phrase “*beijing lixiang*” (背井离乡, literally, to leave behind the well and one’s native place) is frequently employed to illustrate the migrant’s act of leaving. A well (*jing*, 井) is the source of water, the resource that has nourished the person from birth. By illustrating the fact that migrants have had to leave this valuable source of subsistence, the phrase “*beijing lixiang*” carries the connotation of unwillingness, frustration and bitterness. It also implies that the absentee is obligated to end this separation one day by returning.

The second characteristic of the narratives is that successful individuals’ past bitterness and hardship are depicted as becoming their symbolic capital in the present. Contained in the biographies of several “big *huaqiao*” is the message that the more bitterness someone has eaten, the more moral a person he (as it is almost always a male) has become and the more successful he or she will be. Recognition of an individual’s ability to “eat bitterness and endure hardship” (*chiku nailao*, 吃苦耐劳) is a critical part of the homage given to those who are wealthy and successful, i.e. those who no longer suffer poverty. As Soothil (2010) documents in her study of Overseas Chinese in Madrid (Spain), the ability to eat bitterness is highly valued as a “cultural strategy” (2010:3) by the Chinese migrant parents who try to educate their children to develop, and not to lose, this ability so that they can secure a prosperous future in Spain or China.

In this section, I have demonstrated how the basic storyline of the accounts of Dashan’s life is one of striving for success from a past of bitterness. I have argued that similar narratives are frequently encountered in accounts of successful migrants. In the next section, however, I will show how this narrative linking bitterness to success was only half of Dashan’s story: villagers also describe how Dashan’s past experience of bitterness was linked to his quest for revenge in the present.

4. Bitterness and Revenge

In this section, I describe the ways in which villagers understand and morally evaluate Dashan’s involvement in the demolition of the Leyuan building. The narratives of the villagers reveal the conflicting morality of eating bitterness, in

which sometimes bitterness is to be avoided and escaped, while at other times it is to be embraced. Villagers are therefore able to be flexible when interpreting an individual's experience of eating bitterness: it may lead to success, but alternatively it may lead one to take revenge on the community of one's hometown.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the Leyuan building, funded by donations from *huaqiao*, was supposed to provide a permanent clubhouse for the Elders' Association (LRH) of the village. The building was a key site with multiple layers of significance to the LRH Committee, villagers over the age of sixty, and the Zhang lineage as a whole including their overseas brethren. It was the most significant site of public life and public space in the village. The majority of villagers and Mashanese overseas community opposed its demolition.

Below, I provide an account of Dashan's perceived involvement in the demolition of Leyuan in 2005, which resulted in many villagers reinterpreting his past experience of bitterness and current success. Using the villagers' narratives and some written documents, I reconstruct how the demolition of Leyuan happened and how Dashan, who had previously been viewed as a "virtuous *huaqiao* and lineage member" and an "honourable citizen", came to be judged as the key wrongdoer responsible for the demolition. Not surprisingly, Dashan's image of being a "big *huaqiao*" and his status as a community leader were severely undermined. Following my account of these events, I will return to discuss the local logic of eating bitterness.

Dashan's involvement in the demolition of the Leyuan building

The key role attributed to Dashan in the demolition of the Leyuan building is perhaps ironic, because in 1994 he contributed to the construction of the building. According to the records, Dashan had contributed 500 Yuan towards its construction. However, this contribution was relatively minor when compared to the biggest private donation of 17,200 Yuan or the 48 other *huaqiao*, who each contributed more than 1,000 Yuan. Indeed, Dashan's name, clustered together with others in the section of "500 Yuan donors", was in a relatively low position in the hierarchical arrangement of donors names, organised according to the sums they had each donated.

Despite contributing to its construction, according to the villagers, including his few defenders, Dashan was intimately involved in the process leading to the demolition of Leyuan. Many villagers claimed Dashan bribed the LRH Committee members whose opinion carried weight. One of the committee members admitted that, on the day of the ad hoc meeting (also see Chapter Three) to discuss the demolition of Leyuan, all the Committee members who were then present in the village²⁸ were invited to a banquet at Dashan's restaurant in the county seat. The former and current village Party Secretary, as well as the village director, were also there. After the lunch, each was given a red envelope (*hongbao*, 红包)²⁹, which can be something between a gift and a bribe. Then, when all of them returned to the village, they held the meeting, "voting" by raising their hands to decide the fate of Leyuan. All but one raised their hands as a sign of their agreement. After the meeting, they opened the red envelopes only to discover that each envelope contained "just five Yuan inside".

Dashan was reported to have been proactive in removing a second major obstacle to the demolition of Leyuan: the need to find a replacement office building for the LRH. Dashan supported a plan for a school building to be converted for use by the LRH. The school building in question was the block of classrooms which, as described earlier in this chapter, had originally been funded by *huaqiao* from Mashan and the completion of which was celebrated during the organised return visit of *huaqiao* to the village in 1984.

Officially, it was the principal of the village primary school, Mr Lan, who managed the block. Without Mr Lan's formal agreement, this school building would not have been secured as the new venue for the LRH and consequently the destruction of the Leyuan building could not have been justified. In order to secure his agreement, Dashan was allegedly aggressive towards Mr Lan. Though living in Mashan, Mr Lan was not a member of the Zhang lineage and Dashan used this fact to pressurise Mr Lan into giving his consent for the LRH to use the building. Dashan told him, "You are an outsider! You don't have any say over the affairs of

²⁸ The chief editor of the Overseas Newsletter was away in Shenzhen at the time.

²⁹ See Stafford (1995:85) for the ambiguity of money in a red envelope.

the Zhang lineage.” Mr Lan was hesitant but felt he had no choice but to agree in the end.

Villagers who recounted this episode were obviously sympathetic towards Mr Lan, commenting that he was afraid of offending a powerful *huaqiao* like Dashan, who was also a benefactor to the school. The Leyuan accountant remarked that Mr Lan was actually not in a position to agree to Dashan’s demands, because the school building was registered as the property of the County Education Bureau and therefore did not belong to the village school.

This episode illustrates that Dashan could use his membership of the Zhang lineage to pose as an “insider”, which added to his influence as a *huaqiao* benefactor. He skilfully manipulated lineage discourse, distinguishing “insiders” from “outsiders” in Mashan, in order to achieve his aims. His interference was deemed to be the driving force behind the demolition.

The laying of blame: the revenge of a huaqiao?

In this section, I explore how the villagers made sense of this disruptive event by integrating and interpreting the personal, family and local histories with which they were familiar. I discuss the intriguing process by which the locals came to ascribe blame over the loss of the Leyuan building. As a wealthy overseas returnee, Dashan was expected to make positive contributions to the prosperity of the local community, but in this case what he had done was viewed as doing the opposite. He was understood to be taking revenge on his native place community.

With a couple of exceptions, the following statement was almost the standard response from villagers when asked about why they believed Dashan was the driving force behind the demolition of Leyuan: “Now he’s got money, of course he wants to pursue good *fengshui* for his house. He is taking revenge on Mashan where he once suffered a bitter life [by demolishing Leyuan]”. I was told the phrase “taking revenge” (*baofu*, 报复) was first used to describe Dashan when it was blurted out by a woman in her mid-sixties after the last annual gathering of LRH members held at the Leyuan before its destruction. The notion of Dashan

“taking revenge” on his own home village was instantly accepted by disenfranchised villagers and was the phrase was repeated frequently. Interestingly, the first Chinese character *bao* (报) in the word “revenge” is the same as the character used in the words for “return” and “reciprocity” (*huibao*, 回报 and *bao'en*, 报恩). Here *baofu* (revenge) refers to Dashan’s “negative reciprocity”, i.e., taking revenge for the bitterness he used to eat.

Locals pursued two lines of reasoning in accusing Dashan of taking revenge against the village community. The first of these was based on his family history and current power, while the second was linked to the discourse of *fengshui* (Chinese geomancy), and in particular the way in which the position of one’s house and ancestral tombs were cosmologically linked to the fortune of the household and descendants³⁰. I consider these in more detail below.

First, most villagers stressed the drastic transformation of Dashan’s personal and family fortunes to justify their ascription of blame to Dashan. Grandma Wa, an old woman in her early eighties, tried to convince me that Dashan was the person to blame for the loss of Leyuan. Her evidence was the “gifts” given by Dashan to a villager who had been the ringleader in the “political struggle meetings” during which Dashan and his family were humiliated. In an established *qiaoxiang* like Mashan, the three gifts expected from a visiting *huaqiao* should be a packet of biscuits, a pack of dry noodles and a facial towel. However, according to Grandma Wa’s narrative, on his first return visit, the three “gifts” Dashan offered to this villager were a pair of shoes, a handkerchief and a facial towel. Grandma Wa explained, “The shoes were to be used to beat that person’s face, the handkerchief to adsorb his tears, and the facial towel to clean it afterwards!” Dashan’s message was clear: “You used to ‘struggle’ against me, but now I am prosperous, while you still own nothing”. Then she went on to remark in a low voice and with obvious disapproval that in relation to the demolition of Leyuan, “Dashan has the final say on everything. Even the village cadres have to bow to him.”

³⁰ See Feuchtwang (1974) for a detailed analysis of *fengshui*.

Dashan's political power, both within the village and beyond its boundary in the local area, was viewed with certainty as evidence of his ability to arrange the destruction of Leyuan. In this context, frequent reference was made to his close alliance with the local government officials and village cadres.

The high social status Dashan had achieved was demonstrated by the fact that he was the only person originating from Mashan to have been awarded the title of "Municipal Honorary Citizen" by the Municipal government, the administrative body one level higher than the county government. The achievement of this status, which was recorded on a red square plaque awarded to Dashan, was a major political endorsement of him as an investor and as a philanthropist, with only those *huaqiao* or foreign investors whose contributions had exceed one million Yuan (about £100,000) being eligible for this title. This policy aims to attract investment from outside by offering local social prestige in exchange for the finance brought by *huaqiao*. Certainly, at the time he received the title, the award marked the peak of Dashan's political and social life in the local area. He might never have expected that this achievement would be turned against him, facilitating the popular accusations made against him in relation the demolition of Leyuan, but this is indeed what later happened.

In the accounts they gave me, several senior villagers directly linked Dashan's status as a "Municipal Honorary Citizen" (市荣誉市民) to the demolition of Leyuan. They believed that the municipal-level honour had boosted Dashan's influence and hence his ability to orchestrate the demolition. Soon after he was awarded the title, a public parade was held in his honour. The parade marked another high-profile return to Mashan for Dashan. He walked along the main village street carrying the "Honourable Citizen's Certificate" in front of him, and he was followed by a group of villagers beating a large drum and gongs. At the time of my fieldwork, the certificate was still displayed on the wall of the ancestral hall of the lineage branch to which Dashan belongs.

A villager in his early eighties pointed out to me the colour photo of Dashan holding the certificate flanked by the municipal-level Party Secretary and the

municipal governor, which was printed on the front page of the Overseas Newsletter. The photo and the public parade were viewed as Dashan's efforts to play up his connection to powerful government figures in order to "intimidate and frighten" the villagers who disagreed with him. The timing of the LRH meeting held to decide the fate of Leyuan, described above, was believed to have been chosen to coincide closely with this parade. The local assumption was that only those with access to government power would have control over village affairs.

The village cadres who had access to the town and county governments were believed by most villagers to be in the service of Dashan. According to the announcement published in the Overseas Newsletter and the records of the LRH meeting, the village cadres echoed Dashan's key argument in favour of the removal of Leyuan. They repeated Dashan's claim that the aim of the demolition was "to improve the image and appearance of the village". This same phrase was to be found in the document issued by the town government endorsing the demolition. Dashan and his allies argued that Leyuan severely damaged the public image of the village, as it blocked the view from the highway of the prestigious new school building which had been built in the village with *huaqiao* funds.

Those who opposed the demolition were not convinced by this official line of argument. As was pointed out by an eighty-year old LRH committee member, who had much bureaucratic experience from his life-long work in a government sector, without a formal request from "some people inside the village", the town government would not have produced the document to intervene the village affairs. By "some people" he was referring to the village cadres who, according to locals, caved in to pressure from Dashan. The village cadres were identified as having benefitted financially from the renovation project which converted the school building into the new venue for LRH. Both the village Party Secretary and the village head involved their family members in the renovation. As locals cynically pointed out, the former village Party Secretary profited from the construction of Leyuan ten years ago, while the current Party Secretary profited from its destruction ten years later. In short, villagers believed these cadres had financial incentives to support Dashan.

The second line of reasoning that his fellow lineage members developed in order to place the blame on Dashan was related to the ideas and practice of *fengshui*. The popular belief of *fengshui* has been studied by many scholars (e.g. Brunn 2003, Feuchtwang 1974). The discourse and practice of *fengshui* was officially denounced and fiercely attacked as “feudal”, “backward” and incompatible with the state modernisation agenda during the 30 years of radical socialism. However, as Brunn’s (2003) study convincingly demonstrates, *fengshui* has enjoyed a revival in many rural areas and cities since the 1980s. This is certainly true in Mashan.

With the influx of cash from overseas and the emergence of opportunities for accumulating individual wealth in the market-oriented economy, many Mashan households enjoyed their new-found wealth. The most common expression of wealth is the construction of a new family house. As discussed in Chapter Four, a new house in the village is regarded as a key household status marker. Finding a location with good *fengshui* is an important part of building a new house, because *fengshui* is, in part, the art of situating houses for the living, as well as tombs for the dead, so that the living can benefit from the energy (*qi*, 气) flowing through the environment.

It is usual to employ a *fengshui* master to secure an advantageous site for one’s new house. With the number of new houses mushrooming in the village since the 1980s, funded by overseas relatives, villagers assumed that anyone who had made a fortune would intend to build a new house in his home village, usually on or near the site of his old house. The choice of location could, however, give rise to conflict. Feuchtwang (1998:52-54) observes that *fengshui* is regarded as a limited resource in certain locations, which can create competition as people search for success and the future prosperity of individuals, households and communities. As such it is a zero sum game: for one person to gain good *fengshui* usually means another’s loss.

Dashan’s desire to secure good *fengshui* for his planned new house, and hence future success and prosperity, was believed to be his motive in removing Leyuan. As a wealthy *huaqiao*, it seemed entirely reasonable to the villagers that Dashan

would want to build a new house in the village. Furthermore, the villagers recognised that according to the logic of *fengshui*, it was in Dashan's interest to secure a site with good *fengshui*. However, it seemed that there were problems with the site of the two-storey house, only a stone's throw away from the site of Leyuan, where Dashan's family used to live before he left the village in 1978. Several villagers confirmed that a couple of years before, in 2005, Dashan had hired a *fengshui* master from a faraway place to come to Mashan and examine this house and its surroundings. The master concluded that the rectangular structure of the Leyuan was like a coffin lying in front of his house. As such, it would have a very negative impact on the *fengshui* of Dashan's future house. From the villagers' perspective, this explained perfectly why he was actively involved in the destruction of the Leyuan: he wanted to gain good *fengshui* for his new house to safeguard his wealth and success.

Local tales abound to reinforce the association between wealth and *fengshui*. "Fengshui is only for the rich and powerful," said one senior villager, Uncle Jin (see Chapter Two), when commenting on a *fengshui* dispute in 2008 between Dashan and another migrant from Mashan who had made his fortune in Shenzhen. Another widespread comment regarding the connection between wealth and *fengshui* goes, "The richer one becomes, the more strongly one believes in *fengshui*". This is true in the sense that the wealthy tend to spend more on *fengshui* practice than the average villager. The wealthy may invite a *fengshui* master from outside at a much higher price than that of the local expert, as the one from outside is claimed to be more effective than the local one. The cost involved can be more than ten times higher, far beyond the budget of most villagers.

The small number of villagers who defended Dashan, mostly his close agnates and village-based nephews, also used the logic of *fengshui* to reason in his defence. To refute the charge against Dashan, one of his defenders, who was Uncle Jin's son, argued that another new house in the village was not on Dashan's agenda given that he already owned a number of houses in New Zealand, Hong Kong, Guangzhou and in the county seat. He also claimed that, as a filial son, Dashan would follow his mother's advice not to change the old house that he had inherited from his father.

This line of reasoning did not convince other villagers. Freedman (Freedman, 1971:5-15) points out that *fengshui* is about competitive and selfish gain. This meant that villagers saw Dashan's gain as resulting in a loss to the community. This loss was incurred in both literal and symbolic form: the demolition of Leyuan leading to a drastic drop in overseas remittances; while the use of the phrase "the bridge is broken" in response to the demolition evoked the consequent breakdown in relations between *huaqiao* and their home village. It is in this context that the accusation that Dashan was taking "revenge" on the whole community was readily accepted.

Dashan offended most villagers by bringing about the demolition of Leyuan, in the pursuit of his own interests. Dashan's past bitterness in the village and his vested interests in *fengshui* were subsequently interpreted as evidence of his motivation to take revenge against the people of the village, while his money and political power were seen as giving him the capacity to carry out the revenge. As a result of the demolition, locals also viewed Dashan's past financial donations from a different perspective. An angry mother, Wu Zetian (see Chapter Six) told me in the presence of several other villagers that she believed Dashan's donations to the village community over the previous decades were all part of his plan and preparation to ensure good *fengshui* for his house. According to her argument, Dashan's positive reciprocity made him such a powerful figure that no one would dare to voice any disagreement when he subsequently demanded changes in the village to secure good *fengshui* for his house.

Bitterness and moral failure

In this section, I have discussed the other half of the story told about Dashan: his bitterness towards the village and his perceived revenge on the lineage-village community. I have shown how his personal and family history of bitterness and success was conceived by most villagers to be intimately entangled with the demolition of a significant public building in the village. Villagers were convinced that Dashan was heavily implicated in the demolition of Leyuan, and that this had consequently led to a "broken bridge", i.e., the damaged transnational ties between Mashan and its overseas community. It was thought that he was taking revenge on

the village by deliberately harming the interests of the community. His success is therefore now viewed as non-reciprocal success: he has taken without giving back. Anagnost's (1989) analysis of wealth and morality discourse is relevant here, because my findings confirm that in the Chinese rural context, where a strong undercurrent of egalitarianism is present, the wealthy are expected to make reciprocal contributions to the community.

From my analysis of the accounts on Dashan's life, which I encountered in the village, it can be seen that there has been a significant change in the way that Dashan's experience of bitterness was evaluated. People often see bitterness as an essential ingredient for success. Yet bitterness can also account for moral failure. In the case of Dashan, his experience of bitterness went from having positive connotations prior to the demolition of Leyuan, to having negative connotations afterwards. Most villagers tended to see a clear and strong link between Dashan's past bitterness, his rapid rise in social-political status and his involvement in destroying the popular Leyuan building. They openly described Dashan as a selfish person who did not deserve respect even though he was successful in making money. In the eyes of most villagers, he was considered to be morally bankrupt.

5. Conclusion: The local logic of eating bitterness and the ethics of success

The idea that suffering or "eating bitterness" can lead to achievement is not a new idea in China. A well-known classic Chinese text by Mengzi (孟子), dating from about 1000 years ago, is still studied by school children today. It reads, "天将降大任于斯人也，必先苦其心志，劳其筋骨，饿其体肤": Before Providence bestows a great task on someone, he must first labour his mind and body, and starve.³¹ This paragraph is often quoted to encourage people to bear hardship. It is based on the logic that suffering in both a mental and a physical sense will lead to greater achievements in the future.

The idea that "eating bitterness" or enduring hardship is a virtue necessary for success is perhaps universal. However, I would argue that in contemporary China

³¹ My translation.

it is given greater emphasis as a result both of this long philosophical tradition but also because of the more recent campaigns of “speaking bitterness” (*suku*, 诉苦) organised by the Communist Party in the 1950s and 1960s.

These campaigns used the logic that past suffering would bring future rewards as a “technology” to encourage peasants to describe their past personal and family suffering (Guo and Sun 2012, see also Anagnost, 1997: 45-74). The intention was that by “remembering bitterness” (*yiku*, 忆苦) the Party would instil in the peasants the belief that, compared to the bitter past, they were now “having a sweet life” (*sitian*, 思甜) under the Chinese Communist Party regime. In this period, the more past bitterness one could talk about, the better the political status one might achieve, since past suffering was taken to indicate one’s level of poverty, which in turn determined one’s class label. These campaigns can be seen as a project of social engineering, transforming the relationship between the peasants and the Chinese Communist state, giving rise to new forms of identification, and “the construction of state power and the nation-state.” (Guo & Evans, 2012).

The “remembering bitterness” campaign, the well-known classical texts, and popular sayings, such as “the one who can eat the bitterest bitterness can become a person above other persons”, which was discussed at the beginning of the chapter, may together contribute to the popular narratives that link bitterness to success. The bitterness element in the narrative today is no longer as overtly political as in the era of high socialism. Indeed, the market-oriented economy has resulted in fierce competition for wealth and the aspiration to “get rich first” is actively encouraged by the Chinese state. Consequently, bitterness now mainly refers to the hardships that must be endured for the sake of economic achievement. However, as I have shown in this chapter, experiences of bitterness also raise questions about the ethical behaviour of individuals.

Dashan’s story is that of an individual striving for success (Yan, 2013). It is also a story of how the hometown community ethically evaluated and re-evaluated this successful individual. Yan has proposed the concept of “the striving individual” to understand the process of individualisation in Chinese society. According to Yan,

“the striving individual” is distinct from the concept of “the enterprising individual” which developed in the European context. Yan emphasises how Chinese individualism is characterised by “egoism” and a corresponding lack of civic duty in comparison with western individualism today (Yan 2003, 2013). The story of Dashan provides a clear example of these differences. He has eaten much bitterness in the past. He is wealthy and regarded as successful today. But his involvement in the demolition of Leyuan resulted in the villagers’ moral re-evaluation of him as a selfish person who used his political and economic influence to get what he wanted. He was no longer respected, as he was previously, as a virtuous *huaqiao*.

Three points can be drawn from this chapter regarding bitterness and success or failure. Firstly, bitterness may well contribute to success. In the locals’ narrative, “eating bitterness” is glorified. But only when a person has become wealthy and thereby successful does his or her story of bitterness enter the realm of public knowledge. The logic implied is that no matter how much bitterness you have eaten in the past, it was worthwhile as long as you have achieved success in the present. Past bitterness is evidence of the low position a person used to occupy and the justification for the high position occupied in the present. The more bitterness a person can talk about today, the harder and higher it shows he or she has climbed in the social-economic ladder. Thus having eaten bitterness is only a virtue if and when a person has become successful.

Other scholars have also noted this point that past bitterness only receives public attention and is only embraced by those who have endured it, once those individuals have achieved success. The Chinese historian Qin Hui (2012) studied the “intellectual youth” (*zhiqing*, 知青) who were sent down to the countryside to be “re-educated” by peasants in the 1960s and 1970s. He has found that only those who have returned to the city and became successful after the 1980s made efforts to ‘show off’ their past hardship in the countryside. In a similar vein, regarding the current understanding of the harsh experience of the 1958-1961 famine, one of Feuchtwang’s interviewees remarked that “Those who talk about [bitterness] are those who have become wealthy. Those who have not succeeded, do not”

(2013:230). Bitterness and eating bitterness is an essential part of the success narratives created in the local community. Bitterness becomes part of the decoration and virtues of successful individuals.

Secondly, bitterness is two-sided: it can be symbolic capital for one's success, and it can be one's reason for taking revenge. The contradictory tension is contained in the local use of the popular term "eating bitterness". Prior to the demolition of Leyuan, Dashan's history of "eating bitterness" was praised as being to his credit like that of other successful individuals. However, after the demolition, his history of enduring bitterness worked to his disadvantage: the contrast between his past bitterness and his success in the present was believed to have provided Dashan with the motivation to behave unethically and take revenge on the local community. Bitterness in the past is no longer regarded as symbolic capital in the present if people have consequently caused harm to the local community.

Thirdly, the way in which stories of bitterness are told and understood may depend very much on the structural position of the narrator. Johnston (2013:45-65) portrays very well how the children of peasant families hope to escape from the bitterness of life in the countryside through success in school and educational migration. In future, it may be that these children will achieve success and, like *huaqiao* from Mashan, embrace their past experiences of bitterness. In contrast, some *huaqiao* actually felt that their present overseas life was more "bitter" than that of local people. *Huaqiao* saw the locals leading an easy life playing Mah-jong, and commented that their overseas life is comparatively more bitter as they have to work very hard to earn their "sweat and blood money" (Oxfeld, 1993) and achieve success.

In this chapter, I have used the local oral history of a vengeful son who returned to the village in order to demonstrate how the conflicting meanings attributed to "eating bitterness" in the village. I have argued that past experience of "eating bitterness" may explain latter success and prosperity, but equally it may also be used to explain why people may be motivated to use their wealth and power to take revenge on the village community. In the following chapter, I introduce another

“striving individual”: a fierce, married-in woman. In contrast to Dashan, however, this woman has learned that sometimes it is necessary to hide one’s power.

Chapter Six: An “Actually Existing Matriarch”—A Village Woman Beyond the Family Threshold

1. Introduction

It was on my first evening in Mashan that I first heard Wisdom refer to her mother using the public nickname (*waihao*, 外号, literally, outside name) “Wu Zetian” (武则天). Though I had not expected it, Wisdom, a ten-year-old girl, was to be my companion for the first few months following my arrival in the village. She would come every evening to study Chinese essay writing with my landlord, Uncle Lai, who was a retired school teacher of Chinese and the chief editor of the village-based Overseas Newsletter (see Chapter Three). At 8:30pm every evening she would come to my room to practice English with me for 30 minutes and then stay overnight. I did not know this arrangement had been made prior to my arrival. Later, I learnt that Wisdom’s mother, Wu Zetian, had pestered Uncle Lai to assist in improving her daughter’s academic performance. Uncle Lai also believed this arrangement was a helpful means of pre-empting village gossip about the nature of our relationship, because there was no other regular female presence in his household.

Without needing much encouragement, Wisdom was happy to talk about her life as a grade five primary school student and her family. Her assertive manner, urban-style clothes and her fair skin indicated she probably came from a relatively well-to-do, rural family. She told me that the person she missed most was her maternal grandmother, who had brought her up in her mother’s natal village, which was situated about two hours’ away by motorbike from Mashan. She also said she disliked some of the “barbaric and bad-mannered” boys in her class, who came from a rival lineage in the local area and who sometimes bullied their English teacher until she broke down in tears.

In our first conversation, Wisdom mentioned that her mother was called Wu Zetian, the name of the only female emperor in Chinese history (this is discussed in more detail below), “because she is very sharp and fierce (*lihai*, 厉害) and when angry she is very ferocious (*xiong*, 凶).” Over the next few weeks, when we chatted

before or after our English session, Wisdom continued to tell me more about her mother. Wisdom was obviously observant and aware of her mother's dominant role at home. "Whether family affairs are big or small, my mother always makes the decisions, so everyone calls her Wu Zetian". Wisdom also talked about her father, but with evident disapproval, "If Mother was to go the local market town, my brother and I would have no rice to eat. My father doesn't care about us. He beats us sometimes and he gambles money away."

In the previous chapter, I wrote about the bitter/successful life-history of a vengeful son who returned to the village to elevate his personal and family status in the community after becoming a wealthy *huaqiao*. No longer living in the village, yet fostering his connections with the village, he was a powerful absent-insider. In this chapter, I will write about a married-in outsider, a powerful woman who consequently acquired the public nickname "Wu Zetian". Her marriage and family life have been critically influenced by the strong *huaqiao* connections reactivated and maintained by the families and the lineage-village community in Mashan. Wu Zetian dominated her household and, to some extent, the community's social and public life. By presenting the ethnographic story of this powerful woman's life inside and outside the domestic sphere, this chapter examines the general situation of women in the *qiaoxiang* community and, in particular, focuses on both the actual power women hold and the public presentation of this power in the community.

In a thought-provoking article titled, "Actually existing Chinese matriarchy", Stafford (2008) raises the question of the gap between, on the one hand, the cultural ideology of Chinese patriliney and patriarchal power and, on the other hand, the ethnographic reality of an "actually existing Chinese matriarchy" that he encountered in several of his fieldwork sites. He argues that matriarchy should be defined as:

a way of life in which considerable power and authority is vested in women (and in wives and mothers in particular), to the extent that they often "have the final say" over men, including in public discussions, while also often significantly dominating the emotional dispositions and outlook of their children (2009:149).

In another essay Stafford proposes the model of “the cycle of *yang*” (养, nurturing and caring in the child-parent relationship) and “the cycle of *laiwang*” (来往, coming and going, or the exchange between neighbours and friends) as two cycles that “coexist and partly merge with patriliney and affinity” (Stafford, 2000b:57). With this model, he questions previous models of Chinese kinship which viewed it as “an extreme and non-fluid version of patriliney: a male-dominated system of rigidly defined agnatic groups – and of women who have power only as disruptive outsiders” (2000: 56). In his book on separation and reunion (Stafford, 2000a: 122-126), where he elaborates on these two cycles, Stafford vividly captures the significant role of women in carrying out filial duties such as taking care of their husbands’ elderly parents. He argues that “a much more central and positively evaluated role for women in Chinese kinship exists” (2000:123). However, it is also important to note that throughout his discussion Stafford describes women’s power as “behind-the-scenes” (2000: 110-114, 126).

My fieldwork material about Wu Zetian prompts me to follow Stafford’s proposal to explore a case of “actually existing matriarchy”. Therefore, in this chapter, I provide a “thick description” of Wu Zetian’s life in the village, including her status and practice in the lineage-dominated *qiaoxiang* community in the late 1990s and early years of the 21st century. I will show that her story provides solid ethnographic support for Stafford’s speculation that “an actually existing matriarchy” can be found in China. However, I will argue that, contrary to Stafford’s suggestion, Wu Zetian’s power is often open and public in the community rather than “behind the scenes”, but at times she does conceal the extent of her own power. It is more complicated that either being ‘open’ or “behind the scenes”.

This chapter follows the anthropological approach of examining women’s practical role in rural areas. This is an approach which previously been pursued in China by anthropologists including Wolf (1972), Stafford (2003, 2009), Judd (1989) and Brandstädter (2009). The notion of women as “disruptive outsiders” threatening the order of lineage and patriarchy has been heavily criticised. In a challenge to the

classic lineage model, Wolf developed the “uterine family” model, which includes the mother and her children, particularly her sons (1972: 32-41). This “uterine family” within the patriarchal family lends power and security to the wife/mother. Wolf described “a successful woman” as usually being someone “who has outlived her mother-in-law and her husband” (1972:40-41).

In this chapter, I analyse the actions of Wu Zetian in both the domestic realm and the public life of the community, in order to examine two key issues about women in the countryside of South China, where lineage structure and ideology have historically been strong and have again been revitalised over the past three decades. Firstly, I want to examine how the community’s relations with *huaqiao* have affected the process of family union and divorce or separation. Secondly, I want to use my ethnography of this village matriarch to examine the extent to which it is necessary to go beyond the threshold of the domestic sphere and into the public sphere if we are to understand the power and influence that Chinese women have in contemporary rural China. By doing this, I hope to go further than those anthropologists who have conducted research on women, but primarily restricted this to the domestic realm by focusing, for example, on the kinship roles of women such as mothers (Bray 1997; Stafford, 1992; P. Sangren, 1983), on married-out daughters (Judd 1989), and on brides and daughter-in-laws (Yan, 2003).

2. A village woman with the public nickname “Wu Zetian”

The nickname “Wu Zetian” was taken from the name of the only female Chinese emperor in Chinese imperial history, who achieved this status during the Tang Dynasty (circa 700AD; Stafford 2009:140; Jay, 1992). She did not rule from “behind the curtain”, but openly in a way that challenged traditional gender roles. As Jay wrote, “[T]raditional Chinese historians have condemned her short rule as an anomaly, a gender reversal and a violation of nature comparable to having hens instead of roosters crowing at dawn” (Jay 1992:228, quoted in Stafford 2009: 140).

I begin my account by explaining how this woman might have acquired this extraordinary name, which confers on her a particular distinctiveness. I then proceed to describe her marriage and the way in which this was influenced by *huaqiao*, her unnamed house and her dominant role at home. Finally, I discuss her

involvement in ancestral worship and her political participation in village politics, i.e. her public life in the lineage-village.

The life-history of this impressive matriarch, which I present here, is constructed from accounts that I collected from Wu Zetian herself as well as her daughter, her mother, and other villagers. In addition, I use my own participant observation in the village to build up a portrait of Wu Zetian.

Throughout my stay in the village, I interacted with Wu Zetian and her family on an almost daily basis. I was helping Wisdom with her studies most evenings and heard her speak regularly about her mother. In addition, living in Uncle Lai's house, it was necessary to pass Wu Zetian's house to reach other parts of the village. For my first four weeks in the village, I passed by Wu Zetian's newly-built, one-storey concrete house on the main village road every day. During this time, I had glimpsed people playing Mah-jong at the house, but I did not meet Wu Zetian herself until the wedding day of the son of her husband's cousin. On this day, she took the initiative to approach me at a time when most villagers still remained suspicious about my presence as an outsider in their village. She was the first adult villager who opened up to me. I learnt her proper name and, coming from a younger generation, I addressed her as Auntie. Throughout my fieldwork, I never called her Wu Zetian myself; however, since the other villagers invariably referred to her as such, I employ this public nickname to tell her story here.

During the course of my fieldwork, I got to know Wu Zetian well. I regularly had tea in the room that served as her shop front and sitting room, and I occasionally had breakfast, lunch or supper at her kitchen table with her daughter, son and husband. Occasionally, I slept over at her house. At the end of my first year in the village, she generously offered me a copy of her house key, most probably without consulting her husband. A couple of times Wu Zetian and I went to the local county seat together on her motorbike, with her driving and me sitting behind as her passenger.

A lineage-dominated place

Mashan is the kind of farming community where anthropologists would generally assume that women have a low status. In examining women's varied status, both Stafford (2009) and Brandtstädter (2009) make rewarding comparisons between two different kinds of communities in China and Taiwan. Both agree that, in general, there is relative gender egalitarianism in fishing communities where agnatic kinship is expected to be relatively weak. This is in contrast with farming communities where land ownership is important and where women tend to have lower status.

Mashan certainly fits the category of a lineage-dominated farming community. In many ways, it is similar to the lineage-village complex described by Freedman (1965, 1971) and Watson (1975). However, despite this, Wu Zetian's status as a powerful woman in the village contradicts the conventional anthropological wisdom that women will not attain much power in a lineage-dominated farming community. This fact deserves notice and explanation. To this end, I provide some relevant details about Mashan village and the status of local women.

The proceeds from the paddy fields counted as the main source of domestic income in Mashan until about ten years ago. The rate of local marriage is relatively low. The lineage orientation and agnatic kinship ties remain strong (Stafford 1992: 377, fn 11). Households of the powerful Zhang lineage make up more than ninety-five percent of the local population in Mashan. The majority of the married-in women came from other villages, with a small, but increasing, number from other provinces as many young villagers meet their spouses in the urban factories where they worked.

Huaqiao have promoted lineage ideologies and funded the renovation of ancestral halls of various levels and the (re-)construction of collective ancestral tombs. Ancestral trusts for selected ancestors have been re-established and written genealogies have been updated. With these tangible revivals of lineage ideology and structure, the elite village elders' power has been restored (see Chapter Three). The competition with the rival lineage located upstream in the same valley, which

continued even during the Maoist era, reinforced local lineage identity (see Chapter One).

Against this background, in 2007, a memorial stone praising women's traditional virtues was reinstalled to its pre-1949 position in Mashan, along the former main road of the village. A four-character phrase, "Chastity, Filiality, Flowing Fragrance" (*zhenxiao liufang*, 贞孝流芳), is inscribed on the stone in literary Chinese. The phrase expounds female subordination to men. It was said the imperial state of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) bestowed the memorial stone on a young widow who never re-married. In one of the anti-traditionalist campaigns of the post-1949 period, the stone was criticised as a symbol of old tradition and was pulled down. It ended up forming part of the edge of a paddy field. Its 2007 re-installment was a result of the joint effort of the village elite elders, village cadres and another group of villagers. Uncle Lai claimed that this Memorial Stone was an object of Mashan culture.

The public presence of women in Mashan has seen a small increase over the past few decades. In the summer of 2007, I took part in a series of editorial meetings with three editors for the book, *Special Collection for the Centenary Celebrations of the School's History*, which was produced in the village. All three editors were senior, "cultured men". They discussed an essay comparing the names of the patrons which had been used for the two blocks of school classrooms completed in 1984 and 2005. Among the 35 classroom patrons from 1984 and the 47 patrons from 2005, there were just two and five women respectively. None of these women was a village resident. All but one of the female patrons were elderly and were honoured either as "virtuous mothers" or wives with successful sons or husbands. Over lunch, the three "cultured men" mentioned in a half-joking, half-lamenting manner, "Nowadays, as long as one has money, even women's names can be inscribed on the wall!(现在, 只要有钱, 女人的名字也可以上墙了)" They then went on to elaborate how strict the generation-based, patriarchal seniority rules had been before 1949.

Patrons to the village School building

Year	1984	2005
Female	2	5
Male	33	42
Total	35	47

Acquiring the public nickname

I was unable to determine how and when Wu Zetian acquired her unusual nickname. In her late thirties, she was a short woman of medium build. But arguably it came about as a result of her strong personality and actions within the village.

When prompted, Wu Zetian provided a vivid account of her direct confrontations with the village cadres that had taken place in public in the village. She described one event in particular detail. “A few years back, in order to broaden the provincial-level highway now cutting through the village,” she told me, “the government requisitioned some land registered to our production team, including some of my own household land. Monetary compensation was offered. The production team leader took the measurements and reported a half *mu*³² more than the actual amount of land taken from his household. Yet, he accused me of reporting a false figure, I responded, ‘You can eat the Communist Party. Why can’t I?’³³ [Here, ‘eating’ means to cheat the government out of its money]. The village director was called in to arbitrate. On arrival he said to me, ‘You are so greedy’. I retorted immediately, ‘And you’re *not* greedy? How did you become a village cadre?’ My words made him choke. He didn’t know how to respond.” In the end, like the other villagers, Wu Zetian got away with the extra reimbursement. Given that both the production team leader and the village director were male members of the same lineage as her husband, her outspoken and assertive manner were bold.

³² 亩: a Chinese unit of measurement, equivalent to 667 square metres.

³³ “你可以吃共产党。为什么我不可以？”

Another instance of Wu Zetian's public confrontation was more violent. She had a small shed built as a makeshift kitchen outside the shop which she had rented from the Elders' Association (see Chapter Three on the demolition of the Happiness Garden). She did good business there selling pork and groceries. Nobody questioned her for the first five years. Then came the plans for the expansion of the provincial highway. The village party secretary told her to flatten the shed but refused her any compensation. She furiously declared, "If anyone dares to demolish my kitchen, my butcher's knife will be waiting to serve them." In the end, it was Granduncle Zhenkun (see Chapters Two and Three), who at the time was the director of the Elders' Association Committee, who helped arbitrate and "led them along the public path to fairness" (*zhuchi gongdao*, 主持公道). Wu Zetian eventually received 200 Yuan as compensation.

Wu Zetian's opinions shaped some of the influential local discourses on certain issues. The delicate local management of the village's overseas connections was one such issue. Granduncle Zhenkun was one of the most senior lineage elders and he was widely-respected. He once expressed his concerns that, after the demolition of the Leyuan building, some villagers had told their overseas relatives to discontinue financial donations to public projects linked to the village or lineage. Later, I discovered that he was actually referring to Wu Zetian. Not only had she strongly advised her Taiwanese granduncle (whom I discuss in more detail below) against continuing his sponsorship to the village over the telephone, she also made sure to air her opinion on this issue in public. She voiced her anger at the demolition of Leyuan because she had lost the shop where she had run her business and where she had lived with her two children for five years. Given the widespread animosity against the demolition, Granduncle Zhenkun, the Committee director, feared Wu Zetian's attitude might be infectious. Though privately disapproving of Wu Zetian's remarks, he had to talk with her apologetically and seek reconciliation. For example, he deliberately came to buy some chicken from Wu Zetian at her morning meat stall, located in the front of her newly-built house, even though this was a long way from his own home.

Wu Zetian's widely-used public nickname suggested her female dominance at home and in the village community. It was not a kin term, which is how the villagers often address each other. It did not place her in the relational system connected to her husband's generation in the lineage. Every time Wu Zetian was addressed using this nickname, it temporarily raised her status above others. As Watson has observed, the choice of names is strategic, tactical and "highly contextual" (R. Watson 1986: 624). Wu Zetian sometimes played the game herself. The village party secretary once asked her to join the Communist Party in preparation to run in the future in the village elections. She replied, "I am already an emperor. I don't need to join the Party." The party secretary allegedly responded, "Even Jiang Zemin [then the General Party Secretary of the CCP Central Committee] needed to join the Party." Wu Zetian declined his offer.

3. Narratives of marriage into a *huaqiao*-connected household

Both Wu Zetian and her mother viewed *huaqiao* connections as a critical factor in her marriage into Mashan about 20 years ago. The following is based on Wu Zetian's account of her marriage, which she told to me in her sitting room when only the two of us were present, but the story was also confirmed later by her mother.

Wu Zetian's narrative of her marriage cannot be easily assigned to either one of the usual contrasting categories of romantic love and arranged marriage. She explained that, "Before, I had a boyfriend that I chose myself. I met him while doing odd jobs in Fuzhou [a city in the neighbouring province of Fujian]. We already planned to register our marriage. But his mother disapproved of the marriage seeing me as a peasant girl with no culture. In anger at this, I left him and returned home. Some matchmakers came and within two months I married my current husband. I was too impulsive. At the first introductory meeting, we saw their *huaqiao*-funded house and thought it was a decent family. But I already regretted it by the second meeting when 'examining the home and door'.³⁴ I saw he wasn't quite right.

³⁴ This meeting, called *Cha jiamen* (查家门), is an important part of the local marriage practice taking place between the first meeting and the wedding itself. The main purpose is to scrutinise the acceptability of the prospective groom's family.

Thinking they had already taken the groom's 'deposit'³⁵ [an agreement to the marriage], my parents strongly advised me not to change my mind. And I thought to myself: at least it was a family with *huaqiao* connections; the village was very flat and much bigger than my own; and that I would simply find someone else if this guy turned out to be really wrong.”

Their wedding in 1994 was reported in the “Briefings” section of the Overseas Newsletter ([1994]2005:46) mentioning the groom was the nephew of a Taiwanese *huaqiao*. The wedding banquet was held in the *huaqiao*-funded villa, which consisted of one sitting room and four bedrooms. It was reported with enthusiasm that this was one of the first “overseas-funded villas” in the early 1990s. The villa had been given the same name as the Taiwanese *huaqiao*'s restaurant in Taiwan.

Wu Zetian's marriage involved a cycle of “*yang*” (养, nurturance) (Stafford 2000) between her husband's grandmother and the Taiwanese *huaqiao*. Stafford stresses that the cycle of “*yang*” involves mutual support mostly within parent-child relationships. In 1989, when he was in his sixties, the Taiwanese *huaqiao*, Wu Zetian's husband's uncle, visited Mashan for the first time after 40 years' absence. Before he went to Taiwan with the Nationalist Party army in the 1940s, he had been raised by his aunt who later became the grandmother of Wu Zetian's husband. His reciprocity to this aunt finally came 40 years later when he returned as a wealthy businessman from Taiwan. However, as the aunt was by then long dead, he instead offered his deferred reciprocity to her living offspring, his nephew who would become Wu Zetian's husband. He built a villa and helped arrange for his nephew to marry Wu Zetian. Although Wu Zetian's husband and his uncle had no direct blood ties themselves, they are both now involved in a cycle of *yang*. Wu Zetian once commented on the subject of the benefits her family had gained from this *huaqiao* connection, describing how, “We are now actually eating [benefiting from the kind deeds of] the grandmother.”

As Oxfeld points out, since the 1980s *huaqiao* connections have become a valuable symbolic social asset as well as a source of financial support (2004:99-

³⁵ The marriage deposit (*dingjin*, 定金).

100). This kind of marriage in which a *huaqiao* connection plays a critical role is not a unique case. There were at least three other women who had married into such *huaqiao*-connected households.

4. The female household head inside and outside the home

Wisdom had told me how her mother was the decision maker on “family affairs, whether big or small”. But Wu Zetian’s power evidently was not confined to the domestic domain alone. As I have suggested above, Wu Zetian acquired her public nickname precisely due to her ferocity in dealing with the world outside the home. In this way, she transcended the assumed gendered dichotomy, which anthropologists have identified and developed, that links women to the inside/domestic sphere and men to the outside/public sphere. Both Brandtstädter (2009:160-162) and Sangren (2000:179-180) have applied this dichotomy in attempting to understand women in Taiwanese and Chinese contexts. Brandtstädter argues that:

‘work’ is the key element in the process of value formation in Chinese kinship, structured around a gendered dialectics of inside (*nei*) and outside (*wai*), that continues to influence the formation of kinship values in modern Taiwan and the People’s Republic (2009: 155).

Using another pair of Chinese terms *xiaoqi* (petty-minded, stingy, 小气) and *dafang* (generous, open-handed, 大方), Sangren (2000) argues that gender stereotypes continue to exist: women should be concerned with the small world inside the family, while men should be more concerned with the big issues connected with the outside world. But he notes that sometimes women’s productivity at home is transformed by men in order to demonstrate their generosity in the public domain (2000:185). In the Chinese context, the normative, traditional gendered roles continue to exist in which “Men take charge of the outside and women take charge of the inside” (*nanzhuwai, nuzhunei*, 男主外, 女主内).

Mobility and family business

Motivated by the wish to have a better livelihood, Wu Zetian tried her hand at several different small businesses. Her post-marital life trajectory was highly

mobile. According to Wu Zetian, by the time she married into the family, the Taiwanese *huaqiao*'s money had mostly been drained by another agnate of her husband (this is explained in more detail below). Apart from the *huaqiao*-funded villa on the North Mount, which she disliked, not much financial aid had actually come to her new household. Therefore, in order to raise money, she left her new-born daughter, Wisdom, in the care of her mother in her natal village and became a vegetable and fruit seller in the local towns for the next two years. Not achieving much success at this, she decided to return to Mashan and started a hairdressing business on a village side-street. Within a year, she started renting a shop from the Elders' Association, for 100 Yuan per month. In this shop, she ran a successful grocery business for five years until she lost the premises as a result of the demolition of Leyuan. During this time, Wisdom came back to attend school in Mashan. By 2006, Wu Zetian had managed to save enough money to consider building her new house along the village main road.

Wu Zetian was the decision-maker, planner and manager of the successful family poultry business. Though she had previously been accused of "having no culture", she was able to read and write and she was sufficiently numerate to do business. Her day started before five in the morning, when she would sell pork, duck, chicken and noodles in the shop front of her house. From this, she earned 20 to 30 Yuan each morning. She also organised the work of other family members. Her husband would use his motorbike to sell poultry in the surrounding villages during the day. Her husband's intellectually-handicapped brother would look after water buffalos. Her mother-in-law helped in looking after the poultry. She had one of her paddy fields converted into a cash-oriented fish pond, while in order to have more time for the family business, she rented out all the other paddy fields allocated to her household members. She rented them to a tobacco farmer during the spring and to another villager after summer and collected unhusked grain as rent, which provided part of the family diet.

Wu Zetian had a range of non-agricultural skills and was resourceful in using these to generate an income. As mentioned above, she had previously worked as a hairdresser and, in 2007, she had one third of her sitting room furnished as a basic hair salon. She sometimes acted as a midwife, though without a certificate. She

also was an occasional match-maker. Despite her own unhappy marriage, she successfully introduced two other local women to their Taiwanese husbands. I often saw her riding fast on her motorbike going between the village, the family poultry base, another poultry farmer and the local town. This situation is different from the village in Anhui Province where Johnston (2013) did his fieldwork and where he observed that women in general did not ride motorbikes.

Wu Zetian's two children, five and ten years old respectively, took the surname of their father, as local patrilineal naming practice dictated. However, it was Wu Zetian who picked their given names, Wisdom and Self-Reliance, expressing her wishes for their future. She showed great concern for their schooling and managed to get Uncle Lai to give private tuition to Wisdom. Given that her own marriage prospects had been hindered by her low educational achievements, she hoped that Wisdom would at least finish high school and would thereby avoid the accusation of "having no culture" that Wu Zetian had faced herself. Wu Zetian was already concerned about the educational achievements of her five-year-old son, Self-Reliance, who only learned to count from one to five after one year in the kindergarten.

A self-reliant house unnamed

The new, one-storey house built in 2006 probably played a significant role in consolidating Wu Zetian's position as the household head (*dangjiaren*, 当家人). The house had a shop front, a sitting room, a spacious modern kitchen, a bathroom and squat toilet, and three bedrooms at the rear. While many households had both a wood-burning stove and a gas cooker, she was one of the few who only used the latter, fitting a portable gas cylinder (*meiqiguan*, 煤气罐) containing 12kg of liquid gas to her cooker. These cylinders had to be purchased and transported from the market town at the cost of about 90 Yuan (£9) per tank in 2008. She did not have the traditional brick stove and did not set up a small shrine for the worship of the stove god (see Santos, 2009). In addition to an electric rice cooker, which was often found in village kitchens, she also had a microwave and actually used it. In contrast, in some homes, I saw that families used microwaves as a storage space or proudly displayed them in their sitting-rooms as modern appliances. Wu Zetian

also had a washing machine and a hot water shower in her bathroom, while in her bedroom, she had both a CD player and a TV. The flat roof of her new house was used to dry the daily laundry.

In several of our conversations, she initiated discussion about her house. She took great pride in the fact that she had planned and managed the construction of the house all by herself:

I do love face [i.e., I do want other people's respect] ... I want to have what other people have... Ever since I decided to live in Mashan, I cannot abide being lower than others³⁶... They cannot look down on me now that I have my own house on the main street.

She described building the house as her “ambition” (*xiongxin*, 雄心) which was directly triggered by the demolition of the Leyuan in 2005 (see Chapter Three). Wu Zetian disliked the family's *huaqiao*-funded villa, believing it was “too remote from the village centre and everybody else”, and claiming that “it's no good for doing business”, even though it was actually about five minutes' walk from where her new house stood. After the unexpected demolition of the Leyuan, she said she had nowhere to go. She told me she spent her evenings standing alone on the village bridge, smoking her way through at least 15 packs of cigarettes over that period, while thinking about the construction of her new house. It remains unusual for young rural woman to smoke, but Wu Zetian probably needed this habit in order to move around in the social circle of village men.

In building the new house, Wu Zetian demonstrated how her social ties extended beyond the domestic threshold. The house, which covered 120 square metres, was built on four reserved plots (*ziliudi*, 自留地) owned by four different households. She had to obtain each household's agreement for the purchase of these plots. One of them promised her the sale but waited until she had transferred payments to the other three before demanding double the price previously agreed. The purchase of the land cost about 16,000 Yuan, while the construction cost more than 80,000 Yuan (£8,000). She had to borrow most of this money from several friends and

³⁶我就是爱面子。别人有的，我也要有... 既然我要呆在这个村子，我就不能比别人差。现在我在街上有自己的房子了，他们也不能看不起我了。

relatives, including the brothers of her natal family. She admitted she had made more male than female friends in Mashan and had succeeded in gaining the trust of these men. She had done this by establishing and maintaining the cycles of *laiwang*. *Laiwang*, literally meaning “coming and going”, refers to the exchanges that take place between neighbours and friends (Stafford 2003).

To bypass the legal ban on building houses on plots reserved for vegetable growing and to obtain the official house construction permit, Wu Zetian had to mobilise her personal connections, which included a real estate boss in the local county seat and the head of the Village Women’s Association. She said that even her husband’s close agnates acknowledged her efforts and offered help.

In successfully building her new house, Wu Zetian demonstrated her ability to maintain the respectable face of herself and her family as well as her ability to provide better living conditions for her children. She commented that her husband “didn’t plan ahead”. She continued, “He didn’t borrow a penny. He did whatever I told him to. His parents were useless too. I did it all on my own.”

Wu Zetian’s “self-reliant” house remained ambiguously unnamed, which set it apart from the majority of houses built after the 1980s (see Chapter Four). The namelessness of the house also contrasted with the great pride she took in the house and the great value she placed on her “face”. Sangren suggests that “face can be viewed as a kind of value associated with the production of social solidarities and collectivities that ... are primarily constructed as suprafamilial levels” (2000: 180). In Chapter Five, I noted that Dashan returned to fund a house in the local town and a streetlight project, a bridge and a basketball court in the village. These were named after his widowed mother, himself and his father respectively. He was considered to have gained face in the community as a result of all these projects.

As discussed in Chapter Four, houses and house names are viewed as a statement of an individual’s or a household’s moral standing in the village. At least half of the new “self-reliant” houses have been named using a combination of the given names of the husband and wife. Others were named after the male household head,

or using a combination of the father's and son's names. But no house in the village had been named exclusively after women.

Leaving her house unnamed was probably Wu Zetian's strategy to avoid bringing additional public attention to her ambiguous status and her troubled marital relationship (discussed below). Aware of the strength of patriarchal power in the village, she would not want to attract criticism by naming her house after herself alone, even though its construction was mainly her own achievement. On the other hand, she did not want to have her house named jointly after her husband and herself in line with the most popular method of house naming in the village. In comparison with a named house, an unnamed house is much less objectified as being the property of a particular family or patriline. The resulting ambiguity leaves other opportunities open: Wu Zetian once mentioned that her mother and her younger brother's family (including his wife and son) might come to settle in Mashan and that she might have another storey built onto the house for them to live in. In suggesting this possibility, she is asserting her rights to bring her own natal family to live in the house, thereby challenging the idea that the house is the property of her husband's family.

Furthermore, the namelessness of the house offers flexibility: it allows the house to become a commodity. By leaving her house unnamed, Wu Zetian retained the freedom to sell the house if she decided to leave her unhappy marriage in the future. This option would not have been available to Wu Zetian if she had continued to live in the old house, the construction of which was funded by her husband's *huaqiao* uncle.

Divorce and Huaqiao

One day near the end of my fieldwork, as I was passing by her house, Wu Zetian asked me to sit down and have tea with her. She started talking about her marriage problems and said she might sell the house and get a divorce one day. "He [her husband] said he wants to bomb the house..." she complained. "Nowadays it is simple to get a divorce. Each takes a child and goes... I am optimistic. I don't care". I was not surprised at this news. Divorce had come up a couple of times in

our conversations without any prompting from me. Once, when commenting on her marriage, she said:

After more than ten years' marriage, I have no feelings for my children's father. But I have no regrets. My only concern is whether my daughter has inherited her father's character [*zhong*, 种, literally, seeds/type]. Luckily one teacher has said she is quite bright³⁷.

Wu Zetian had considered divorce several times. She said the first time she wanted a divorce was when Wisdom was two years old, but then she had thought "it wouldn't be too difficult to make a living here [in Mashan], so I didn't make up my mind." She said she found it even more difficult to leave after she had her second child, worrying that the children's father would not take good care of them.

After a sleepover at Wu Zetian's place one night at the end of my first year in the village, I realised that only she and her two children slept in the new house. She arranged for her husband to spend the night in the *huaqiao*-funded villa, which served as the base for the family's poultry business, on the pretext that he needed to keep an eye on the poultry during the night. However, as the mother-in-law and her husband's unmarried brother lived there already, this was unlikely to have been her real motivation. As far as I could see, the husband still ate his three meals at the new house, though not always at the same time as his wife and children. In the evening, after supper and a shower, she would urge him to leave. Their residential arrangement did not overlap with the usual meal-sharing. Obviously, his share of the intimate spaces of the house was limited. He ate from the same stove as his wife and children, but did not live under the same roof with them (Santos 2009).

In talking about a divorce case in the village that happened a few years back, Wu Zetian commented that the divorced mother never entered the village again and every time she visited her adopted daughter they met outside the village border³⁸. Wu Zetian saw in this episode the power of the husband's agnates to exclude the

³⁷ 结婚 10 多年了，我对孩子他爸没什么感情。但我也不后悔。我唯一的担心是我女儿是否传到了她爸的种。幸好有个老师说她还是很聪明的。

³⁸ The couple adopted a daughter as the mother never got pregnant. The daughter was 10 years old when the divorce took place. Within a few months of their divorce the husband met an untimely death while on a drunken binge. Following this, the daughter lived with her uncle and grandparents.

divorced mother. She remarked, “Whether they are close or not, people from the same family should still help each other.³⁹” In addition to concerns about how she might be treated by her husband’s agnates, there also were practical considerations about where Wu Zetian would live if she did get a divorce. Her natal village was much smaller and further away from the local county seat than Mashan. Most people from there had abandoned the village and she never mentioned the possibility of returning there.

As mentioned above, the overseas connection was a key factor that encouraged Wu Zetian to marry into her husband’s household in the first place. Twelve years after the marriage, it seemed she might manipulate the overseas connection to facilitate her divorce. As a “married-in outsider”, Wu Zetian began to play a crucial role in maintaining the family’s overseas connections, specifically with her husband’s uncle and aunt in Taiwan, who had funded the villa on North Mount. She was the one who made the phone calls across the Straits and talked with them during the Chinese New Year festivities. Her communication skills were smoother than those of her husband and mother-in-law. In April 2008, I met this Taiwanese couple, then in their early eighties, when they returned to Mashan and stayed in Wu Zetian’s new house for a couple of weeks. They expressed their admiration for Wu Zetian’s single-handed achievement in funding the new house.

Wu Zetian told me about a financial dispute, the details of which were confirmed by the Taiwanese couple. In the mid-1990s, the heyday of *huaqiao* return visits, more than 180,000 Yuan (£18,000) changed hands between the Taiwanese uncle and one of his agnates working in Shenzhen, who claimed he wanted to borrow the money for investment in a certain real estate business. The money was never returned. Wu Zetian took a proactive role in encouraging the *huaqiao* couple to pressure the agnate in Shenzhen to return the money and she sought legal aid on their behalf. For their part, the Taiwanese couple promised, if the money was successfully retrieved, a big portion would go to the Wu Zetian’s household. I suspect that in making this offer, they hoped to keep Wu Zetian in her marriage with their nephew. The financial dispute was not resolved by the time I left.

³⁹ “亲不亲，自己人还是帮自己人。”

The Taiwanese *huaqiao* had advised Wu Zetian against a divorce. From their perspective, this was understandable. The household of Wu Zetian and their nephew was the only one remaining in the village from their sub-lineage branch. Therefore, for more than a decade, it had been only Wu Zetian's household that had carried out worship on behalf of the Taiwanese uncle at the tombs of his parents and grandparents. In other words, the continuation of these Taiwanese *huaqiao*'s ancestral worship depended on Wu Zetian and her children remaining part of the nephew's household.

Nonetheless, before I left the village in 2008, Wu Zetian asked if I could write a divorce application for her. She said that, if she managed to retrieve the money for the Taiwanese *huaqiao*, she planned to use her portion to buy an apartment in the local county seat, which would give her residential security if she divorced. Wu Zetian was aware of the consequences a divorce would have for her moral and social standing in the community. "To tell the truth," she said, "I might be gossiped about or condemned as someone who grabs the money [from her *huaqiao* relatives] before leaving. But who cares?" She stressed she would raise her children herself, even without any financial support from her husband.

5. Ancestral worship and community acceptance

Wu Zetian was involved in ancestral worship activities that are similar to those of the strong women Stafford (2009) describes. Ancestral worship has always been viewed as a significant manifestation of lineage ideology and patriarchal power. At the micro-level of family dynamics, it might be different. Stafford writes, "[W]omen play important roles in enacting and thus reproducing traditional values, including those associated with religion, patriarchy and patriliney" (Stafford 2009: 148). But he cautions us, noting that, "it is useful to distinguish ... between the 'ideological' and 'pragmatic' reasons behind women's exercises of their agency (in ways amenable to patriarchy)" and that a combination of "pragmatic and ideological concerns" lies behind their religious worship (Stafford 2009: 146). Stafford provides an intriguing example of a mother who set up an ancestral tablet for her husband's father and worshipped it daily. She started doing this after being told the reason for one of her daughters' sickness might be her paternal grandfather

not receiving proper worship in the underworld (ibid: 147-148). In short, she hoped her ancestral worship would protect her own daughter's health.

Here I will examine Wu Zetian's role in ancestral worship activities at the household, supra-household and the sub-lineage branch level. I suggest it is possible that her pragmatic concern in carrying out ancestral worship was to appease her husband's family and the community in general.

In 2007, I attended the "tomb completion ceremony" for Wu Zetian's father-in-law whose ashes were buried in the new tomb on a hillside about 10 minutes' motorbike trip from the village. I will describe the full details of the new tomb and the ritual in the next chapter. Wu Zetian's father-in-law had died in 2006, and this was the first tomb worship for him. Just before the ritual started, they realised the incense had been left behind; Wu Zetian's husband, supposedly the major worshipper in this occasion, went home to fetch it while the rest of us waited. Wu Zetian later told me the detailed cost of the whole event such as buying the construction material and paying the fengshui master. It became clear that she, rather than her husband, was the organiser of the tomb construction.

As I got to know Wu Zetian better, I found she was not always happy spending time and money on ancestral worship. On 19 June 2007, the day of the Dragon Boat Festival (端午节), I observed most families worshiped their ancestors. My host at that time worshipped his granduncle in addition to his own grandparents, because he was living in a house funded by his granduncle, all of whose own descendents had settled overseas. The Dragon Boat Festival is one of the four days in the annual calendar for ancestral worship in Mashan. Wu Zetian, however, did not participate in worship. She simply said she was "*tai lei le*" (太累了). This phrase can be translated as "too tired" or "too tiring", and I was unsure whether she meant doing the worship was too tiring or that she was too tired from all the work she had been doing since early morning. She probably meant both.

Wu Zetian further related that she had deliberately "abandoned" one of the tombs that year, meaning she had discontinued worshipping at it. The reason she gave for

this was that previously either she or her mother-in-law had mistakenly cleared the grass around the wrong tomb and worshipped at it. Wu Zetian observed that the following year they realised their mistake, “But my luck that year didn’t change, so I abandoned that tomb.” She continued, “If my mother-in-law found out she would be angry... After her death, I am going to abandon most of the tombs.”

With the exception of “tomb completion ritual” (完盆) described above, Wu Zetian and her daughter Wisdom never again invited me to any of the ancestral worship rituals at the family tombs. I suspect that she only performed the bare minimum. This would not surprise me. Even the village *fengshui* master once told me how he declined to attend ancestral worship for the founding ancestors of the first seven generations. “Making money is more important than worshipping ancestors,” he said, explaining how he had made a fortune in the 1990s as the entrusted *fengshui* master for those *huaqiao*-funded tombs.

Despite her otherwise casual attitude to ancestor worship, Wu Zetian would carry out the annual worship ritual for the tombs of the parents and grandparents of the Taiwanese uncle in a more elaborate way. The uncle had a son running a business in Suzhou, a city with a high-tech centre that was popular with Taiwanese businessmen. He had married a mainland woman. Every year he would offer 2,000 Yuan to Wu Zetian, asking her to prepare all the worship items, including five different kinds of meat. He and his wife would then come to the village for one or two days to attend the ritual. Wu Zetian hired one or two women to carry the items up the mountain, the most laborious part of the job.

The most intriguing story about Wu Zetian’s involvement in ancestral worship relates to the time she hosted the collective ancestral worship of Yinshan Gong, the tenth generation focal ancestor whose descendants made up about half of the residents on the north side of Mashan. The ancestral trust for this ancestor was “eaten up” (吃光了 divided) during the famine years of the 1960s and worship for him had stopped. Out of a sense of inter-segmental competition, however, the worship restarted in the 1980s when worship for Yinshan Gong’s elder brother was revived in an elaborate way by another sub-lineage branch. This competing branch

had an ancestral trust of over 50,000 Yuan deposited overseas and each tomb worshipper on the day would be rewarded with a red envelope containing five or ten Yuan. In contrast, the descendants of Yinshan Gong had to contribute money from their own household income towards the event. A minimum monetary levy would be collected from each household that wished to participate and this was given to the host. In 2008, the levy was 30 Yuan. The host then used the collected money to prepare the worship items and host a banquet with at least five or six tables. The levy did not raise a great deal of money and, in recent years, people had started complaining about the cost and labour involved in hosting the event. Consequently, the rotation system had partially collapsed and only a limited number of households, motivated by the potential for harnessing political or social capital, were willing to shoulder the burden of hosting the event. These households tended to be those of *huaqiao*, local businessmen or village cadres.

Every four years, it was the turn of Wu Zetian's household to host the ritual. This frequency was a consequence of the system of rotation that was used for hosting the event. Responsibility for hosting the event rotated between the four branches (*fang*, 房, literally houses) that had developed from their tenth generation ancestor. If a particular branch contains a large number of households, then any single household of that branch may only have to host the event once every twenty or thirty years.

However, Wu Zetian's household was one of only two households in the "weakest" branch, that is, the branch with the smallest number of households. Unfortunately, the other household was headed by an alcoholic man in his seventies whose wife and adult children had moved away, so Wu Zetian's and her husband were left to take on the responsibilities of the entire branch. Wu Zetian complained that it was unfair that this burden of the whole branch fell on her household. One day in March 2008, the night before the selected worship day, Wu Zetian asked four or five women to prepare chicken for the banquet. She gave each of these women a red envelope containing 20 or 30 Yuan as a token of thanks. She complained that she was too busy to host the event, but her complaints were met by criticism from some male lineage members. She was warned, "If you don't host

it, you'll lose your share of the ancestor [i.e. her household would be excluded from the group]. Your house (*fang*) will be excluded from the rotation. And even if you offer money we won't take it." She was furious about these remarks, but was unable to find a way to avoid the duty without offending the group.

The next day in front of the tomb, her husband's name was announced as the "major worshipper" (*zhuji*, 主祭) to the ancestor at the beginning of the ritual. After we had all returned to the village, the lunch banquet began at around noon with nine or ten dishes per table. About 60 people attended including children and elderly men and women. At the end of the banquet, in front of the crowd and in a direct and outspoken manner, Wu Zetian complained about the cost and the burden to the male lineage members in charge of overseeing the worship. Her complaints were actually taken well by most. These men had been trying for years to mobilise funds to establish an ancestral trust that could ensure the stability and continuity of the annual worship.

Regarding religious or ancestral worshipping, Stafford (2009:146) asks if "the practicalities help blur the more far-fetched claims of the ideologies". Wu Zetian once confided she "did not believe in or worship" gods. She continued worshipping ancestors because she "had no other options since everyone else is worshipping"⁴⁰. On the day of Wu Zetian's father-in-law's tomb completion ritual (discussed above), her mother made similar remarks about how she disliked "feudal superstition". For Wu Zetian, the practicality of not being excluded from the community was probably a more important motivation for hosting the collective ancestral worship than ancestral ideology. Ancestral worship is an event of the moral community. Refusal to host it would be overly offensive to this community. Known to be the *de facto* household head, she would be blamed as the main wrongdoer. By hosting the event, yet voicing her complaints publically at the end, she avoided the label of someone disrespecting ancestors and ensured her hard work gained her some recognition from the community. The occasion of collective ancestral worship could, in this way, potentially become a platform for mobilising political support. As I will show in the next section, Wu Zetian's desire to mobilise

⁴⁰ “不拜神明。不信。拜上代是没办法，因为别人也都拜呀。我也巴不得大家都不拜。”

political support was linked to her involvement in the upcoming election of village cadres.

Wu Zetian's Political ambition

The extensive involvement of Wu Zetian and her two political allies in the 2008 village election was intended to challenge the incumbent village leaders and the existing configuration of political power in the village. The election was not the first time Wu Zetian had been involved in village politics. She had once challenged the production team leader, arguing that team members should take turns to be the leader. However, as she said, she “didn’t like making enemies” and she had been able to foster good relations with several people with influence in local politics. As mentioned above, the Village Party Secretary once encouraged her to join the Communist Party, and, on one occasion during my fieldwork, she took me to meet the former village Party Secretary. She was well informed about public debates and issues in the village, such as Dashan’s involvement in the demolition of the Leyuan building discussed in Chapter 5. Her active participation in the village election did not therefore come as a surprise to most villagers in Mashan.

The details of village elections and village democracy in China are beyond the scope of this chapter⁴¹. Here I will first briefly introduce the village elections in Mashan and then focus on Wu Zetian’s participation in this sensitive political competition that lasted for about six months between October 2007 and April 2008. During this time I mostly listened without asking questions and tried not to voice which side I preferred. In addition to following the activities of Wu Zetian, her political allies and other villagers, I also followed the senior lineage elders and village production team leaders. The latter each carried a ballot box on their backs on the day of voting, walking from one household to the next.

“If one is not elected, his/her opinion carries no weight.”⁴² Several villagers voiced this common view which indicated the perceived significance of the village election in validating the power of the village cadres. This popular mindset, instilled by the past three elections, created a potential space for Wu Zetian and her

⁴¹ See Kevin O’Brien (2009) for an extensive discussion on this topic.

⁴² “不是选举上去的，说话不响亮。说话没分量。”

alliance to gain access to political power in the village. Village elections began to be held around 1998 in Mashan and the local rural areas. An administrative village was a constituency, the unit for the election. Despite the village party secretary still being handpicked by the township government, the village Committee Director (*cunzhuren*, 村主任) and five other members of the village committee had to be elected every three years. They are village cadres and each receives a monthly salary of 300 Yuan from the local government budget. If they stay in the Committee for over nine years they are entitled to a government pension. These benefits, which had only recently become available, made being a village cadre a more attractive position than before and As a result the village election had become a more tense competition.

The implication of Wu Zetian's support for her two non-Zhang friends from Mashan in their pursuit for political power should be viewed from the perspective of entangled lineage loyalty and village power. In Mashan, the lineage was one of the local "social forces" (O'Brien and Han 2009), which critically shaped the process and results of the village election. The Zhang and the Yang lineage groups, or surname groups, are two powerful rivals that have competed for local political power over the past few decades, both before and after village elections were introduced. Between them, they monopolised the village Committee. A Zhang lineage member had occupied the office of the village Party Secretary for the past three decades, while members of the Yang lineage always took up at least two of the other cadre positions. The only female village cadre, the head of the Women's Association, was the wife of a Zhang member.

Lineage affiliation was actively mobilised to influence voting decisions, although most villagers expected a village cadre to be "someone with a public/unselfish heart" (*you gongxin de ren*, 有公心的人) (Feuchtwang and Wang 2001). The idea of electing someone from one's own lineage was widespread, particularly among the senior lineage males. Collective ancestral worship in front of tombs in early 2008 became a ready platform for mass political mobilisation.

Despite this active mobilisation of lineage-based political allegiance, Wu Zetian supported her two friends from two non-Zhang surname groups. One was her poultry business partner, who for the past few years had been an emerging local entrepreneur. He came from a small surname group which historically did not have a share in the political power in the village. The other was a Mr Yang, a village electrician from the rival lineage to Wu Zetian's husband. This electrician was one of the friends who lent money to Wu Zetian for the construction of her new house, and he had demonstrated his political uprightness in the past by exposing the current village Committee's collective embezzlement of a government subsidy. Both in their early forties, neither of these men had been a village cadre before. Another senior Zhang lineage male, who had recently returned from a coastal city, also chose to support these two new non-Zhang candidates. Their lineage membership did not "naturally" command their political loyalty. The four of them got together several times, either in Wu Zetian's sitting room or in a restaurant in the local county town. They passionately discussed the lack of transparency in the village Committee accounts and the village cadres' general incompetence in energising the stagnant village economy. They all agreed that one of the two candidates, Mr Yang, should try to gather support on the basis of his lineage affiliation.

Wu Zetian had no intention of becoming a village cadre herself, though she spent money and mobilised her connections (*guanxi*, 关系) to "grab the vote" (*lapiao*, 拉票) in support of her two friends. She told me that her involvement was largely out of her support for her friends, but she also wanted to "have a fight with" the incumbent village cadres. She criticised the current village cadres for "bullying the good, bowing to evil and supporting the powerful". "If I were a village cadre," she said, "I would do better than them." But she continued,

Not till my living-standard becomes comfortable would I consider being a cadre. [I will] speak for people on the reasonable/right side. But I won't want to become one. This society looks at money only. No money, no respect.⁴³

⁴³ "如果我要当干部，一定要等自己的生活有中等以上了。要为有道理的人讲话。不过我不想去当，这个社会只要有钱，没钱就被人看不起。"

She elaborated on the relationship between personal wealth and becoming a cadre, saying she did not want to be like other cadres who knew nothing but “eating”, i.e., enriching themselves at public expense. “It is too corrupt,” she claimed, “Why be part of the corruption? I can rely on myself to make money. (太黑暗了。我靠自己赚钱，何必去搞那些腐败黑暗的呢?)”

At least half of the voting population registered in the administrative village were in fact absent from the village, working as migrants in the cities. This created a space for fraudulent voting. A person was allowed to fill in blank ballots on behalf of his/her family members, such as an uncle for his nephew’s household or a grandfather for all his sons and daughters-in-law. Another rule was that no more than three ballot papers could be delegated to the same person if “no direct blood tie” existed between the delegated and the delegator. As far as I could see, no formal procedures were required for setting up this kind of proxy voting. It was not uncommon to witness a villager filling out more than ten ballot papers at the same time in the presence of one of the Voting Organisation Committee members.

Throughout the election period, Wu Zetian remained discreet about her own political loyalty. Strategically she told others she wanted to get elected herself and got hold of other villagers’ blank ballot papers. This did not attract any suspicion since she had long been viewed as a much more capable candidate for the job of the village Women’s Association Head than the existing officeholder. Wu Zetian took these blank ballot papers and filled in her own name and those of her two friends. She was aware of her own moral hypocrisy saying, “You cannot follow an honest path to take part in the election. To ‘enter the gate’, you have to do this.”⁴⁴

In the end, Wu Zetian and her friends did not succeed due to various factors, the details of which I will not elaborate on here, except to say that her two friends were excluded from the list of legitimate candidates for the last-round of competition after being accused of “violating the family planning policy”. However, the group certainly did succeed in making a serious challenge to the status quo of the

⁴⁴ “不可能按照老实的方法参加选举，只能是以这种方式。首先你要进入那个门，你就得那样。”

village's political structure. Wu Zetian had 309 votes under her name in the eighth round of voting posted on the wall in the village centre on 31 March 2008 by the Village Voting Organisation Committee. Hers was the second highest tally among the three serious women candidates. The woman who came first was the serving Director of the Women's Association, whose name was actually pre-printed on the ballot papers. Given that Wu Zetian's name was not printed and that each voter would therefore have had to write down her three-character name on the ballot paper themselves, it was a hard-won achievement.

6. The ambiguity of Wu Zetian's public nickname

Thus far, in this chapter, I have elaborated on Wu Zetian's dominance and ferocity in both domestic and public domains. In this section, I return to consider Wu Zetian's public nickname in light of this ethnography. I argue that her extraordinary nickname reflects Wu Zetian's individual distinctiveness and the reach of her power beyond the domestic threshold into the public. In light of this, the nickname should be understood as reflecting the ambiguity of Wu Zetian's status as a powerful married-in woman and the consequent ambivalence felt towards her, which is perceived both by Wu Zetian herself and the other villagers.

There is ambiguity in Wu Zetian's public nickname. Her nickname could be taken as an expression of respect and admiration for her boldness, resourcefulness and capability. Two male villagers, father and son, once remarked that Wu Zetian's husband's family was fortunate to have her. "She is the key pillar of the family. Neither the husband nor her parents-in-law have any boldness or resolution (*poli*, 魄力)," they said. They certainly saw Wu Zetian as possessing *poli*, a quality usually associated with men. On the other hand, her nickname was mentioned occasionally in a joking tone. Some may view her dominance "a negative fantasy – as an object lesson about the risks of giving too much power to women" (Stafford 2009: 139). Indeed, it is possible that some villagers, women included, may be critical of her power. I never heard and cannot imagine Wu Zetian's husband or mother-in-law calling her by her nickname. I was probably viewed by the villagers as a close associate of Wu Zetian, however: this might explain why I did not hear any direct, negative comments about her.

Wu Zetian did not reject her nickname outright, but she harboured ambivalence towards her own unusual power in the community. She confided once that if she had married a strong capable man she would not like to play the dominant role. Instead, she said she would have been happy being a gentle caring wife standing behind a strong husband. She viewed her strength, sharpness, fierceness and dominance as the result of having “no choice” (*wunai*, 无奈).

Wu Zetian made deliberate efforts to ensure her female dominance was kept in check. Her daughter Wisdom spoke about her family’s involvement in the centenary celebration of the village school that took place in October 2005. This was a high-profile *qiaoxiang* village occasion. A number of elite *huaqiao* flew back from abroad especially for it. Local official dignitaries attended and made speeches. All the village households in Mashan were invited to send one or two members to attend the 100-table banquet provided some monetary donation was given. Wu Zetian contributed 50 Yuan (£5), but registered Wisdom’s father’s name instead of hers as the contributor on the book recording the name list of donors. This name list was then copied by a calligrapher in dark ink on red paper to be displayed on the school wall for public display and would later be incorporated into the *Special Collection for the Centenary Celebrations of the School’s History*, which would be distributed to the Overseas Chinese communities. On the day of the celebrations, Wisdom’s father had to go away to sell chickens for the family poultry business managed by her mother, so Wisdom and her mother went in his place to enjoy the banquet as the representatives of their household.

Another time I saw Wu Zetian following the practice of contributing “incense money” (香仪钱) to a deceased villager’s family. She put the money down and asked for her husband’s name to be registered⁴⁵. Later I asked her why, and she said “it was to avoid others’ gossip”. When she acknowledged her husband’s household headship on paper like this, she was also considering her own social and moral standing in the community.

⁴⁵ See Yan (1996) for a systematic study of the rural gift economy.

As a village woman, Wu Zetian's public nickname rescues her from anonymity. It allows her individuality in the lineage-dominated village. She is the complete opposite of the "nameless women" described by Rubie Watson (1986). Her nickname contributes to her exceptional life-story. However, in terms of what she did both inside and outside her home, hers was not a unique case. At least four other women in their early forties left to work in restaurants in the cities, while their husbands stayed behind to look after their school-aged children, elderly parents, vegetable plots, and paddy fields. "Women can find jobs in the city more easily than men," was the explanation these men gave to me for this. They did not show embarrassment about this reversal of the traditional gender roles.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how a married-in woman overcame her difficult marriage and led an impressive life. Her female dominance was interwoven with the presence of overseas Chinese and a powerful village lineage.

Wu Zetian was powerful not only as a mother, a married-out daughter, a wife and a daughter-in-law, but also as a member of the public community. She was an informal organiser of one of the major collective ancestral worship rituals. She was a contender in the competition for political power. Clearly she has significant power and agency, and not just the influence attributed to "women as disruptive outsiders". There is both admiration and criticism of her power in the community. Mostly she exerted her influence by working through the friends and neighbours which she incorporated into her network of relations through the cycle of *laiwang*. Last but not least, Wu Zetian was a middle-aged woman and therefore does not fit Wolf's "uterine model", in which an old woman becomes powerful mainly by outliving her mother-in-law and husband.

The lineage-dominated community acknowledged Wu Zetian's unusual power by labeling her with the name of a female emperor. But no one made a fuss or took any action to contain her power. Instead, lineage elite elders frequently accepted her requests, just as Uncle Lai had in assisting with her daughter's education.

By way of concluding, I want to first draw three comparisons between this *lihai* (厉害, fierce), married-in outside woman, Wu Zetian, and the vengeful returning son, Dashan, who was discussed in the previous chapter, before making some more general observations.

Firstly, like Dashan, Wu Zetian can be regarded as a “successful individual” or “striving individual” in the sense that she did possess economic and, to some extent, political power in the community. However, for Wu Zetian, the definition of individual success would also include a happy marriage, which she did not feel that she had achieved. This differs from Yan’s definition of success, which takes a male perspective, primarily emphasising the importance of economic and political power.

Secondly, like Dashan, Wu Zetian had certain grievances about her life in the village, feeling bitter about her troubled marriage and the fact that she had to take responsibility for building a new house and raising her children. However, unlike Dashan, the bitterness she felt did not attract public attention and therefore it did not form part of the ethical narrative on her actions in the village.

Thirdly, while Dashan strived to publicise the power he achieved in the village, Wu Zetian may choose to conceal the extent of her actual power. In the previous chapter, I described how Dashan, as a *huaqiao*, publically and even aggressively accumulates social capital for himself and his family. He funded projects in the village and had them named after himself and his family members. In contrast, although Wu Zetian had significant power both at home and in the community, she would sometimes deliberately conceal this, for example, by leaving her new, self-reliant house unnamed. Wu Zetian’s power and status can therefore be understood as remaining fluid. It would not be appropriate to make her power public by having her name formally recorded on written documents. Nor does her power convey the type of prestige that is suitable to be materialised and memorialised by engraving it on a dedication stone, as was done for the virtuous wife praised by the Memorial Stone or as Dashan did for his own virtuous mother.

Wu Zetian and other women's "actually existing" power in this male-dominated community should not be understood as simple cases of female dominance. Wu Zetian's strength and dominance coexist alongside, and in spite of, the strong lineage presence and patriarchal power in the village. Wu Zetian's power in both the domestic realm and community is exactly what Stafford suggests: neither "a kind of hidden power", nor "unremarked", nor "a form of 'resistance'"; "If this is a secret, it is an open secret" (2009:150). Her public nickname refers to this open secret. She knows well the constraints of the lineage and manipulates them if and when necessary.

Finally, my ethnography of this village woman, Wu Zetian, can help dispel a myth about the past: that Chinese women were passive victims of the patriarchal system. This myth is part of what Ko (1994) calls the May Fourth view of Chinese history and the victimisation of Chinese women. The image of "traditional" Chinese women simply as victims is based on "distorted and totalizing images generated by the nineteenth-century confrontation between China and the Western powers" (Bray 1997: 270). This May Fourth view has influenced Yan Yunxiang's works on individualisation, in which he contrasts rural women who used to be passive victims played a key role today (Yan 2006: 003-005). In Yan's works, the rural women's key role in the process of individualisation is cast in the light of the past.

Bray's (1997) historical research powerfully demonstrates that in Chinese history there was a time when women's productive work or "womanly work" was seen positively as the foundation of society and the nation-state. Bray demonstrates that at least the elite women are not deprived of freedom and dignity in their domestic space, their work and their role in reproduction. Some women of higher status exploited women of lower class. Both Ko's (1994) and Bray's (1997) historical research focuses on educated and elite women in late imperial China, since they are the ones about whom it is possible to find written records.

By contrast, in this chapter, with the story of Wu Zetian, I have provided an example of the power and dignity of a village woman in her late thirties, deemed by some to "have no culture". It cannot be assumed that all women have such power; indeed, her position probably implies inequality among sisters-in-law in the

village-lineage community. However, I did not deliberately set out to find such strong women in my fieldwork. Thus, on the basis of my findings in Mashan, it is reasonable to expect that rural women are not in fact a monolithic group of victims. Like Wu Zetian, rural woman may be also able to achieve power and agency in both kinship and wider political spheres, even in those places where lineage ideology and structures have dominated the community.

Chapter Seven: Symbolic Differentiation in the Disposal of Bodies—Cremation and Earth Burial

1. Introduction

One day in June 2007, while we talked in his sitting room, a retired schoolmaster described the first cremation that had taken place in Mashan. He concluded his account as follows:

You tell me how big the difference is: one was dug out [from her tomb] and forced to be burnt by fire (*bei huoshao*, 被火烧); the other was allowed an earth burial (*tuzang*, 土葬). [And both these happened] in the same place⁴⁶.

His wife and neighbour, who were sitting nearby, agreed with him. The schoolmaster was giving me his account of an event that many other villagers also still remembered vividly even eight years after the cremation had taken place. Dubbed the incident of “the woman who was dragged out to be burnt”, it had taken place in 1999 after the provincial government started to implement the policy of cremation in the villages of Dabu County. Following the death of a villager’s mother, the county-level officials organised a team to persuade the family to have her body cremated. The family agreed, even though a tomb had already been built for her several years before her death in line with the usual local practice⁴⁷. However, on the third day after death, when the time came for the dead body to be removed, the crematorium wagon did not arrive. It was considered essential to follow the timing set by the funeral master in order to ensure a smooth journey for the deceased and the future good fortune of the household. So instead of waiting for the transport to the crematorium, the body was carried to the mountain and buried in the tomb. When the wagon finally arrived later that day, the county officials ordered a group of people, temporarily employed from the town, to dig out the body. The entire episode was filmed and broadcast on the provincial TV channel and for three days in a row on the local county TV news programme.

⁴⁶ 你说差别有多大？一个被拖出来被火烧，另一个允许土葬。在同一个地方。

⁴⁷ In Mashan, a tomb (*shengji*, 生基) is prepared for someone while he/she is still alive.

Since this traumatic event, no villagers have dared disobey the requirement that bodies be cremated.

In contrast, around that same time, the mother of a “big” Hong Kong *huaqiao* was allowed an earth burial, the local traditional way of disposing of a dead body. The fact that she had a Hong Kong residence permit was emphasised as the key issue that explained the different treatment this woman received. Her son applied to a certain provincial-level office and readily received a permit for earth burial from the municipal and county governments. From the locals’ perspective, both deceased women had been members of the same lineage in the village. In the past, before the new policy of cremation, they would have received the same funeral procedures. But now their bodies were being disposed of in drastically different ways. One was burnt to ash, and the other received a “proper” burial. For the retired schoolmaster and other villagers, there was a fundamental difference between these two methods of body disposal and in their respective implications.

In Chapter Five, I described how Dashan was viewed as a vengeful son returning to the community. In this chapter I shall talk about another kind of return. Here I focus on the dead who are being “sent away” to the other world and who are supposed to return as ancestors. As a result of state intervention, the two different practices for dealing with corpse treatment in Mashan, i.e. cremation and earth burial, produce an arena of differentiation. The correct disposal of bodies is closely related to notions of filial piety and the local cosmology of *fengshui* (风水, geomancy). In this chapter, I consider the questions and concerns about filial piety and cosmology that the introduction of the practice of cremation gave rise to amongst the villagers. I explore some of the paradoxical implications of these two different technologies of body disposal and the discourses surrounding them. Using my ethnography, I demonstrate that these two technologies have given rise to new forms of differentiation in the realm of the afterlife as a result of the local cultural beliefs about the relation between the living and the dead. Although the state aimed to re-integrate *huaqiao* into the local community via preferential treatment, the paradoxical result of this policy was the isolation of *huaqiao* from the community.

Symbolic differentiation in rural areas

Here I discuss the symbolism of death and burial along the lines of Bloch & Parry (1982: 1-44) and Watson (1982). Bloch and Parry discuss the symbols of reproduction in funeral rituals in a variety of cultural contexts. They convincingly argue that there are two phases in mortuary rituals: first, the disposal of the polluted individual body; and second, the re-installation of the dead as permanent ancestors. It is with the second regenerative phase that “the dead are harnessed (however imperfectly) to the reproduction of social life” (1982:10). This regenerative aspect is also the key definition of a “good” death while the lack of it is a “bad” death (15-18). Bloch and Parry point out that tombs are used to construct an ideal social order by transforming the remains of the dead (35-36).

Following the lead of Bloch and Parry, Watson (1982: 155-186) discusses the dialectic of flesh and bones in Cantonese funeral rituals. He highlights the power of bones as a means of transmitting ancestral blessings to the descendants of the deceased after the second burial, i.e., after all the flesh, which is viewed as a source of pollution, has separated from the bones. Intriguingly, in the discussions of death featured in Bloch and Parry (1982) and Watson (1982), there is almost a total absence of consideration about the role of the state. Bloch and Parry mention only in passing the political significance of death ritual at the end of their introduction to their edited volume (1982: 42).

Watson and Rawski (1988) have provided a thorough historical overview of the significance of death rituals in late imperial China. Both discuss the role of the imperial state in the standardisation of the traditional funerary ritual (Watson, 1988: 17-18). Rawski discusses the “indirect” role of the imperial state in shaping the standard practice of death ritual (Rawski, 1988:31). In this chapter, I will explicitly connect the symbolic and political aspects of death rituals by emphasising the direct role of the Chinese state in the funeral process and rites of disposal.

Whyte (1988) discusses the radical change in death rituals brought about by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) after 1949 as a result of their policy requiring cremation. Whyte’s focus is on urban areas where the policy on cremation has been imposed for much longer than rural areas. Unlike Watson’s suggestion that

the Chinese placed more emphasis on funerals than burial (1988:16), Whyte points out that most Chinese are united in rejecting cremation (1988: 314). Whyte documents and analyses a new sequence of rites that has appeared in the cities following the practice of cremation promoted by socialist ideology. Whyte argues the CCP funeral reforms actually enlarged rather than reduced the gap between rural and urban areas. However, it should be noted that at the time of Whyte's research, cremation was limited to big cities where crematoriums had been built and the practice had not yet reached most of the rural areas where traditional funerals and earth burial continued. Drawing on Whyte's analysis of the earlier differences between the cities and countryside, I will use ethnographic material from my fieldwork in Mashan in 2007 to examine the ritual differentiation created within rural areas as a result of the introduction of cremation.

I shall argue that the introduction of cremation into a rural village has created another kind of stratification. Yan(1992) demonstrated the necessity of studying social stratification within local rural communities through his case study of a village in northern China. He proposed that "perceptions of equality and inequality" (1992:21) should be considered. He first demystifies the egalitarian image of rural collectives and then examines whether market-oriented reforms have decreased or increased social inequalities (1992: 1–21). Following Ivan Szelenyi (1988), Yan argues that "a dual structure of social stratification is emerging in the village, in which the socialist-bureaucratic rank order co-exists with a market-based economic class order" (1992: 20). I share Yan's interest in studying "perceptions of equality and inequality" in rural communities, but whereas Yan's focus was on social-economic stratification, the present chapter mainly examines symbolic differentiation in the ritual domain.

To provide context for my examination of symbolic differentiation, I first summarise the general socio-economic "special preferences" that are bestowed by the Chinese state on *huaqiao*. Then, by looking at the two different practices of body disposal that are used in Mashan, I examine how perceptions of symbolic differentiation and ritual marginalisation have developed as a consequence of the state's imposition of cremation in the village.

2. State policies of “preferential treatment”

I have described in Chapters One, Four and Five of this thesis how *huaqiao*, defined as a politico-economic category, receive a “glorious return” and how as a group they are attributed an elevated status by the municipal and county governments. They are a group designated by the state as eligible to receive “preferential treatment” (*youdai*, 优待) in various domains, such as in relation to housing plots as discussed in Chapter Four. Before 1999, when the cremation policy was first seriously enforced in rural areas like Mashan, preferential treatment towards *huaqiao* had been mostly limited to the political and economic spheres.

The preferential treatment towards *huaqiao* offered by the CCP government in contemporary rural China has to be understood in both the national and local *qiaoxiang* contexts and also as taking place at a specific historical moment. However, generally speaking, special treatment for *huaqiao* is nothing new in Chinese history. Peterson (2011) has researched the systematic special treatment given to overseas Chinese during the mid-1950s. This special treatment was in the politico-economic sphere and included the opportunity to change their class status to a favourable class, to regain ownership of homes that had been confiscated, and to have access to privileged consumer items (Peterson, 2011: 55–56). He observes that this treatment “insulated” this group from the radical socio-economic changes taking place around them, making *huaqiao* a special category (56–57). In particular, he noted that *huaqiao* were permitted, and even encouraged, to spend remittances “for avowedly ‘feudal’ and ‘bourgeois’ purposes” (66) such as arranging a conspicuous funeral for the dead, which could not have easily been afforded by those without overseas connections. This preferential treatment did not last long. It stopped soon before the Cultural Revolution in the early 1960s when political campaigns pronounced hostility towards anything overseas and *huaqiao* were branded as potential state enemies.

In his historical research, Peterson’s (2011) main emphasis is on official state policies rather than on how these policies were received at the local level. In contrast, my emphasis in this chapter emphasises the local reception of new

policies giving special treatment to *huaqiao*. Since the early 1980s, a series of policies have once again been issued to provide special prestige to *huaqiao* and their relatives in relation to housing and business. *Huaqiao* can apply for a bigger tract of land for use as housing plot than other villagers, and this is available for free from the county-level National Land Management Bureau (see Chapter Four). A hotel or factory established exclusively with investment from a foreign passport holder, such as *huaqiao* businessmen, can receive tax breaks for the first five years, as well as receiving the land required for factory building at a very low price (Hsing, 1997:145–156). One of the best-known hotel-restaurants in Dabu County was opened by the big *huaqiao* Dashan (see Chapter Five). On the front wall of the entrance to this building, a golden board notifies visitors that this business has been “exclusively invested in by a foreign businessman”. A Mashan villager told me that officials from the Industry and Commercial Bureau cannot even enter the premises to check for hygienic conditions without first gaining permission from the county government.

Anthropologists have examined extensively the politico-economic advantages enjoyed by *huaqiao* in Mainland China in the reform era since they began to return in the late 1970s (Smart, 1999; Douw, Huang, & Godley, 1999). In some cases, the political influence of *huaqiao* was used by villagers to obtain the local government’s endorsement for the establishment of local lineage organisations (Shu Ping 2004) or for the restoration of the collective property of their lineage (Brandstädter 2001).

Kuah (1999) has described how *huaqiao* are given “cultural concessions” to practice religious and ancestral worship rituals in Anxi, Fujian Province, where many Singaporean *huaqiao* have returned to visit since the 1990s. She shows how in Anxi ancestral worship is a form of moral-cultural capital that local officials and villagers are able to use to attract overseas Chinese investment and donations. Kuah’s analysis of Anxi is equally applicable in Mashan. However, in this chapter I want to go further and consider the wider impact that the preferential treatment of *huaqiao* had on ritual practices in the village. Despite her interesting findings, Kuah’s research was primarily restricted to experiences of *huaqiao* themselves rather than the locals. She gave only limited consideration to the impact of these

policies on local people, and she did not consider how locals felt about the very different treatment that villagers and *huaqiao* received from the state. It is certainly true that the political space and opportunity to conduct ancestral worship arose in Mashan because of the economic presence and political influence of *huaqiao*. However, this kind of “cultural concession” conferred on *huaqiao* could be and was immediately imitated and appropriated by the villagers themselves. For example, in group ancestral worship in Mashan, *huaqiao* are always mentioned in the ritual elegy read in front of the ancestral tombs and, perhaps because of this invoking of *huaqiao*, the local-level state agents did not stop the villagers from practicing these rituals.

The situation in relation to burial and cremation, which is the focus of this chapter, is very different from ancestral worship. Allowing *huaqiao* to continue to practise earth burial, while the villagers were forced to use cremation, was an unprecedented type of preferential treatment conferred on *huaqiao*. While rituals of ancestral worship could serve to unite the villagers and *huaqiao*, this new preferential policy on the disposal of the dead only served to differentiate the two groups.

3. “Preferential treatment” in the afterlife

Huaqiao not only enjoy a better socio-economic quality of life in this world, but also in the afterlife. This was made manifest with the introduction of cremation into the village. Cremation was imposed on people from the local area by the Chinese state as part of the national modernisation agenda. However, *huaqiao* were exempt from this policy and were allowed to continue to use earth burial, which, as I will describe below, is perceived to lead to a better afterlife for the deceased and better prospects for their descendants.

There is no precedent for this preferential treatment in relation to earth burial. While other concessions to *huaqiao* have brought advantages to their relatives in the village and often created links between the two groups, the policy on burial creates a divisive distinction between *huaqiao* and locals. The distinction made between *huaqiao* and locals in relation to body disposal practices is particularly striking in the social context of *qiaoxiang*, because it is contrary to the lineage

ideology of “equality in front of ancestors” (R. S. Watson, [1985] 2007), which has received new emphasis since the late 1970s. The revival of lineage institutions, sponsored by *huaqiao* but actively coordinated through the efforts of the locals, has given new expression to the revived rhetoric of equality, but this is now threatened. From the locals’ perspective, cremation and earth burial are not simply two different ways of disposing of corpses. Instead, they produce different afterlives for their ancestors, and consequently different kinds of futures for their children. The production of the symbolic differentiation between *huaqiao* and local residents in this way can be seen as primarily resulting from the state’s policy of “special preferences” for *huaqiao*.

When giving their accounts of “the woman who was dragged out to be burnt” discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the retired schoolmaster and other villagers always made an additional comment on the particular viciousness of this first case of cremation in their village. “Bad luck surely will come to the family members if the body is unearthened after burial,” they warned. As I will elaborate in the next section, the local popular belief is that earth burial is a key part of a “good” death, ensuring a good afterlife and blessings for the deceased’s descendants, while in contrast cremation defines a “bad” death.

Burning by fire versus earth burial

In 1999, the first and only crematorium in Dabu County was built, making cremation available to —and required of—the local population. As Whyte (1988) noted, the adoption of cremation in the urban areas has brought “a sharp rural-urban gap that didn’t exist before 1949” (1988: 304). Cremation remained limited to the urban population until 1999⁴⁸. It was only ten years after Whyte’s article was published that cremation was finally, and relentlessly, expanded to the rural areas of Meizhou Municipality, where Mashan is located. Today, in Mashan, cremation is widespread and is a highly salient issue. It is always understood in contrast to earth burial.

⁴⁸ The obvious and only exception is the remains of Mao (Wakeman, 1988:254-288).

To both *huaqiao* and locals, earth burial has always been and remains integral to the infrastructure of ancestor worship. Veneration of one's ancestors is considered to be a cornerstone of personal morality (Oxfeld 2010). The popular preference for earth burial (*tuzang*, 土葬) is in contrast to the negative connotation assigned to cremation by locals. This is not surprising, given that earth burial is a deeply ingrained religious and cultural practice in the rural areas of China (see also Whyte 1988). The four-character phrase *rutuwei'an* (入土为安), which literally means "entering earth for peace"⁴⁹, is used to mark the end of almost any description of a funeral. Earth burial is an important part of ancestral veneration according to the Confucian values system, and is a socially approved expression of filial piety. The local terms for cremation sound unpleasant: "to be melted by fire" (*huohua*, 火化) or "to be burnt by fire" (*huoshao*, 火烧), though the official term is simply *huozang* (火葬), literally "fire burial".

Since 1999, the villagers have been banned from performing earth burials. Given that the county government reported in 2009 that the goal of a one hundred percent cremation rate (of local bodies) had been achieved every year for the past eight years, it would seem that the policy on cremation is being enforced very effectively, denying ordinary villagers any opportunity to practise earth burials. Nonetheless, it is evident that for both ideological and practical reasons the locals still prefer earth burial to cremation. Below, I consider three reasons why the majority of villagers continue to privately defend the practice of earth burial.

The first reason is related to the household economy. Cremation means an extra monetary cost of at least 1,000 Yuan (about £100) for the household of the deceased. One afternoon, at the new venue for the Elders' Association clubhouse, five women over sixty told me about the cost of cremation while chatting over tea. In 2007, the cost of the cremation itself was at least 1,000 Yuan. If a wooden coffin is provided by the family of the deceased, another 100 Yuan is charged "because it takes more time to burn". The plastic coffins on sale in the crematorium range from 400 to 800 Yuan. The service charge for transporting bodies within the county seat (*xiancheng*, 县城) is about another 300 Yuan, but, for the villagers

⁴⁹ It is also translated as "have one's bones buried" or "earth burial brings peace to the deceased".

from Mashan, outside the county seat, the transport cost is increased for each additional kilometre that must be travelled from village to the crematorium.

All agreed that the cremation “wasted” (*langfei*, 浪费) their money. One remarked, “Now cremation has been enforced. We rural people still have to go up to mountains after the cremation. It costs more [than before]. If it was only earth burial, it cost at most a few hundred to carry [the coffin].” Here, to “go up to mountains” (上山) referred to earth burial, as gravesites are always on mountains as these locations have the advantage of auspicious *fengshui*. Today, however, the practice has been compromised and adapted. The locals still ask the *fengshui* master to select a gravesite and build a tomb, which can cost more than 5,000 Yuan. However, instead of the body, the ash box of the dead is placed in the tomb. This practice of “double burial” (*erchong zang*, 二重葬) will be explored in more detail later. It suffices to say here that this negates the official policy, which purports to reduce the “waste” of land and money of an earth burial.

The second reason for villagers to favour earth burial was explained to me by the schoolmaster using a folk saying, “Only those who have done evil deeds will end up being struck by lightning or burnt up by fire.” This schoolmaster regretted that, “Today, no matter how virtuous people are, they must be burnt by fire.” This semi-religious belief correlates the manner by which one’s body is disposed of to one’s moral standing. Cremation is perceived to be no less than a violent death, similar to being struck by lightning. It is interesting that in this context the villagers would not see a difference between the mode of disposing of the body (e.g. cremation or burial) and the mode of dying (e.g. illness or lightning).

In early 2008, a migrant millionaire returned from the coastal city of Shenzhen to find a site for the second burial for his mother, who had died 10 years earlier and whose bones were ready to be exhumed. The migrant millionaire was known to have deeply regretted his mother’s relatively early death at the age of 63. But he said, “Probably it was her good fortune [to die that year]. It was the last year before the forced cremation. Her coffin was still a ‘flesh coffin’ (血棺)”: by this he meant a full-body burial. Here, his implicit message was that avoiding “melting by fire”

was in a sense worth dying early for. This local notion of cremation coincides with the Berstein's (2000) finding that in Song-Dynasty China (960–1279), “Confucian scholars condemned the burning of the dead as the most unfilial of acts—a fate worse than the death itself” (Berstein 2000: 304).

Closely related to the second reason, the third reason why villagers support earth burial in preference to cremation concerns the preservation of the ancestral bones in accordance with the theory of *fengshui* (风水, Chinese geomancy, see Feuchtwang 1974 for the basic terminology of *fengshui*). Implied in the subtext of the migrant millionaire's story is that the idea that because the bones of his mother had escaped cremation, this would also bring good fortune for him. The significance of ancestral bones has been observed by a number of anthropologists. Watson commented that, “the bones of the ancestors must be preserved at all costs as they are essential to the wellbeing of the descendants” (J. L. Watson, 1988: 155). Placed in auspicious locations, the bones, once freed of the ancestors' own flesh, then “transmit the good geomantic influences of the cosmos to the living” (155, 181). Jing Jun demonstrates the symbolic significance of the ancestral bones (1996: 82–84) to the Kong family in his study of memory in Gansu Province. Before their village was flooded, the Kong desperately dug out their ancestral bones to take with them. Bruun (2003) found that the burning of bones was employed as a means of wiping out the family tree of the enemy during the radical era of Maoist politics (Bruun, 2003:102).

Following the introduction of cremation, there are no longer any bones for the children to collect, only ash. Watson points out that it is only after the second burial that “the bones begin to function for the benefit of descendants” (J. L. Watson, 1982:155). The second burial referred to the practice of retrieving and placing in an urn the bones that remained five or ten years after the first full-body burial (Freedman, 1966:118-54; Ahern 1973). By 2007, the practice of second burial had vanished from Mashan. This was evidenced by the millionaire's complaint about the difficulty of finding a good-quality urn anywhere in the local county area.

Bloch and Parry (1982) point out the key difference between a “good” and “bad” death is the presence or absence of regeneration potential. In Mashan, it is the bones which are considered to be vital to the regenerative aspect. This is because it is the bones which act as the key transmission medium of ancestral blessings, which, according to *fengshui* theory, can be manipulated for worldly benefits by and for the living descendants. According to Watson, the dead become “settled ancestors” only when their bones have been secured without any flesh left (J. L. Watson, 1982:181). Not surprisingly then, to the locals in Mashan, earth burial is a “good” death and cremation “bad”. This has a particularly divisive effect in a *qiaoxiang* such as Mashan, where a “good” death was part of the “preferential treatment” given to *huaqiao*, while locals were condemned to a “bad” death.

The villagers witnessed how *huaqiao* were allowed to continue practising earth burial, while they were forced to cremate their own deceased elders. Not only did these different methods for dealing with the dead result in inequality in the dignity accorded to deceased villagers, but they also had important implications for the fortune of their descendants. In the next section, I consider in more detail how villagers responded to this perception of inequality.

The body that does not have to be cremated

In contrast to the bodies of deceased local villagers, the bodies of deceased *huaqiao* do not have to be cremated. Two cases of earth burial have taken place in Mashan, both of which are well-known to the locals as evidence that state policy can be circumvented by a “special permit” (*texu*, 特许). The first case was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. A second case, in 2011, was for Dashan’s mother, the former socio-political outcast who had been “struggled” against as a landlord during Mao’s time (see Chapter Five). As a Hong Kong residence permit holder, permission for her to receive an earth burial was agreed by both the municipal government and the county government. An entire issue of the Overseas Newsletter was devoted to reporting the life story of the widowed mother and her splendid funeral. To have an earth burial was said to be her “final wish”. Her elaborate funeral was reported in great detail, including how, for example, six strong, young men carefully carried the coffin up the mountain.

When locals talked about the strict enforcement of cremation, they would always contrast their experience with the special exceptions available for deceased *huaqiao*. They qualified the enforcement of the policy by saying “except the foreign nationals” or “unless you are a *huaqiao*”(除非你是华侨). Unusually, in relation to earth burial, the foreignness of overseas Chinese was stressed in the official justification that legitimates traditional treatment of their bodies after death. In contrast, in most other contexts, overseas Chinese are normally labelled *huaqiao* or *qiaobao* (侨胞, overseas brethren) or described as “members of the same big family” in an effort to encourage their integration and inclusion. Their homogenisation and identification with Chinese culture is usually emphasised. At the moment of death, however, they are called “foreign nationals” (*waiji renshi*, 外籍人士) and their possession of foreign nationality or overseas residence permits is a necessary condition for applying for the special permit allowing earth burial. This creates a paradoxical situation similar to what Luke Freeman (2001) described in highland Madagascar, where “the ancestral order was sustained by people living in places furthest removed from the moral authority” of the ancestors (Freeman, 2001:192). Here in Mashan, the ancestral order is also embodied by those holding foreign passports.

The exception that allows *huaqiao* to avoid cremation is part of the municipal and local governments’ efforts to encourage *huaqiao* to invest in their place of origin. It should therefore be understood as emerging in a particular socio-economic context specific to the experience of *qiaoxiang* at a time when local state agents and the community were working hard to re-integrate *huaqiao* into the local area. By allowing *huaqiao* to have earth burials, officials hoped to encourage them to return and inject their financial resources into the local economy. As Peterson (2011: 75-81) argues regarding the return of *huaqiao* in the 1950s, the reason for the state’s preferential treatment was primarily economic: the quest for remittance and investment. The majority of the returnees to Mashan were elite overseas Chinese. They brought back with them the traditional values and practices, which they had preserved in the overseas Chinese community and which they or their parents had taken with them when they had emigrated before 1949. The most

prominent of these practices was ancestral worship, as was demonstrated by the resurgence of tomb construction and restoration that took place with overseas funding throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the peak period of *huaqiao* return.

The building of tombs is primarily about taking good care of one's ancestral bones. One part of the ancestral souls/spirit is believed to remain at the tomb (R. S. Watson, 1988). To have one's ancestral tombs in the village territory is an important way of acknowledging lineage membership and belonging. One story, which was reported in the Overseas Newsletter, is widely told and exemplifies how *huaqiao* returned to look after their parents' bones in the village. In 1998, a team of more than 30 villagers was organised by the village cadres in order to search for the misplaced bones of the adopted mother of one Taiwanese *huaqiao*, who was soon to return to the village after an absence of more than 50 years. In the 1940s, he had been "bought-in" as a son to the family in order to provide the parents with a male heir. The search for the bones continued for a couple of days and covered several mountains around the village, but it ultimately proved fruitless. However, the message implied by this search about the significance of the bones remained strong for the villagers. Even without possession of his mother's bones, the Taiwanese returnee continued to build a grand tomb for his parents. A piece of ancestral tablet with the mother's name written on it was entombed with the father's exhumed bones. A banquet with 20 tables was held to celebrate the completion of the tomb.

The efforts of this Taiwanese *huaqiao* to ensure that his parental tomb would be worshiped did not stop there. He had settled in Taiwan and would not move back to Mashan. However, with the promise of a new house (the significance of which is discussed in Chapter Four), he persuaded five family members of his married-out, adopted sister, who was over 60 years old, to relocate to Mashan from the neighbouring province of Fujian. The household registration of these five people was officially transferred to Mashan, his sister's natal village. The sister's grandson was designated as the future worshipper at the tomb by having his surname changed to be the same as that of the Taiwanese *huaqiao* and his adopted parents. None of these efforts would have been possible without the full assistance of local state agents. The Taiwanese *huaqiao* was praised within the local

community for his filial piety. Unfortunately, as it happened, the promised new house never materialised due to the untimely death of the *huaqiao* in Taiwan. The relocated household was left living in the old living quarter of an ancestral hall.

Another instance involved a senior *huaqiao* from Malaysia who was respected for his authoritative knowledge of “family rites”. He donated two coffins and two sets of “longevity clothes” (*shouyi*, 寿衣, the clothes in which a corpse is dressed before being put into coffin) to some villagers who were too poor to afford these ritual items upon their death. These charitable deeds were extolled as acts of “virtue” (*gongde*, 公德) recorded in the Overseas Newsletter in the 1990s.

Both the search for parental bones in the mountains and the donation of coffins were well-known efforts of *huaqiao* to uphold and reinvigorate the practice of earth burial. Both *huaqiao* involved received extensive official assistance, since courting *huaqiao* and the overseas financial investments is a top priority for the local state agents. Thus earth burial has become a symbolic marker of privilege, distinction and social status for overseas Chinese and their family members. The privileged position of *huaqiao* in the domain of death rituals primarily emanates from their distinctive socio-economic status. However, this privilege cannot be understood as resulting only from the greater purchasing power their wealth affords them. No matter how wealthy, none of the locals, the village cadres, or even the government officials of higher ranks is able to have an earth burial at death.

The villagers of Mashan were well aware of the “overseas superiority” conferred upon *huaqiao* and manifested in their continuing access to earth burial. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, earth burial continues to rank more highly than cremation in the opinion of the villagers. The biggest practical difference between the two technologies of burial is whether or not the ancestral bones will be successfully preserved and whether or not the exchange between the living and the dead can continue. With earth burial, overseas Chinese are perceived to enjoy a better afterlife than locals. This inequality, in the eyes of the villagers, also results in an inequality in the well-being and future prosperity of their children, since

advantageous *fengshui* can be transmitted only through the preserved bones of one's ancestors, and not through the ash of cremated bodies.

4. Ritual Stratification

The emergence of double burial

According to the workings of *fengshui* theory, beneficial energy will not flow to offspring without the ancestral bones. It would thus have stood to reason that the cessation of the practice of full-body burials for locals would also have meant a cessation to the practice of building tombs. But this is not what happened in Mashan. New tombs continued to be built, not to bury the body, but the ashes left by cremation. The practice of burying ashes in an individual tomb was branded by local officials as a “double burial” (*erchongzang*, 二重葬) and was officially forbidden.

As the oft-repeated local comment goes, “We have to practice the new, but we still can't throw away the old”⁵⁰. In spite of the official ban on “double burial”, locals continue to ask a *fengshui* master to select individual gravesites in the mountains around the village for their parents or grandparents. Tomb building continues to be called “doing *fengshui*” (*zuo fengshui*, 做风水), but no bones were buried, only ashes.

One morning in January 2007, Wisdom (Wu Zetian's daughter, see Chapter Six) invited me to attend the “tomb completion ceremony” for her grandfather, Wu Zetian's father-in-law, who had died about half a year before. Essentially the ceremony was a happy event to celebrate the “new house” in the other world for the deceased so that he would be safe and satisfied and would not come back to harm the living. It was a grand horseshoe-shaped tomb of concrete and stone located on a site, selected for its supposedly good *fengshui*, lying on the side of a mountain about 10 minutes' motorbike journey from the village centre. The *fengshui* master and his wife were present to organise the ritual. About 20 people, including Wisdom and her brother, Wu Zetian, her husband, his brother and mother and other agnates, attended the ritual. It was similar to the ritual of annual

⁵⁰ “新的要行，老的还扔不掉。”

ancestral worship: presenting food and wine, kowtowing four times and setting off firecrackers which circled the new tomb. The major difference from the annual ritual was that the *fengshui* master, standing inside the tomb courtyard, dispersed rice from a bucket into the air while all the others in attendance stood in front of him trying to catch the rice by pulling out the lower half of their shirts to create a receptacle to catch the rice. The *fengshui* master's wife explained that all the rice thus collected should be put in the rice container at home to ensure good fortune for the family.

Despite the ban on earth burial, the importance of tomb-building remained. Wu Zetian later told me it cost more than 6,000 Yuan (£600) to construct the tomb and another 200 Yuan for the use of the hillside. The latter was called the "Forest Management Fee" charged by the village cadres. The total amount was more than the annual income of an average village household, which was about 4,000 Yuan (£400). This was not an insignificant amount for Wu Zetian by any means, especially given that her household still had debt incurred in building their new house. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Wu Zetian did not show particular interest in ancestral worship, yet she did have the new tomb built. Tomb building continued to be a moral activity sanctioned by the community.

New tombs continue to be built. Locals do not want to be marginalised by the ritual differentiation brought about by cremation. They do not want to be left behind as people "without ancestors". The exclusive entitlement of *huaqiao* to earth burial means their offspring are eligible to enjoy proper ancestral blessings. By contrast, future generations of locals will be deprived of these and of potential prosperity, according to the locals' understanding of *fengshui* theory. Ash burial in an individual tomb selected by a *fengshui* master can be seen as the locals' attempt to compensate for the humiliation of burning. At least in form if not in content, they can take some reassurance in the fact that individual tombs enable their recent ancestors to enjoy advantageous *fengshui*.

Brunn (1996) observed the resurgence of *fengshui* belief and practice across China after the 1980s and pointed out the "conflicting cosmologies" between the state and the peasants. He commented, "*fengshui*'s ultimate ethos lies in the old Chinese

perception that all resources are limited and anybody's intervention will affect the total balance" (O Bruun, 1996: 64). In light of Brunn's analysis, it is possible locals continue to build tombs to contain the ashes of their ancestors in an attempt to stop *huaqiao* from usurping all the advantageous energy in the mountain.

The privilege of earth burial awarded by the state to *huaqiao* may have contributed to local creativity in establishing this new practice of placing ashes in tombs. The two *huaqiao*, who have received full-body burials in Mashan since 1999, were ranked among the wealthiest and most powerful. This can be interpreted as a consequence of their auspicious ancestral *fengshui*. It can be inferred that the privileges these *huaqiao* enjoy have reinforced local beliefs in the advantages of earth burial.

Officially, no new tomb sites were to be approved after 1999. This was one of the major claimed objectives for the official promotion of cremation: to reduce the amount of land and number of hillsides occupied by tombs. A village cadre told me the policy of cremation aimed to "promote environmental hygiene and the growth of forests" (一是为了环境卫生；二是为了森林绿化) for the benefit of the living rather than the dead. Based on the idea of economic efficiency and the ideology of modernisation, the rationale behind the practice is to eradicate the necessity of occupying land with an individual burial plot. Cremation is only part of the systematic state efforts to transform funeral practices as a whole in the countryside. Another part of the system that goes hand in hand with cremation is the construction of at least one licensed cemetery for the upkeep of ash boxes in every county seat. The cemetery is designed to house all the ash caskets and to save space, and was intended to render unnecessary the construction of individual tombs. However, as I have shown, in Mashan, the locals have defied the demand of the local governmental demand to keep their ash caskets in the cemetery. Instead, they have adopted a new practice of burying ash boxes in individual tombs. This practice has obviously evolved from the previous full-body earth burial, and should be understood as having developed partially as a result of the creativity of the villagers in response to the stratified forms of corpse disposal discussed in this chapter.

The tombs that must be covered-up

The ritual stratification has much to do with the actual and imagined economic power of *huaqiao* and the pursuit of this by the local state agents. The local government has to juggle conflicting priorities to implement the ban on earth burials on the one hand and, on the other hand, to attract overseas investments for the economic development of the local area.

The conflicting official priorities of attracting overseas finance and promoting of universal cremation can sometimes put county- and town-level state representatives in difficult situations. In 2006, they faced a predicament as they were forced to choose between meeting the upper-level government's target of a green environment and the necessity of protecting tombs in the village to appease *huaqiao*. In December 2006, a group of provincial and municipal government officials were due to descend on Mashan to examine the completion of the "socialist new village" project. Local-level state representatives came up with the solution of covering up the tombs with green pine-tree branches. As concrete roads are seen as important symbols of modernisation, it was especially important that tombs could not be seen from main roads. Therefore those households with tombs visible from public roads were told to cover them up. For the tombs of absentees, such as *huaqiao* and migrants, the village cadres and production team leaders recruited some villagers to do the job. A villager would be paid 20-to-30 Yuan (about £3) per tomb. Some villagers who had settled in the local county seat (about half an hour's trip by bus or motorbike) rushed back to cover up their family tombs. In the end, the provincial and municipal government officials were said to have come and stood on the main village road for a few minutes, then, satisfied, awarded Mashan the official status of a model socialist new village. At the end of 2006, when I came to the village and went to the mountains nearby, I saw a couple of tombs still covered by these tree branches, which by then had turned dry and brown.

The continuing presence of tombs in the village as a result of the preferential treatment given to *huaqiao* poses a dilemma to the local state agents. On one hand, to secure their financial contributions to the local economy, local officials have to promise to "protect *huaqiao* interests", which includes the protection of ancestral

tombs and ancestral halls. The presence of ancestral tombs in the village is believed to exert a strong moral force on the *huaqiao* and gives them a reason to return to the *qiaoxiang*. On the other hand, these tombs are regarded as “disorderly graves” (Teather, 2001:187) that should be removed. The appearance of tombs, according to the central and provincial government agenda, is blocking national progress towards modernisation in state teleology, the achievement of which is the responsibility of all state officials.

Cremation and ritual marginalisation

The implementation of cremation has widened the ritual differentiation between *huaqiao* and locals, as well as among locals themselves. Before I elaborate more on how this stratification has occurred, I will first describe the usual funeral process that has arisen as a result of the integration of cremation with more traditional funeral rites.

In Mashan, the elementary structure of death ritual described by James Watson (1988) has been combined with cremation. All nine ritual steps that Watson identifies as constituting the basic structure of Chinese funerary rites are still in place (1988:12-15): wailing, wearing white clothes, ritualised washing of the corpse, food and money transferred from the living to the dead, a soul tablet, the monks and the musical bands, the hammering of the coffin, the paper house for the afterlife and the expulsion of the coffin from the community. With the enforcement of the cremation policy, the family of the deceased had to first report the death to the village cadres who would issue “a letter of introduction of death” (*siwang jieshaoxin*, 死亡介绍信) and who would phone the crematorium to arrange a time to collect the body. The crematorium staff would need to see this official letter before carrying out the cremation. On the morning of the second or third day of the mortuary rites, representatives of the leadership of the Elders’ Association (see Chapter Three) would come to deliver a eulogy. This is similar to what Whyte (1988) described as an alternative developed by the CCP to replace the traditional funerals in Chinese cities after 1949 (295-296).

Before cremation came to Mashan, when it was time to bury the body, the funeral procession accompanied the body from the ancestral hall in the old house to the tomb on the hill. Now, the whole funeral procession has to make a detour to the conventional village entrance where the crematorium wagon from the county seat will be waiting to collect the body. In this way, cremation is grafted onto the traditional funeral ritual. As soon as the body is loaded into the wagon, all the green, yellow, and white paper banners (*fan*, 幡) are thrown away near the village entrance, conveniently onto the riverbank alongside the road. This indicates the end of the funeral procession. The conventional village entrance is reinforced as the tactical meeting point where village tradition comes into contact with state-imposed cremation.

Only a few family members and close agnates accompany the coffin to the crematorium and collect the ashes there. Before they can retrieve the ashes, the family of the deceased must also sign a contract with the village cadres agreeing not to build a tomb visible from the public roads or in the first layer of mountains. It takes a couple of hours to complete the cremation, and the ash casket is brought back to the village in the afternoon so that it can be interned in a tomb on the hill. The funeral procession, the cremation and the placing of the ash casket in the tomb all happen on the same day. The two phases of mortuary rites (Bloch and Parry 1982:4)—disaggregation and reinstallation—are merged in the contemporary burial ritual of the village. Cremation has rendered unnecessary the need to wait for the flesh to decay before the remaining bones can be exhumed for the secondary burial. Consequently, it has shortened the time span between the temporary earth burial and the secondary burial. This used to take at least seven years and sometimes several generations, but now it takes place within three days if a tomb was built before death or about half year to one year if a new tomb has to be built. Except for the disruption of a few hours travelling to and from the crematorium and the shortened timeframe for reburial, the funeral process seems to be unaltered. It continues to be an arena of competition in terms of expense, the food provided, the number of people attending, and the number of cloth banners received. For the majority of villagers, it continues to be an elaborate communal event.

For some households, though, cremation provides a convenient pretext for avoiding the traditional funeral procession by making death a non-communal event. The families of at least four people who died during my stay did not hold the two- or three-day mortuary rite required according to local standards. In one case this involved the old village barber, who died in his early nineties. His body was quickly removed to the crematorium, and the family did not inform other villagers of the death. One of his life-long friends, Uncle Lai (my first host), did not find out until a week later when I told him the news. He blamed the three sons of the deceased for being not filial, claiming they “simply want to save money”. This episode was unusual in a close-knit, village community where news travels fast.

There are several reasons for why villagers may wish to avoid holding a funeral procession and associated ritual. The first of these relates to the costs involved. The average cost of a three-day mortuary ritual amounted to about 15,000 Yuan (£1,500) in 2007. The cremation would cost at least an additional 1,000 Yuan. In the case of the old village barber, he had moved to Mashan a few years before 1949 and did not belong to the dominant lineage group. His was “a family without an old house” (see Chapter Four on the ritual significance of old houses). For this reason, he was still called an “outsider” (*waidi ren*, 外地人) even after having lived in Mashan for over 60 years. At over 90 years old, he had not joined the Mashan Elders’ Association (as introduced in Chapter Three) and therefore was not entitled to the benefits its members gained to help with paying for their funerals. His three sons lived in new houses, which could not be used for the mortuary ritual. Therefore, if a funeral was to be held, extra money was required to put up a tent outdoors. The family of another deceased villager was said to be too poor to cover the cost of even a minimal version of the mourning ritual, because the expense of treating a long-term illness had drained the family’s economic resources.

With the omission of a funeral, the deceased and the family of the deceased were excluded, at least temporarily, from the communal network of reciprocity (Yan, 1996). For some villagers, this may be a second reason not to hold a funeral, as it

may be perceived as freeing them from future reciprocal obligations they might not be able to bear. However, such behaviour is frowned upon by the majority of villagers. Almost all villagers I talked with obviously did not approve of such behaviour, saying “We don’t even have the chance to send some ‘incense money’”. “Incense money” is money contributed to pay respect to the dead, which also helps cover the expense of the funeral.

Several villagers noted that in recent years it had become more frequent for families not to hold proper, communal funeral rites. For example, previously, it required four-to-six pallbearers’ assistance to carry the body on its journey from the village up to the mountain. This journey was a noisy and public spectacle, usually accompanied by firecrackers and gongs and a drum, which the whole village would know about. Now, with just a phone call, the crematorium wagon can be sent to collect the body. The body can be disposed of quietly with no mortuary rites or relatives present, and villagers may be left without a chance to pay their last respects to the deceased.

Without the enforcement of cremation by the state, such quiet funerals might not have happened so often. To many villagers, it is as if the death had not occurred at all. The ritual marginalisation of these families is a reflection of their socio-economic marginalisation in the village. Cremation has pushed this marginalisation to new extremes.

5. The role of the state in producing ritual differentiation

Earth burial only became a form of social privilege after the state imposed the practice of cremation on the locals, while at the same time permitting *huaqiao* to continue with earth burial. The key role of the state should be emphasised here. In the discussion above, I have mentioned that one of the official objectives in promoting cremation was the preservation of land and the reduction of forest lost as a result of the building tombs. This is part of the state’s wider efforts to change the practices and beliefs of the population in order to achieve the modernisation and development of the nation. In this section, I consider this process in more detail.

At the heart of the policy on cremation, and the discourse that accompanies it, lie the state ideologies of modernisation and development, which are to be achieved through economic efficiency and rationality. In official discourse, earth burial is labelled an “evil custom from the past” (陈规陋俗). Earth burial is condemned as being “wasteful” (浪费), “feudal” (封建) and “superstitious” (迷信). Eradicating earth burial is therefore in line with the principles of “the frugal funeral” (丧事简办), “civilisation” (文明), and “modernisation” (现代化)⁵¹. By enforcing the practice of universal cremation and discouraging lavish displays and funeral processions, state agents also aim to efface the socio-economic differences displayed at funerals. The extravagance displayed at funerals is perceived to be specifically related to the practice of earth burial and is viewed by the state as wasteful and irrational.

Peasants have long been the targets of state efforts as modernisation. Cohen (Cohen, 2005: 60-76) went so far as to argue that the category “peasant” is a political-cultural invention of the CCP that serves to justify the latter’s position as the progressive force. Similarly, the powerful contemporary official and popular discourse of *suzhi* (素质, human quality) attributes social-cultural “backwardness” to the peasants, and justifies the need for the state to raise their level of *suzhi* (Kipnis, 2006). Earth burial is specifically regarded as evidence of peasants’ “low quality” (*di suzhi*, 低素质). A number of documents promoting cremation draw a direct correlation between the earth burial ban and the improvement of the peasants’ “low quality”, backwardness and ignorance⁵². In Mashan, where most of the villagers are classified as peasants, the *suzhi* discourse is readily adopted by local state agents as the rationale and justification for the ban. The peasants of Mashan are therefore the objects of modernisation; they belong to a group with “low quality”, who need to be modernised and improved, in part through the imposition of new funeral practices. In contrast to the peasants, in contemporary China, *huaqiao* are identified as agents of modernisation or positive forces for economic development.

⁵¹ 广东省殡葬管理工作“十五”计划, 广东省人民政府办公厅文件, 粤府办〔2001〕61号

⁵² 关于将殡葬改革列为评选文明单位重要条件的通知

In the chapter, I have demonstrated that it is by examining the work of officials whose jurisdiction covers *qiaoxiang* that one can best understand the contrasting statuses attributed to *huaqiao* and their hometown counterparts as well as the very different treatment these two groups receive from officials. There is certainly much at stake for local officials in their attempts to find resolutions between those policies that aim to modernise the peasants and those often conflicting policies that aim to achieve modernisation by tapping the resources of *huaqiao*. The cremation percentage of any administrative unit, like Mashan village or a town is listed as “an important category for gauging the civilisation level of the unit”⁵³. For the village cadres, the cremation rate is therefore an important indicator of their political performance, which affects their annual bonuses from the town and county government. As a result, local officials go to great lengths to enforce the policy on cremation, and in doing so they embrace the state’s discourse on the importance of modernising the village and raising the “quality” of the villagers. However, it seems that when these same state agents confer the privilege of earth burial on *huaqiao*, they are neither concerned that the village’s modernisation will be blocked nor that the “quality” of *huaqiao* might suffer from their practice of this “evil custom”. Instead, paradoxically, granting *huaqiao* permission to have earth burials is seen as a means to modernisation.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the local practices and discourses of cremation and earth burial as two co-existing ways of handling dead bodies. These different methods of dealing with dead bodies have been shown to be connected to local notions about the afterlife and the significance of bones for the transmission of ancestral blessings to future generations.

In discussing these issues, I have emphasised the impact that the state’s policy of cremation has had in producing a ritual stratification in relation to the disposal of dead bodies. At the same time, I have demonstrated that villagers’ own understandings of cremation and earth burial are also important and the villagers

⁵³关于将殡葬改革列为评选文明单位重要条件的通知

can be understood to have creatively responded to the state's policy. In order to attract overseas investment to Mashan, a concession has been made to *huaqiao* allowing them to continue with earth burial, and this is officially justified with reference to their status as foreign nationals/outsideers. However, this has given rise to a critical social division within the lineage between those whose bones will be burnt and those whose bones will be preserved. In line with local *fengshui* theory, *huaqiao* are therefore understood to benefit from their ancestors' blessings, whereas, local villagers are forced to use cremation which may result in the loss of "a potential source of regeneration" to the living and future generations (Bloch and Parry 1982:15).

My focus has been on how earth burial has been transformed from an ordinary local custom into a symbolic privilege, and how this privilege further creates symbolic stratification within the village society. Although the official compromise of earth burial for *huaqiao* may just be "a return to pragmatism" by party officials (Watson J 1984: 2), from the perspective of the locals, these differing modes of body disposal give access to different afterlives and different futures. Compared to *huaqiao*, villagers are relegated to a lower stratum in both earthly and heavenly hierarchies.

By way of conclusion, I want to address three general points. Firstly, body disposal should be considered as an important part of funeral ritual in Mashan. Watson (1988) does not include rites of disposal as a basic element in the Chinese elementary structure of death ritual. Whyte (1988), on the other hand, proposed that cremation and earth burial, as rites of disposal, should be studied as part of death ritual in China (1984: 292 footnote 8; 314). I agree with Whyte as disposal of the body was certainly a key concern for villagers in Mashan in the late 1990s and it continues to be at the beginning of the 21st century.

My findings in Mashan village are somewhat to similar to what Whyte found nearly 30 years ago in the urban areas of China. Whyte argued that in post-1949 China the rural-urban gap had been widened with the introduction of cremation to the cities while people in the countryside continued the practice of earth burial (1988: 303). When cremation was later imposed on villagers, with privileged

access to earth burial reserved only for *huaqiao*, a gap in the arena of death emerged within the same *qiaoxiang* community, rather than just between cities and rural areas.

Secondly, in this chapter and in Chapter Five, I have provided two accounts of returns to Mashan. In Chapter Five, Dashan was seen to be like a returning, vengeful son of the community. In this chapter, I have described how through death ritual the dead are “sent away” to the other world in order that they may return as proper ancestors. Although very different in nature, the returns of both Dashan and the ancestors have nevertheless been acutely transformed by the state agenda of modernisation and official policies favouring *huaqiao*.

For Dashan, the policies have led to a transformation that has greatly benefitted him. He returned as a distinguished *huaqiao*, leaving behind him the label of a “landlord son” and a history of eating bitterness. Due to his privileged connections beyond the village world to local state agents and a foreign nation, his mother was one of the few who would return as a proper ancestor with her bones preserved. However, for most locals the transformation the state has brought about in relation to death ritual has been for the worse. Cremation, at least from the point of view of villagers, destroys the potential for the proper return of ancestors. Ancestral bones secured through earth burial used to be vital to ensure the reinstallation of the dead as “settled ancestors” (Watson JL 1982:181), and failure to ensure correct burial risked that they would return as vengeful or hungry ghosts that may harm the living. Recognition of “the unbroken line of descent”, i.e., the ideal social order, depends on the reciprocal relationship between the living and the dead (Watson JL 1982:182). Therefore, as a result of the state’s new policy on cremation, the villagers are left with a deep anxiety over their failure to perform their filial duties to their parents and ancestors.

Thirdly, inspired by Yan’s (1992) delineation of “a dual structure of social stratification”, i.e., the socialist-bureaucratic rank order and a market-based economic class order, in this chapter, I have investigated the production of inequality within Mashan in general. Yan’s analysis suggests that one of the striking consequences of the reforms has been the decrease of the village cadres’

previously superior status. In contrast to the decreasing status of cadres, the former political outcasts, once categorised as the “four bad elements” or “black hands”, have, like Dashan, gained economic success in the newly emerging market economy.

Yan’s (1996) dualistic framework of bureaucratic rank and economic class is too simple. To understand the status of *huaqiao* in *qiaoxiang*, it is also important to take into account the ritual or symbolic hierarchy. Obviously, *huaqiao* are neither incumbent nor retired bureaucrats in the bureaucratic system. Earth burial is not available even to high-ranking Chinese officials. It cannot be purchased in the market either. Even the very rich locals are not able to circumvent the rules. By their exclusive access to earth burial, *huaqiao* occupy a higher position in the ritual hierarchy than local officials.

The high ritual/symbolic status of *huaqiao* must be a separate form of hierarchy from the dual structure identified by Yan. *Huaqiao* are granted high ritual status not simply owing to their actual and potential financial power or their bureaucratic rank. The evidence here suggests that neither bureaucratic nor economic capital can be converted into this type of symbolic capital. Thus, we should distinguish between domestic capital that remains in China, and foreign capital that can be imported to China. What makes the capital of *huaqiao* more powerful than the capital of wealthy local Chinese is the foreignness of *huaqiao*.

Conclusion: Leaving the village, history and individualisation

This thesis began, in the prologue, with the accounts of two village girls: Wisdom and Faith. Wisdom complained about the public greeting ceremonies held for *huaqiao* returnees. Faith expressed her desire to travel further from home after college education in order both to achieve success and demonstrate this success to people in the village. These two narratives – of ambivalence towards *huaqiao* and the links between migration and success – have run through the ethnography and arguments of this thesis. This will be evident in this concluding chapter, in which I begin by first briefly summarising the main findings of the previous chapters. Having reviewed the arguments of the thesis thus far, I will then discuss some of the wider implications of the material presented here.

In Chapter One, I introduced the three key themes of the thesis: 1) individualisation as a process in China – a topic which I explored with reference to the work of Yan Yunxiang (2003, 2009); 2) separation as a step towards autonomy and freedom but which often intensifies one's sense of belonging and community ties – an argument which I developed using the work of Charles Stafford (2003); 3) homeland philanthropy as a means by which individuals make themselves visible to their community.

In the chapters that followed, I examined the importance of these themes in a variety of different contexts in Mashan since the 1980s, including their implications for local perspectives and interactions between villagers, *huaqiao*, ancestors and local state agents. In Chapter Two, I discussed *huaqiao*'s return as a problem for the locals. I argued that while the return of *huaqiao* from overseas is often cast in a glorious and positive light, it can be a cause of strain for local resources and social relationships.

In Chapters Three and Four, I discussed two different forms of group space and considered their dependency on overseas funds. In Chapter Three, I used the construction and demolition of the public building that served as the recreational centre for Mashan Elders' Association members to tell a story of the failure of

grassroots leadership. I argued that the power resurgence of the village elite is fragile in the face of the state and I showed that this fragility is related to the political disgrace that some members of the key local elite suffered in the Maoist era. In Chapter Four, I considered the family houses of Mashan. I presented the local dualism of old and new houses, and examined the hierarchical intimacy in the building and naming of new houses. I demonstrated how locals draw on the discourses of traditional and state collectivism and individual self-reliance when making moral judgements about new houses.

Chapters Five and Six respectively contained accounts of two influential individuals and their position in the village community: Dashan (the former “landlord son” who became a powerful *huaqiao* businessman) and Wu Zetian (the fierce village woman). In Dashan’s story, I discussed the logic of “eating bitterness”. I argued that the discourse of eating bitterness is two sided: it can be viewed as symbolic capital for one’s success, and it can be regarded as a reason for taking revenge. In my description of how Wu Zetian operated both inside and beyond the family threshold, I presented empirical evidence of the actual power that a village woman can hold in a lineage-dominated community. Finally in Chapter Seven, I discussed the ritual stratification that was produced through the use of two different means of body disposal: cremation and earth burial in the village. I argue that under the heavy hand of the state, earth burial as a way of ensuring “the return of ancestors” has been transformed from an ordinary local custom into a symbolic privilege.

By way of conclusion, I will discuss the two broader areas in which this thesis has attempted to contribute to more general debates in anthropology. First, I will discuss the inside/outside dynamics in relation to separation. Second, taking inspiration from the work of Chinese historian Qin Hui, I will discuss the positive role that traditional communities may play on the path towards individualisation vis-à-vis the threatening Chinese state.

1. The dynamics of inside and outside

I want to begin by highlighting the crucial role that the idea of separation and return plays in linking together the process of individualisation with the practice of homeland philanthropy. The inside/outside dynamics to be discussed in this section are related to the issue of separation, which creates the sense of a boundary between inside and outside, home and away from home. Separation from one's family and community is a vital step to achieve at least some degree of individualisation. Yet, separation often contributes to strengthening one's sense of community belonging. Consequently at certain points in their lives, those who have left may want to go back and make charitable efforts.

I have considered two specific kinds of return in this thesis: the return of *huaqiao* who are powerful individuals like Dashan (Chapter Five) and the return of ancestors (Chapter Seven). Locals regarded both prominent *huaqiao* and ancestors as insiders, though they are no longer regularly present in the village. When personal and family histories of past disgrace is invoked, however, the charitable efforts of *huaqiao* may bring about complicated problems and different interpretations in the community. The deceased had to be "properly" sent away before they would return as protective ancestors only at fixed temporal moments of the year in accordance with the ritual calendar. The locals have to carefully manage the relationship with these powerful insiders residing "outside".

The village is believed to be a powerful place: a ritual and efficacious centre. This belief is one of the key reasons for migrants to return. The ritual domain is one of the most important one for homeland philanthropy. The efficacy of this ancestral centre actually has to depend on outsiders – women who married into the village like Wu Zetian, and those who have left and become successful and wealthy like Dashan. Intriguingly, Wu Zetian lived inside the lineage-village but was treated as an outsider who might potentially leave. In contrast, Dashan who lived on the outside is viewed as an insider who would eventually make his actual return.

It is the widowed mother, alive or dead, who clearly figures in the returns of both Dashan (in Chapter Five) and the Taiwanese *huaqiao* who relocated his married-out sister from another province back to Mashan for the continuation of ancestral

worship (Chapter Four). What was perhaps not emphasised enough in the previous chapters was the power of “widowed mothers” in pulling their successful “wandering sons” back, thereby encouraging them to return from the outside. This influential cultural schema linking “widowed mothers” and successful sons is crucial to the belief of the village as a powerful and venerable place. Upon returning, these successful sons often became locally well-known homeland philanthropists in order to honour their suffering “widowed mother”.

Bray (1997:368 footnote 68) has also noted how the image of a “suffering and sacrificing” mother, who stayed behind in the village, plays a key role in encouraging the return of successful sons. Hsiung (1994:88) has argued that the image of mothers as “a symbol of virtue and suffering” in late imperial China was a social construction by both women and their sons who achieved high-ranking official positions. My research in Mashan shows that in the 1990s and early 21st century, this image of mothers continues to be powerful. Both women and their migrant sons are important in maintaining the imagination of the village as a powerful place. However, whether it is mothers or sons who are more important in promoting this image is a question that requires further investigation.

The village is actually a weak place. Without the financial resources from the successful migrants, the new houses named after ancestors will not be built; the tombs will collapse. Villagers in general seek resources from the outside and come up with creative strategies to mobilise various returns from migrants. In the public domain, migrants’ homeland philanthropic activities produce a group of grassroots leaders who organise these resources into social support for villagers. However, their grassroots power is squeezed between dependency on outside finance and the local government (Chapter Three).

It is evident that those who remain in the village of Mashan perceive themselves to be in a social-economically weak place. As I prepared to leave Mashan in early 2008, I said goodbye to villagers and households. To my surprise, some of those whom I had got to know well advised me, “Don’t come back. There is no hope for our village.” This is a common perception among village-based locals. Paradoxically, given the large number of glorious returns of *huaqiao* from the

1980s to the first few years of 21st century, the de-population of the village was very noticeable throughout my fieldwork period. I was only able to talk with a fairly small number of young adult villagers in their twenties and thirties. Upon graduating from junior high school, the majority of the young now migrate to the cities for work. In order not to be left behind, the children of those villagers who were once left-behind in a *qiaoxiang* now try to capture every opportunity available to leave their hometown, even when this means they will have to face more hardship in the outside world.

The locals have a love-hate relationship with the powerful, whether they are successful migrants, ancestors, a fierce married-in woman, or local government officials. It is a two-way process rather than simply the poor “resisting” the powerful, or the powerful dominating the poor. The poor sometimes want to be close to the powerful. But sometimes they complain the powerful are corrupt.

2. The role of the traditional community in the process of individualisation

In this section, I discuss the potentially positive role that small-scale communities like the lineage/village of Mashan can play in the Chinese individualisation process. My discussion makes extensive use of the theory of influential Chinese historian Qin Hui (Qin, 2003, 2011). To briefly recap on the discussion on individualisation that featured in Chapter One, Yan’s individualisation theory (Yunxiang Yan, 2003) implies that in China collective-oriented communities such as the lineage/village obstruct the process of individualisation. For this reason, Yan emphasises the necessity of leaving one’s parents or extended family in order to become individualised.

In contrast to Yan, Qin Hui (2003:61-126; 2011:405-421) proposes that traditional small-scale communities, such as lineages or villages, do not necessarily prevent the process of individualisation. There is much that anthropologists of China can learn from Qin’s historical work, but it is not possible to give a comprehensive overview of this work here. Instead, I will just summarise those arguments of his that are relevant to the Chinese individualisation process (2003; 2011). On the basis of his historical research into the links between Chinese tradition, political

culture and state power, Qin proposes that it is actually historically possible for the expansion of individual rights and community growth to occur as part of the same process, because of the “alliance between individuals and small-scale communities”. It should be noted that the term “alliance” here refers to an abstract conjunction of interests rather than an actual or official agreement (Qin 2003:106-117).

Qin has observed that (2011: 421):

Behind the disintegration of minor communities⁵⁴ is not the growth of citizens’ individuality or individual rights; however, there is such a possibility in China’s modernisation drive. The development of minor community bondage does not contradict the development of citizens’ individuality and individual rights; that is true at least within a certain period of time when citizens ally with minor communities.

My village ethnography confirms Qin Hui’s insight that individualisation may coincide with the increasing strength of local communities. In the case of Mashan, returning to one’s community can be a strategic part of the individualisation process in China. Individuals become individuals *through* community. Donations for the public good in Mashan may simultaneously be investments in the individual and in the community. Individualisation as a process is rooted in the structure of the community. The Chinese individualisation process has embedded itself in the community. The expansion of both communal and individualistic space can mutually facilitate each other. This is because, as Qin (2011) argues, communities and individuals face a common enemy, i.e., the threat of the intrusive and omnipresent state.

The initial power resurgence of the grassroots elites and the expansion of the public provision of welfare available to the village’s elderly people comes from the revival of the village identity as a *qiaoxiang*. The *Laoren Hui* has emerged to become part of the community structure which has enabled the growth of the rights and benefits of both elite and ordinary villagers. The public life of the village is revitalised with overseas funds. The collective identity of Mashan person has been

⁵⁴ By “minor communities”, Qin is referring to the small-scale communities such as lineages or villages.

emphasised. The elderly villagers' dependence on the community has grown. To Yan, this would mean the counter-trend of individualisation. Qin's works add some deeper level of understanding to my ethnographic material. This growth of both community identity and individual rights is characteristic of the process towards individualisation in China.

Qin Hui's Critique of the lineage model

Using historical evidence and by adopting a comparative approach, Qin has convincingly argued that it is a mistake to see the lineage or local patriarchal community as an obstacle to Chinese individualisation and modernity. Central to Qin's argument is his sophisticated critique of the lineage model developed by Maurice Freeman (1971, 1965) and others such as Baker (1968), James Watson (1975) and Rubie Watson (2007). While anthropologists have rejected the lineage paradigm because of the limits of its structural-functionalist approach, Qin (2003) uses a comparative and historical perspective to provide a critique of the idea that lineage is paradigmatic of Chinese culture or Chinese tradition. Specifically, he rejects the image of Chinese as always putting family interests or lineage interests before those of the individual. He further rejects the binary opposition that Chinese are collective-centred while Western Europeans are individual-centred. There are two stages to his critique. First, he lists four reasons for the production of the misconception about the difference between China and the West (Qin 2011: 407-410). Second, he makes a historical, structural comparison of local communities in pre-1949 China and pre-industrial Europe. The historical period of Europe that he chooses for comparison is important and I reflect on this methodological point below.

According to Qin (2011: 405-412), there are four reasons why a mistaken contrast was made between Chinese culture, which supposedly emphasised the collective, and Western culture, which supposedly emphasised the individual. The lineage paradigm, which Qin sees as having its roots in the mid-19th century in the coastal areas of south China, has played a key role in shaping this contrast. The first reason is related to the timing of the beginning of the intensified contact between China and the West. By the 19th century, Western European countries and China were at different historical stages. For example, at that time, England had basically already

completed the transition from “lineage society to civil society” (James, 1974: 177-194). Qin also draws on Marc Bloch’s two volume work *Feudal Society* to stress that the kind of lineage constraint and protection based on lineage property in medieval Europe may have been even stronger than that of Chinese lineages. Describing this period, Bloch went as far as to write that “There was no real friendship save between persons united by blood” (Bloch, 1962:124, Quoted by Qin, 2003, 86). Qin points out that, in medieval Europe, “consanguine communities and other non-consanguine communities like villages, trade unions, parishes, fiefs, etc had no less influence in the West than their counterparts had in the East” (2011:408).

The second reason is related to the Chinese “May Fourth” Movement, which began around 1919, when Chinese people were fighting against foreign invasions. The shackles preventing individual liberation such as ‘arranged marriage, patriarchal system, and clan and husband authorities’ were at that time attributed to family and clan authority. But thinkers at the time ignored the role of the state—which arguably had more of an impact on individuals’ rights. That is, they focused on ‘culture’ and social constraints over politics.

Drawing from Tonnies’ (2011) “Community and Society”, Qin identifies the third reason as resulting from the differences between traditional Western society and traditional Chinese society. For Qin, these two societies “differ most fundamentally in that Western society indeed emphasises minor communities” (2011:409-410) while in China an autocratic central imperial state has been very advanced for a long time. The nation-state and statism is a modern development in Europe. The fourth reason Qin discusses is that the attention of Western sinologists has been confined to the southeast coastal area where the most developed clan system can be found in China (410).⁵⁵

Qin’s comparison between medieval Western Europe and China avoids the pitfalls of cultural particularism and provides an enlightening and fruitful perspective on the lineage paradigm. Qin provides an explanation for the seemingly “illogical”

⁵⁵ Many anthropologists have since done research outside of southeast China.

phenomenon in coastal areas in southeast China, including the Pearl River Delta and Yangzi River Valley, where the most prominent lineage development took place in the most economically developed areas both during the 19th century and after the 1980s. This observation of “illogical” development of lineage revival in the areas affected most strongly by a market-oriented economy is similar to Brandtstädter’s (2003) discussion of the South China Paradox, which I considered in Chapter One of this thesis.

My research confirms Qin's argument. The revival of the lineage ideology, tradition and collective associations in Mashan should not simply be dismissed as something negative to the process of individualisation. They are resources available for the individuals, both overseas and village-based, to achieve their individualistic goals. For example, in Chapter Four, the houses funded by overseas relatives were named after the common ancestors of *huaqiao* funders and the village-based relatives. *Huaqiao* gained symbolic capital by honouring their ancestors while villagers were happy to enjoy a new house.

The role of the state

While Yan stresses the role of the collective-oriented traditional community in obstructing the process of individualisation in China, Qin instead focuses on the role of the autocratic state. Qin disagrees with the following popular argument among social scientists on China that:

before 1949, the power of the central state only reached the county level. ... Administrative units under that level were autonomous villages and their autonomous interests were represented by the landed gentry who practiced autonomy according to their clan system” (Qin 2011, 414-415).

While concurring that such a description might seem reasonable when villages in imperial China are compared with the situation of state penetration in post-1949 villages, he cautions that claims of local autonomy cannot hold water if Chinese lineage communities are compared with other traditional communities either in Vietnam or those in Europe (2011, 417). In China, the state has long had a role even at the local level.

Through a cross-cultural comparison of small-scale communities in pre-modern times, Qin points out that the kind of lineage communities discovered and researched by anthropologists of China since the 19th century were not as “cohesive” or “autonomous” as those in Western Europe or Russia. He argues that the absence of the moral bonds of small-scale communities in China partially explains why Chinese peasants’ resistance against the state program of collectivisation in the 1950s was much lower than that expressed by peasants in Russia in the 1920s. However, looking at variations within China, peasants’ resistance to the collectivisation of the 1950s was stronger in the coastal areas, where lineages were more developed, than in other areas.

According to Qin, neither strong local collectives nor individualism had had the chance to develop before 1911. He explains this by arguing that the dominance of Legalism (fajia, 法家) from very early times in the political-bureaucratic system and in the political culture of imperial China resulted in the state having a monopoly of power over households. Legalism emphasised a state absolutely dominant over all individuals within its reach. The strict legalist state thus prevented the development of powerful intermediary collectives between the state and the household. In South China, the emergence of the lineage community during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties is, to some extent, an exception rather than a norm. It is a result of the central government gradually weakening control over local society during the era when the imperial Chinese state was in decline, especially towards the end of Qing Dynasty. Qin argues that the advancement of lineages is entangled with and facilitates the development of the commodity economy and the collective enterprising spirit of the lineage.

Qin’s argument is similar to that made by David Faure (2007) and Hill Gates (1996) who have both proposed that lineage developed as a means of protection for local society against the state. Discussing the impact of the lineage emergence through land reclamation in the Pearl River Delta, Faure comments “The Ming dynasty village gained its autonomy from the state under the ritual umbrella” (Faure, 2007:13). Gates finds that lineage provides “the guise of kinship” (Gates, 1996:120)

for the development of petty capitalism, “Regions such as the southeast coast where officials could not stamp out lineage political autonomy (feuding) were also regions where they had difficulty in collecting taxes and suppressing petty capitalism” (Gates, 1996:107). Faure and Gates have both proposed that lineages were better able to secure their autonomy in regions which were more remote from the centres of the imperial state, especially as the power and reach of the imperial state declined during the Qing dynasty.

Drawing on the work of historians on the imperial state’s control over population and households (杜正胜, 1990), of anthropologists working on peasant societies, as well as archaeological evidence that has recently become available, Qin argues that “legalism...had greater influence over the formation of Chinese culture” than is usually thought. He uses the phrase “儒表法里 or 外儒内法” (*rubiaofaili, wairuneifa*, Confucianism on the outside but Legalism on the inside) to characterise the Chinese political and social system and argues this is a very important but often neglected part of Chinese tradition. Perry Anderson (2010: 3-6), quoting influential China historian Ping-ti Ho (He Bingdi), similarly points out that “the realities of rule by successive dynasties” are “Ornamentally Confucianism and Functionally Legalist” (2010:6). There is “a tradition of centralised autocracy” by the state, which had a monopoly on power and rules through “repression wrapped in moralising rhetoric” (Anderson, 2010:6).

Qin argues that it is this Legalist tradition that has oppressed both the expansion of “small-scale communities” and individual rights in China. Thus, Qin sees China’s initial stage of individualisation and modernisation as being different to the equivalent stage in Europe. He describes the European path to individualisation as featuring “the alliance of the King and the citizens” (2003:108) at the initial stage of Western European modernisation in the late medieval period. This alliance with the state facilitates the citizens’ fight for individual rights, helping them to overcome the constraint and control of their immediate communities.

According to Qin’s analysis, the major obstacle to individual rights and individualisation in China is not the “small-scale community” such as family or

lineage, but rather it is the “major community”, namely the omnipresent power of the state or the central government. He therefore proposes a different route to individualisation in China than put forward by Yan, involving “an alliance between individuals and small-scale communities” including the traditional lineage communities and village communities (2003:120-121). Qin emphasises that it is only a historical possibility that the alliance of these forces will one day lead to individualisation/individualism/individual rights in China.

My findings are illuminated by Qin's theory. In Chapter Three, it was the local state agents who ultimately had the LRH leisure centre (Leyuan) demolished. The demolition resulted in the weakening of the power held by the grassroots elites. In Chapter Seven, it was the state who distributed the earth burial as “earned privilege” (Yan 2011:10) to *huaqiao*. That meant that the majority of local villagers lost the chance to achieve ritual propriety and an important source of symbolic capital. The threatening role of the state was in fact lurking behind both community and individual interests.

Different points of historical comparisons on the individualisation process

Qin's theoretical discussion does not deny the general trend of individualisation in China, but his analysis modifies Yan's understanding of individualisation. Qin does this by comparing the individualisation processes of China and Western Europe at different historical periods. Specifically, Qin compares the process of individualisation in contemporary China not with contemporary Western Europe, but with the early stages of European individualisation in Western Europe, which he identifies as taking place before the 19th century. Qin's comparative methodology is therefore distinct from Yan's (2003, 2010), which compares the contemporary path of Chinese individualisation with the situation in contemporary “post-modern” Western Europe as presented in the work of Ulrich Beck (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). In the European case, individualisation has been underway more than 200 years since the 19th century and has been institutionalised by the welfare state, the education system and the mature market economy. Put differently, Yan's theory suffers from a faulty comparison: he takes two comparators at very different levels of historical development. On this basis, I

consider Qin's comparative methodology to be more justifiable and fruitful than that used by Yan for his comparative work on individualisation in China.

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