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Publication Date

2014-05-31

Social Status Compensation: Variations on the Sending of Cultural Remittances among Chinese Overseas

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Presented at the International Conference on "New Horizons of Diasporic Chinese Studies:
Evolving Themes, Changing Frameworks, Future Directions," Nanyang Technological University,
Singapore, March 21-22, 2014

Abstract: Economic reform and social transformation in China since the late 1970s have revitalized diaspora-homeland ties and created new opportunities for transnational engagement. Chinese overseas have made significant contributions to their ancestral homeland's economic development via foreign direct investment and monetary remittances. They have also donated money to build symbolic structures, such as village gates, monuments, spiritual statues, and street altars, as well as cultural facilities, such as museums, cultural centers, libraries, and public parks, for collective consumption. We call these donations cultural remittances. While cultural remittances have left an indelible imprint on the landscape of migrant-sending hometowns in China, emigrants from different hometowns and resettled in different receiving countries vary in their sending of cultural remittances. This paper proposes a theoretical framework of social status compensation to explain the variations in this particular type of transnational practice among international migrations. We illustrate this framework with a comparative analysis of ethnographic fieldwork data from two migrant-sending communities in South China. We find that the sending of cultural remittances serves as a unique mechanism for social status compensation and that this type of transnational practice is not merely caused by migrants' own initiatives or by state policies from the top, but also by responses and actions of local governments and local societies in migrant hometowns. It is the interaction of individual experiences at the micro level, such as felt or experienced social marginalization, and multi-level contextual factors, such as wage differential, currency exchange rates, and hometown reception, that affects the realization of social status compensation and accounts for regional variations.

Keyword: cultural remittances, social status compensation, transnationalism, Chinese overseas, diaspora

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**Social Status Compensation:
Variations on the Sending of Cultural Remittances among Chinese Overseas¹
Min Zhou and Xiangyi Li**

INTRODUCTION

Economic reform and social transformation in the People's Republic of China since the late 1970s have revitalized diaspora-homeland ties and created new opportunities for immigrant transnationalism. Hundreds and thousands of Chinese overseas have returned to China to capitalize on new opportunities in the growing economy while searching for roots in their ancestral homeland. Chinese overseas have made important contributions to China's economic development via foreign direct investment and to the economic well-being of families and communities in hometowns through constant flows of monetary remittances. They have also donated money to build symbolic structures, such as village gates, monuments, spiritual statues, and street altars, as well as cultural facilities, such as museums, cultural centers, libraries, and public parks, for collective consumption. We call these donations "cultural remittances." Cultural remittances are monetary in kind to produce tangible structures or objects of symbolic representation and physical cultural facilities, which are qualitatively different from the types of cultural remittances commonly understood in the existing literature as the flow of ideas, values, musical or artistic forms, literary texts, and other cultural expressions in the context of Caribbean and Latin American immigrant transnationalism (Flores, 2009; Levitt, 1998; Page, 2010).

In recent years, cultural remittances have left an indelible imprint on the landscape of migrant hometowns or villages in China, commonly referred to as *qiaoxiang* in Chinese. These remittances have profoundly impacted the sociocultural development, which has in turn nurtured a more open environment sustaining hometown economic development and migrant transnational practices (Chen, 2005; Kuah, 2000; Li and Zhou, 2012; Portes and Zhou, 2012; Smart and Lin, 2007; Taylor et al., 2003; Woon, 1990). From our observation, however, some hometowns flourish with steady flows of cultural remittances while others decline with few such remittances. This paper aims to identify the causes for variations in this particular type of transnational practice among emigrants from different hometowns. This paper proposes a theoretical framework of social status compensation to explain why emigrants from different hometowns and resettled in different receiving countries vary in their sending of cultural remittances and illustrate it with a comparative analysis of ethnographic fieldwork data from two migrant-sending communities in South China. We

specially address two main questions: (1) What drives Chinese overseas to send cultural remittances back to their hometowns? (2) How do they achieve their remitting objectives? We argue that the sending of cultural remittances can serve as a unique mechanism for social status compensation. It is not merely associated with migrants' own socioeconomic circumstances in the host society and state government policies from the top, but also by individual experiences at the micro level, such as felt or experienced social marginalization, and by multi-level contextual factors, such as wage differential, currency exchange rates, and hometown reception, that affects the realization of social status compensation and accounts for regional variations. We examine how these factors interact to enable or stifle that sending of cultural remittances and accounts for regional variations.

SOCIAL STATUS COMPENSATION IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANSNATIONALISM

In the age of globalization, more and more international migrants are participating in the transnational fields to conduct frequent and orderly activities in trade, finance, manufacturing, politics, and culture in their ancestral homelands while striving to integrate into their host societies (Glick-Schiller *et al.*, 1992; Guarnizo *et al.*, 1999; Itzigsohn, 1995; Levitt, 1998; Portes *et al.*, 2002; Portes and Zhou, 2012; Vertovec, 2004). Although immigrant transnational practices do not constitute a “new” phenomenon, the type, range, depth, and frequency, as well as the socioeconomic consequences, of current patterns, which differ significantly from those of the past, are worthy of continual research (Portes *et al.*, 1999).

Cross-border flows of remittances are generally considered important measures of immigrant transnationalism (De la Garza and Lowell, 2002; De la Garza *et al.*, 2002; Diaz-Briquets and Weintraub, 1991; Durand *et al.*, 1996; Portes and Zhou, 2012). Studies of migrant remittances have paid ample attention to monetary remittances and their economic impacts on families and communities from which migrants have hailed. Remittances in hard currency support the basic subsistence of left-behind families while helping these families to achieve self-sufficiency and social mobility, such as financing family businesses, land acquisition, and construction of new homes for family members and for migrants’ own transnational living or retirement needs as well (Durand *et al.*, 1996; Goldring, 2004; Guarnizo, 1997; Landolt, 2001). Moreover, monetary remittances, even those used for household economics, generate the “multiplier effect” to benefit non-migrant households as well as local and regional developments in migrants’ ancestral villages or towns (Durand *et al.*, 1996; Massey and Parrado, 1998; Taylor *et al.*, 2003).

However, the existing literature has limited information on the sending of monetary remittances for noneconomic purposes, and most of these non-economic remittances are intangible,

such as political remittances, which refers to the transfer of egalitarian ideology and leadership styles, activism, migrant rights (Piper, 2009); social remittances, which refer to the flows of ideas, norms, practices, and identities between emigrant and immigrant communities transnationally (Levitt, 1998; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011); and cultural remittances, which include musical, artistic, and literary forms, ideas, and expressions (Flores, 2009; Page, 2010). Other non-economic remittances are charitable donations, in money or tangible goods, for natural disaster relief, poverty reduction, education, and other social welfare goals. While these various forms of non-economic remittances tend to transcend emigrant communities from the local to the regional, national, and even international, research on tangible cultural remittances has been scant, leaving a substantial void.

What motives migrants to remit? Prior research has focused on two different motives. The altruistic motive emphasizes remitting without any strings attached while the self-interested motive emphasizes remitting for economic benefits (Lucas and Stark, 1985; Kelly and Solomon, 2009). At the individual level, migrants' demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, marital status, and generation) and socioeconomic characteristics (e.g., education, job skills, and earnings, as well as proficiency in the dominant language(s) and citizenship status of the host countries) are found to be important determinants. At the group level, the proportions of foreign born, highly skilled, and self-employed of a migrant group, the strength and level of integration of the migrant community, and a migrant group's social position in receiving countries are found to influence the sending of various types of remittances (Gold, 2001; Guarnizo *et al.*, 1999; Diaz-Briquets and Weintraub, 1991; Itzigsohn, 1995; Goldring, 1996; Popkin 1999; Portes *et al.*, 2002). At the level of the state, policies of immigration and immigrant integration of the receiving country, bilateral relations between sending and receiving states, and sending-country policies are key macro-structural factors. In fact, sending-country governments have interacted proactively with their compatriots to promote

monetary remittances for investment and development projects of various kinds (Iskander, 2010; Portes and Zhou, 2012; Rodriguez, 2010). However, how local governments and non-governmental institutions as primary actors in transnational practices have not been adequately studied.

In the study of overseas Chinese hometowns, scholars have developed four micro-behavioral models. The diasporic identity reaffirmation sees migrants' remitting behavior, regardless of types of remittances, as a way to maintain or rebuild ties to their ancestral hometowns or villages. In the process, migrants reaffirmed their "Chineseness" in the diaspora and symbolic existence in the homeland (Chen, 2005; Liu, 2005). The social capital accumulation model sees the sending of remittances as a two-step strategy toward an economic goal. First migrants seek to establish altruistic images of "patriotic" compatriot and the "we-group" status in hometown for the purpose to tapping into local networks of *guanxi* (social connections). In turn, they use *guanxi* to capture and capitalize on current or future economic opportunities in China (Smart and Lin, 2007). The conspicuous consumption model focuses on consumption patterns among compatriots and their left-behind families in hometowns. Migrants remit their hard-earned dollars to build imposing symbolic structures and hold luxurious banquets and celebratory events for everybody in hometowns to as a way of regaining or establishing social reputations (Li, 1999; Wang, 2000). The moral obligation fulfillment model explains remitting from the sending-community perspective. Catering to the desire of Chinese overseas to maintain diasporic ties, identities, the sense of belonging, government officials and local elites in hometowns innovatively employ strategies — conferring honor or applying shame — to incorporate their compatriots into the moral system of the hometown so as to sustain the constant flow of monetary remittances (Kuah, 2000; Li, 2005). These four models shed important lights but are still constrained by the classical dichotomy of altruism v. self-interest while neglecting mechanisms and intervening processes at the local level and the interaction between the individual actor and institutional actors of the sending community.

Our ethnographic fieldwork in migrant hometowns in China shows that not all migrants are keen on sending cultural remittances to their hometowns and that hometowns are not equal recipients of cultural remittances either. Such different patterns cannot be explained by individual motives or the social pressure on the migrant. In our view, cultural remittances produce visible objects and structures in hometowns for public consumption, through which the senders can achieve different degrees of social recognition for their good deeds. Thus, the sending of cultural remittances may be seen as an alternative means of attaining social status for international migrants. Social status is multi-dimensional involving wealth, power and prestige. We focus on the prestige dimension in the current study. Unlike wealth and power, which can be quantitatively measured, prestige indicates the degree of honor or reputation attached to an individual's social position in society (Weber, [1922]2010; Zhai, 1999). It is both subjective and relative, measured by a person's own assessment vis-à-vis a reference group and others' recognition of such self-assessment, regardless of the person's wealth or power (Zhai, 1999). International migrants often experience a social status gap vis-à-vis the native-born in the receiving country, or social status loss vis-à-vis their past statuses in the sending country before migration (Li and Chen, 2011; Li and Zhou, 2012; Wang, 2000). However, immigrants not only use different frames of reference or traverse different contexts, most commonly between receiving and sending countries, to fill their social status gap (Min, 1992; Wang 2000). We thus develop a theoretical framework of social status compensation to explain why migrants send cultural remittances and why migrants from different hometowns show different patterns of remittance-sending.

As Figure 1 illustrates, our theoretical framework takes into account the interaction of three level of determining factors. We consider the immigrant's social status gap, felt or experienced, as a key determinant. In the receiving country, an immigrant group's social position in the status hierarchy, migration history, and diasporic integration influence individual experiences at the micro

level. If an immigrant group is marginalized in the host society, it would be difficult for group members, including those who are socioeconomically mobile, to have their social status, attained prior to or after migration, recognized and validated by the host society. Likewise, newer and less integrated immigrants are more likely to experience status gap. Hence, the social status gap, whether it is perceived or experienced, is likely to increase an immigrant's desire to seek social status compensation elsewhere, usually in migrant hometowns.

Social status compensation via cultural remittances entails costs. Generally speaking, longer-time and more integrated migrants have greater ability than their newer and less integrated coethnics to send cultural remittances, but may have less desire to do so if their social status can be recognized in the host society. However, the costs of cultural remittances as social status symbols are determined not only by the migrants' own socioeconomic circumstances but also by wage differential and currency exchange rates between the sending and receiving countries. Higher wages in receiving countries would enable even those who make minimum wages to remit. Favorable foreign exchange rates between the sending and receiving country lower the actual cost of cultural remittances.

Most importantly, the sending of cultural remittances is also determined by hometown reception. Whether cultural remittances can effectively be utilized for social status compensation depends on whether the hometown can provide compatriots with social status confirmation and rewards. Hometown institutions — local governments, local societies, and transnational media — are particularly critical in help migrants realize social status compensation in that they confer honor and rewards, confirm group membership and status in the local society, and provide means of publicly acknowledging rewards and honors.

[Figure 1 about here]

DATA AND METHODS

Guided by our theoretical framework, we explain why some migrants send cultural remittances while others do not and why there are variations in the receipt of cultural remittances in different emigrant hometowns. We do so through data collected from ethnographic case studies in two traditional hometowns — Kan Town and Wen Town — in South China.

Kan Town is located in Kaiping City (used to be a rural county up till 1993) in central south Guangdong, with a population of 687,000 people as of 2010. Large-scale Chinese emigration started in the mid-19th century as part of labor migration, and the primary destination was North America. The total number of Kan Town compatriots overseas, including people of Chinese descent in Hong Kong and Macau, was estimated at 750,000 as of 2009 and the majority resides in the United States and Canada. Contemporary emigration from Kan Town has been on a rapid and upward trend, where relatives back home are queuing up to emigrate, taking advantage of the family reunification preference of the 1965 US Hart-Celler Act and the 1962 Canadian Human Rights Act. Thus the proportion of foreign born Kan Town compatriots in the United States and Canada is relatively high, at more than 60 percent.

Wen Town is located in Wenchang City (used to be a rural county up till 1995) in northeast Hainan Province, with a population of 584,600 people in 2010. It has a much longer history of emigration than Kan Town and the number of Wen Town compatriots is much higher, estimated at nearly 1.2 million, with the majority residing in Southeast Asia, such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. Because of the relatively stringent immigration policies in receiving countries, contemporary emigration from Wen Town to Southeast Asia has been slow. As a result,

the foreign born Wen Town compatriots in Southeast Asia accounts for less 30 percent of the people of Chinese descent in the region, who are also much older.

We conducted fieldwork in 2010, which included participant observations, in-depth interviews, reference group comparisons between Chinese immigrants and those who have never migrated overseas. Most of the fieldwork was conducted in Kan Town and Wen Town. We also interview Chinese immigrants from these two hometowns in New York, Los Angeles, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur in 2011-13 and re-analyzed findings from the existing literature on the histories of emigration from these two hometowns.

Since the economic reform in the late 1970s until the turn of the 21st century, cultural remittances to Kaiping City, in which Kan Town is a part, were estimated at about 1.1 billion yuan (*renminbi*), or 1,467 yuan per Chinese overseas from that region.² During the same time period, in contrast, cultural remittances to Wenchang City, in which Wen Town is a part, were estimated at roughly 381 million yuan, or only 323 yuan per Chinese overseas from that region.³ Why is there such a large variation on the sending of cultural remittances between these two emigrant groups? Next, we offer an in-depth analysis of three sets of factors—desire for social status recognition, costs of cultural remittances as social status symbols, and hometown receptions of cultural remittances—and their effect on the realization of social status compensation.

SOCIAL STATUS GAP AND THE DISIRE FOR SOCIAL STATUS COMPENSATION

Kan Town Migrants in North America

The Chinese called America the “gold mountain,” and Chinese immigrants in North America “guests of the gold mountain.”⁴ Kan Town migrants belong to the Siyi (Sze Yap) dialect group originated from the Siyi region, which has a long history of international migration dating back to the mid-19th century.⁵ Prior to World War II (WWII), America’s Chinatowns was dominated by the Siyi dialect group. Most emigrants from Kan Town went to North America, with a vast majority to the United States. The guests of the gold mountain have been looked up to as a high status group by those left behind in their hometown.

Earlier Kan Town migrants were uneducated peasants, arriving in North America as contract laborers or being trafficked as “coolies” (literally meaning “bitter strengths” in Chinese). They were initially sojourners, leaving their families behind in sending villages and having the intention to return home eventually with gold and glory (Zhou, 1992). In the United States, the implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882-1943) reinforced their sojourning mentality and forced them into segregated Chinatowns. Immigration restriction and social exclusion, and antimiscegenation laws led to the formation of isolated bachelors’ societies with little hope of integrating into the host society. Despite legal exclusion, however, the Chinese continued to arrive under false identities, fake papers, or other illegal means via a well-established migration network and the support of the diasporic community (Romero 2010). Remitting money to support families left behind in hometown and to contribute to community welfare was both an obligation and a normative practice for Kan Town migrants. The *Kaiping Diaolou and Villages* a World Heritage Site named by UNESCO in 2007 stand as the living testimony of the contribution made by overseas Chinese prior to WWII.

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, emigration from Kan Town to North America had been interrupted for nearly 30 years and the diaspora-homeland ties were completely cut off. Meanwhile, post-WWII United States and Canada removed legal barriers

that had blocked the social mobility of the Chinese, allowing the children and grandchildren of earlier Chinese immigrants to integrate into the host society as middle or upper middle class. Those who lived and worked in Chinatowns, however, still held the sojourning mentality and considered China as home because they had immediate family members left behind.

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

The majority of contemporary migrants from Kan Town are family-sponsored migrants. Like their predecessors who came to the US or Canada earlier, they hail mostly from low socioeconomic status, lacking education, English language proficiency, and transferable job skills. Many find work in ethnic enclaves in North America through family and kin networks and live in inner city Chinatowns or Chinese ethnoburbs.⁶ Like their countrymen who arrived in the US or Canada earlier, contemporary immigrants view American or Canadian life as "enduring hardships" (*aishijie* "捱" 世界) because of their low socioeconomic status and because of their dual obligations—routinely sending monetary remittances to support left-behind families and sponsoring family members to migrate to the US. A Kan Town migrant who had lived in the US for several decades reflected on his life and said:

*We overseas Chinese are actually miserable. Life here is very hard. We came here to work all the time ... If we had found other better choice, we wouldn't have come to the US to "ai" [endure "捱"].*⁷

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

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

The highly integrated immigrants, those who have become naturalized U.S. citizens and have successfully achieved middle class status, also feel the social status gap. They are keenly aware that they are regarded as the “other” and as the “forever foreigners.” Mr. Wu, former president of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in Los Angeles, expressed his frustration in an interview:

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

From Kan Town migrants, “enduring” hardship implies the felt or experienced social status gap, indicating their inability to attain social status in the host society. Since their status as guests of the gold mountain in the hometown is high, they naturally look to their hometown as a place that would have their social status recognized and enable them to “enjoy the world” (*tanshijie* “叹” 世界).¹⁰

The Chinese call Southeast Asia *Nanyang*, a region known by the Chinese as “a culturally less developed host region” where the Chinese were able to claim certain levels of cultural and economic superiority prior to Western colonization (Li, 2002). Chinese to *Nanyang* were initially maritime traders, and the migration of laborers occurred during the mid-19th century up to the late 1930 (Wang, 1991). Before Western colonization in Southeast Asia, the Chinese already established a strong foothold in the region’s economy that had expanded beyond maritime trade into cash-crop farming that yielded such products as sugar, pepper, gambier, and rubber, and other land-based industries such as tin and gold mining (Wickberg, 1999). The arrival of European colonists in Southeast Asia in the mid-19th century shattered the economic dominance of the Chinese and transformed them into a middleman social status, serving as agents for, or partners of, European colonists and other Westerners who traded in Southeast Asia, and later as labor brokers to facilitate large-scale labor migration from China (Wickberg, 1999).

The diasporic Chinese community in *Nanyang* was fragmented by different dialect groups. Hainanese is the smallest groups among the five major dialect groups (Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka, and Hainanese). Most of the earlier migrants from Wen Town were uneducated, low-skilled, and sojourning laborers, except for a small group of merchants. Many resettled in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. They and those from other areas of Hainan clustered to develop the Hainanese ethnic enclaves—“Hainan Village” or “Hainan Street”—for self-help while resisting discrimination from other Chinese dialect groups. In these enclaves, people talked in Hainanese and carried on similar lifestyles, customs, traditions, and religions to those in Hainan (Han, 2008). Wen Town migrants whom we interviewed told that they lived in these Hainanese enclaves, such as Middle Road, Purvis Street, and Seah Street in Singapore, when they were children. Before WWII, these enclaves were isolated from the host society, similar to Chinese

enclaves in the North America. However, the main reason why the Chinese living in enclaves were not they subjected to legal exclusion. Their residential segregation was largely voluntary.

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

Unlike Kan Town migrants, Wen Town migrants are a more settled group with a more balanced sex ratio and a population of multiple local-born generations. Historically, they were able to form families and lead normal family lives either by bringing their wives from China or by intermarrying with local women, and, for some, by establishing second homes in their places of resettlement. Such patterns of resettlement allowed the Chinese diaspora to reproduce itself and prevented it from forming isolated bachelors' societies like Kan Town migrants in the US. As a result, Wen Town migrants are less likely than Kan Town migrants to have immediate family members left behind and thus are less obliged to send remittances or sponsor family migration than Kan Town migrants.¹²

Wen Town migrants are also more integrated into host societies, in which the Chinese are less marginalized than those in the US. Their integration reveals a segmented pattern—a small wealthy entrepreneurial class, a large middle and lower-middle class, and a sizeable working class. For example, in Singapore, the dominant mode of socioeconomic incorporation into the host society is through occupational achievement via education. Wen Town immigrants and their offspring have

more chances to obtain the economic and political resources from the host society to realize their social status. Furthermore, Wen Town migrants have experienced little immigrant replenishment even after China's open door in the late 1979s. The comparatively low level of emigration from Wen Town to *Nanyang* is due partly to restrictive immigration policies in host nation-states in Southeast Asia and partly to the lack of a substantial wage differential in Southeast Asia vis-à-vis China. Because of the truncated migration history, Wen Town migrants are much older, more integrated into the receiving society, and more removed physically from their hometown than Kan Town migrants. In the 1980s, Wen Town migrants donated money to build or repair schools, cultural centers, elderly service centers, ancestral halls, temples, shrines, roads, and bridges out of a nostalgic feeling, unreleased after thirty years of isolation, to reconnect to their hometown. However, since the 1990s, there has witnessed a waning trend of cultural remittances by Wen Town migrants. An elderly migrant explained,

Our hometown government has money now and don't seem to need to rely on us overseas Chinese to send money. Besides, many overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia are not that affluent, we ordinary folks do not have a lot of money to donate. Even if we donate money, it is far from enough for any given project. Most of the time, the local government has to come up with matching funds for projects initiated by us overseas Chinese, not by them. So they are no longer as enthusiastic as before to attract overseas Chinese donations¹³.

COSTS OF CULTURAL REMITTANCES AS SOCIAL STATUS SYMBOLS

The social status gap, felt or experienced, in host societies increases immigrants' desire to seek social status compensation via the sending of cultural remittances to hometowns. In order to realize social status compensation, cultural remittances must be recognized as social status symbols. The costs of performing social status via cultural remittances vary, affected by wage differential in the

receiving country vis-à-vis sending country and the currency exchange rates in addition to migrants' socioeconomic circumstances in receiving countries.

For Kan Town migrants who have resettled in the US, the costs of cultural remittances in Kan Town are relatively low. First, their receiving country—the US—is a dominant nation-state in the global geo-political system vis-à-vis China and has a much high wage rate, especially for low skilled workers. For example, minimum wage in New York and California is at \$7 or higher. An unskilled worker in New York's Chinatown can earn at least \$1,000 per month. Second, the value of the Chinese yuan is relatively weak against the US dollar (more than 6 yuan per dollar). Even though the average earnings of Kan Town migrants in the US are relatively low compared to their more integrated coethnics and to average Americans, they are still significantly higher than those in Kan Town. This wage differential has greatly enable even the low-skilled migrant workers to send cultural remittance back home, and the favorable exchange rate of US currency inflates the value of migrants' hard-earned money. Mr. Kuan, who immigrated to the US in the early 1980s, is a typical example. Mr. Kuan had worked in a Chinese restaurant in Los Angeles for more than 10 years and is now retired. In 2010, he returned home for a family reunion and donated 30,000 yuan (about US\$4,400 in 2010) to the Kuan Clan Library in his hometown. He says in the interview:

Eh, 30,000 yuan is just a little more than 4,000 dollars, and that amount is not unaffordable to me, just about 4 or 5 months' retirement pension and earnings from odd jobs. I don't spend much in America and can save money quite easily. Since I seldom come back, it is necessary to donate to the library, to support my hometown.¹⁴

To Mr. Kuan, whose economic situation is not very satisfied, the amount of donation was affordable, but to the Kuan Clan Library, 30,000 yuan would be a substantial sum which could benefit many people in Kan Town while making him name known. From this example, we can see that even ordinary low-skilled migrants can afford to make donations in the amount that can

produce known reputation and respected social status in their hometowns and realize compatriots' aspiration of returning home to "enjoy the world."

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

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

... Guannan is located in the remote area with a large population. Because of insufficient public transportation, many students have to walk a long distance, more than 10km, to attend middle school, which is exhausting and negatively affects students' mood for study while increasing families' economic burden. As a result, many students have dropped out of school, which is the fundamental reason for the backwardness of education in this area.

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

Steering Committee of Guannan Huaqiao Middle School

December 14, 1985

Awards Offered to Donors:

- *All donors, regardless of the amount contributed, will have their names inscribed on the wall;*

- *Donors who contribute more than 10,000 yuan will have one classroom named after them and have their jade photos hung on the wall, in addition, have two of their relatives' children enjoy three-year free education;*
- *Donors who contribute more than 5,000 yuan will have one dormitory room named after them and have their jade photos hung on the wall, in addition, have one of their relatives' children enjoy three-year free education;*
- *Donors who contribute more than 500 yuan will have ten-inch photos hung on the wall.¹⁵*

Soon after the initial “mobilization letter” was sent abroad, Wen Town compatriots overseas had donated 48,574 yuan, exceeding the expected goal of “30,000 to 40,000 yuan”. Three years later, Guannan Huaqiao Middle School was founded, but without the two buildings in original plan. The school had to borrow classrooms from Guannan Huaqiao Primary School next door. The local elites then issued another solicitation letter in 1990 in the name of Board of Directors of Guannan Huaqiao Middle School, *hoping* to raise more funds to build its two planned teaching buildings. The letter, entitled, “Notice for Fundraising for Guannan Huaqiao Middle School,” read,

To whom it may concern:

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

Board of Directors of Guannna Huaqiao Middle School

January 10, 1990

Award Offered to Donors:

- *Any donor whose donation is more than 100,000 yuan and enough to build one storey of the teaching building (240m²) will have that storey named after him/her and a 20-inch color photo hung on the wall, in addition, have three of his/her relatives' children enjoy three-year free education;*
- *Any donor whose donation is more than 50,000 yuan and enough to build two classrooms will have the classrooms named after him/her and a 20-inch color photo hung on the wall, in addition, have two of his/her relatives' children enjoy three-year free education;*

- *Any donor whose donation is more than 20,000 yuan and enough to build one classroom will have that classroom named after him/her and an 18-inch color photo hung on the wall, in addition, have one of his/her relatives' children enjoy three-year free education;*
- *Any donor whose donation is more than 10,000 yuan will have a dormitory room named after him/her and a 16-inch color photo hung on the wall;*
- ...
- *All donors, regardless of the amount donated, will have their names inscribed on tablets.¹⁶*

In the short period of five years, the expected amount of donations for building the middle school increased more than 10 times, from the initial call for 30,000 to 40,000 yuan to the second call for 500,000 yuan. And the same rewards required higher amount of monetary donations. The rising costs of cultural remittances as social status symbols, interacted with greater diasporic integration, further discourage Wen Town migrants to send cultural remittances. In fact, from the historical records, we could not find any more documentation about further solicitation of donations to Guannan Huaqiao Middle School, and the middle school was eventually closed down because of lack of funding and decreasing number of students.

PROVIDERS OF SOCIAL STATUS CONFIRMATION AND REWARDS

For compatriots overseas to realize social status compensation via the sending of cultural remittances, the recipient of cultural remittances—hometown—must be in a position to provide social status rewards expected by the migrants. Our field observations reveal three important institutional actors: local government agencies in charge of overseas Chinese affairs, local social societies, and transnational, or *qiaokan*.

Local Governments as Providers of Social Status Rewards

Since the founding of the PRC, overseas Chinese affairs have been overseen by two government agencies: the Office of Overseas Chinese (or *Qiaoban*) at various levels of governments from the State Council to provincial, municipal, county and town; and the Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (or *Qiaolian*) from the national to township and village level. However, between 1949 and 1979 (the year when China launched its open-door policy), overseas Chinese affairs were not on the government's priority agenda, and existing government agencies were non-functional. All real properties and businesses of overseas Chinese were either confiscated or nationalized as state properties. People with overseas Chinese connections were not trusted, and many were even considered prime suspects of bourgeois elements, foreign spies, and anti-revolutionaries. Ties were severed and family communications were minimal, except that via mailed letters, packages containing food and goods for daily necessities, and monetary remittances, which were highly regulated by the government (Zhou, 2010).

China's policy toward overseas Chinese affairs has changed from watching out for anti-revolutionary and sabotaging forces from the Chinese Diaspora to promoting complete cooperation between the homeland and the Chinese Diaspora. Overseas Chinese were considered "supporters, pioneers, and promoters" of China's economic reform.¹⁷ Since the turn of the 21st century, the official policy regarding overseas Chinese has shifted from attracting remittances and capital investment for economic development to fostering Diasporic ties to strengthen China's soft power globally. The policy also stress the importance to helping overseas Chinese become naturalized citizens, participate in the mainstream society of their countries of residence, and grow roots in their new homelands.

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

For example, Mr. Li migrated to the US in the late 1980s and was a “nobody” in Kan Town who had never ever seen a county government official at close distance. In the US, he is on welfare and works part-time in Chinatown. But he travels to Kan Town regularly, making small donations to his home village and presenting himself a leader of several family and hometown associations in Los Angeles’ Chinatown. In an interview, Mr. Li made no mention of his American life on welfare, but enthusiastically talked about his “history of glory” of being received by provincial and local government officials in China:

I am going to attend the banquet given by the Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles to celebrate the Chinese National Day. Only those distinguished overseas Chinese, usually those who have made major contributions to their hometowns, get invited. These days, a lot of Chinese leaders come to visit Los Angeles. Our hometown association takes part in the reception of those leaders. We even received the very top state leaders, such as Mr. Jiang Zemin [former Chinese President] and Mr. Zhu Rongji [former Chinese premier]. Whenever I go back to China, I call up the municipal leaders, and ask them to pick me up at the airport. And they will do it. When I went back last time, the Chief of Overseas Chinese Affairs Office said he was going to greet me at the airport in person, but he was unable to go because of some emergency. Still, he had me picked up by other people.¹⁸

To Mr. Li, being received by officials from his hometown and by higher ranking leaders of the municipal and provincial governments in China was a big deal and, in his words, “a symbol of honor and a manifestation of trust.” In fact, a lot of Kan Town migrants have the same mentality as Mr. Li, viewing the opportunities to meet officials of various levels of governments during their homecoming visits as an honor. Many of them enlarge their photos taken with Chinese officials and hang them in conspicuous places at home in the US as well as in the home village. The local government in Kan Town has tried their best to offer assistance and symbolic rewards to immigrants when they return home, making them felt welcome and connected and creating for them a “history of glory.” This kind of practice by the local government has not only greatly compensated for the marginalized circumstances that immigrants endure in their host societies, but has also reaffirmed their claimed social status as leaders of ethnic organizations in the diaspora and raised the immigrants’ social reputation in their hometown. In fact, such practice in Kan Town has been institutionalized to be a routine job for public officials in charge of overseas Chinese affairs, leading to a win-win situation—social status compensation for compatriots and nurturing and strengthening hometown-diaspora ties for the local government.

By comparison, the situation in Wen Town is quite different. The social status rewards provided by Wen Town governments has changed from strong in the 1980s to weak since the 1990s. Wen Town migrants to Southeast Asia call themselves “Chinese overseas” or [non-Chinese]

“citizens of Chinese descent,” an ethnic identity with an embedded privilege as the “guests of Nanyang.” When China just opened up in the 1980s, these guests of Nanyang were wooed and revered in their hometown because of the need for their donations and contributions to hometown development. Chinese Malaysian Mr. Wang’s experience with hometown government reception is telling,

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

In the past I donated quite a lot of money to Wen Town. I gave money whenever the headmasters of the primary schools asked me for it. Now the Chinese are too rich and live a well-off life. The villagers no long need your 100 or 200 yuan. If they don't ask me for it any more, I don't give it. On a recent trip back to Wen Town, I invited the headmaster of Guannan Primary School for dinner, but he didn't show up. As he didn't come, I wouldn't donate any money. I don't know why he didn't come.¹⁹

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

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

qiaoling [diasporic Chinese community leaders or leaders of overseas Chinese organizations], *municipal government agencies may receive them.*²⁰

Mr. Huang remarks suggested that in order for a compatriot overseas to get an official reception in his or her hometown, s/he has to be a “real” *qiaoling*,” or has an established social status overseas. The rising ceiling in social status recognition nowadays and the local government’s change attitudes reduce the appeal of hometown as an alternative site for social status compensation for ordinary Wen Town migrants.

Local Societies as Providers of Group Membership and Social Status Confirmation

Local societies in migrant-sending communities include a range of place-based or clan-based primary groups, clubs, and associations. These closely-knit local societies are transnational, maintaining strong ties to diasporic communities overseas, and can confirm migrants’ group membership and their social positions within the local and transnational network. The Kuan Clan Library offers an example to illustrate how local societies provide social status confirmation to their compatriots overseas.²¹ The Kuan clan is the largest clan in Kan Town. Its overseas membership is estimated at more than 50,000, and most clan members live in North America. In Kan Town, the clan maintains the Kuanyu Temple (the Kuan ancestral hall) and the Kuan Clan Library, both function in sync as the anchor of the Kuan Clan Society, the main site in Kan Town for clan gatherings, meetings, activities, and events. The clan has maintained close ties to its compatriots overseas who have formed the Kuan clan associations in major cities in the US and Canada.

With the strong support of countrymen overseas, the Kuan Clan Library was established in 1936, but was forced to close down later because of wars and political turmoil. Since the implementation of reform and opening up and implementation of policy concerning overseas Chinese, the clan members at home and abroad have advocated for the reopening of the library. With the generous donation from overseas clan members, it was reopened in 1982. Since then, the

Kuan Clan Library has become an important object of cultural remittances by the Kuan Clan immigrants and has played the role of social status compensation for donors who are keen on public and cultural affairs such as libraries, schools, temples and compilation of genealogies. Mr. Kuan's story is illustrative. Mr. Kuan was a mid-level manager of an architectural firm in Guangdong. In the 1980s, he and his wife immigrated to the US under the sponsorship of their daughter who was married to a Chinatown worker in San Francisco. After arriving in the US, he has worked in a restaurant and other menial jobs in Chinatown, experiencing a significant status loss. When we interviewed him in the US, he described his mental changes before and after his migration: "Before I came to San Francisco, I longed for it. After I came here, I hated it." Mr. Kuan came back home for a family reunion and visited the Kuan Clan Library at the end of 2010. Below is an excerpt from our field notes:

... It was about 10am at the Kuan Clan Library. By then, about 10 people had already gathered at the library, some of whom were directors of the library who seldom showed up there. Over the gate of the library hung a huge banner which read, "Welcome American Country Fellowman Mr. Kuan back home for a family reunion." Everyone was busy decorating the library, preparing the tea set, or cleaning up, as if some important official from town would come visit.

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

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

In Kan Town, a large monetary donation would not simply be an indicator of the donor's generosity but also of his or her earnings ability. Having more "wealthy" compatriots overseas in a primary group would strengthen the group's standing in the local community. Thus, local societies would give such donors proper receptions. Mr. Kuan's case cited above reflects the type of reception that an ordinary Kan Town migrant like Mr. Kuan can get. Although Mr. Kuan made meager "hard-earned" money abroad, he could causally give out 1,400 yuan, a sum that equaled to or more than an average monthly earnings for a compatriot at home. The officers of the Kuan Clan Society were aware of Mr. Kuan's hard life abroad, but they deliberately avoided asking his life circumstances in America; instead, they showed great enthusiasm in receiving the Kuan family. The reception for Mr. Kuan and his family was ritualistic: a huge banner with big Chinese characters acknowledging the welcoming of the Kuans, the enthusiastic company of clan leaders and officers, the seating at the head position of the table, and the reluctant parting... This kind of reception enables compatriots who have endured hardships overseas to regain a sense of belong, comfort, and warmth and to have a real taste of social status.

In sharp contrast, local societies in Wen Town have lost their significance in the past thirty years due to two major changes. First, there is a significant weakening of the emigration culture caused by restrictive immigration policies of nation-states in Southeast Asia. Without continuous emigration, the number of compatriots who have lived experiences in their hometown has shrunk. Second, there is a weakening of diasporic ties. Wen Town migrants who have already resettled there have gradually shifted their national identity from "overseas Chinese" to citizens of a particular nation state, becoming people of "Chinese descent." This change in national identity has created an emotional distance between compatriots in hometown and those abroad. Wen Town societies, in reaching out to

their compatriots abroad, can no longer claim their compatriots as patriotic Chinese or loyal countrymen and offer social rewards to them as such, because Wen Town migrants no longer identify themselves as “Chinese” but rather as “Malaysian” or “Singaporean.” As they climb up the socioeconomic ladder in the receiving countries, the reference group against which Wen Town migrants evaluate themselves has also shifted from their hometowns in China to their host societies. Greater integration into host societies has further decreased migrants’ desire and motive to send cultural remittances, especially for the purpose of social status compensation.

The Lin Ancestral Temple offers a telling example. The Lin Ancestral Temple, located in the center of Wen Town, was constructed mainly on donations by members of the Lin Clan especially those living abroad. But now the temple attracts attention and is visited only during *Qingming* Festival. Without the continual funding support from compatriots overseas, the temple has been neglected without basic maintenance. The hall is rented out to be used as classrooms for the local middle and primary schools to make up for funding shortage. As a traditional practice among compatriots overseas, Wen Town has continued to receive cultural remittances, but the amount has declined each year to insignificance. Many Lin clan members overseas are inclined to donate money to the Lin clan associations in their receiving countries, which have been active and functional, rather than to the Lin Ancestral Temple back in Wen Town. The fundamental reason is that the “guest of Nanyang” has reoriented themselves to grow roots in their host societies rather than to continue to keep up with a sojourning mentality, longing for the day of eventual return when “falling leaves return to their roots.” Moreover, social reputation in Wen Town has much less appealing to compatriots than in the past. With the shift of living center from the sending country to the receiving country, more and more Wen Town compatriots have accepted the evaluation standard of their receiving countries and have attached less importance to the evaluation system of their

sending country. They no longer have a strong a desire for “leaving a name behind” in their hometown. Rather, they strive to climb up the socioeconomic ladder and gain social status in their receiving countries. As a result, they are less concerned about honorary social rewards, such as “bringing honor to one’s ancestors” and “returning to one’s hometown in full glory,” and about membership confirmation provided by local societies in hometown.

Transnational Media as “Collective Letters from Home”

Overseas Chinese magazines, or *qiaokan* (侨刊), are popular newsletters and bulletins about the daily life, culture, education, tradition, customs and rituals, and architecture in hometowns, as well as overseas Chinese affairs and news about diaspora-hometown interactions. Published in Chinese by local societies in migrant-sending communities and sent to compatriots around the world, these transnational magazines have served as a form of collective letters from home, keeping compatriots overseas informed about what’s happening at home (Hsu, 2000; Mei, 2007). As of 2011, there were more than 300 *qiaokan* published in China, including 186 in Guangdong Province and 86 in Jiangmen Wuyi region (encompassing Siyi region).²³ Known as China’s number one and largest hometown to Chinese overseas, *qiaokan* published there are not only most numerous but also rich in content.

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

Ms. Xie returned home for a visit and donated to the Kuan Clan Library, the Kuan Ancestral Temple, and the *Guanyu Monthly*. The report reads,

Deep Affection of Hometown by Canadian Kuan Clan Member Auntie Xie

...

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

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

As providers of social status compensation, publishers of *qiaokan* hope that immigrants will donate more money to support hometown’s social, cultural and economic developments, especially *qiaokan*, and thus take great care to make sure that all donors are given high praises and honorary mention of their generosity. In the process of editing the journals, they also maintain and strengthen

ties to compatriots living in diasporic communities. The editor One of *qiaokan* editors said the following in an interview,

*If a compatriot in China donates 300 yuan or more, and a compatriot overseas US\$100 or more, his or her photo will be posted on the first page of the Guangyu Monthly. This is very important to overseas Chinese. Even if you are very rich, it is useless if you are not known. If you are rich, then donate more money and your photo will be posted. People in the whole world will know you.*²⁵

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

Qiaokan is almost entirely absent in Wen Town. Such absence is not accidental, but reflects the declining significant of local societies as organizational basis for hometown-diaspora informal interactions, the dwindling institutional support for overseas Chinese affairs on the part of the local government, and the weakened attachment of the diaspora to hometown. Lacking this transnational media an effective medium in expressing or performing social status, Wen Town migrants are further discouraged to send cultural remittances.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we aim to explain regional variations in the sending of cultural remittances by exploring what drives Chinese overseas to send cultural remittances to their ancestral hometowns and how they achieve their remitting objectives. Prior research has paid ample attention to migrant remittances for household subsistence and economic development in hometowns and to the effects of individual socio-demographic characteristics or sending country government policies on the

sending of remittances. We seek to focus a different type of remittances—tangible cultural remittances for collective consumption—and develop a theoretical framework that takes into account the interaction between micro-level individual and multi-level institutional factors. We argue that the sending of cultural remittances is not merely associated with migrants' own socioeconomic status, but by the difficulty of having one's achieved social status recognized in the host society. Based on our analysis of two ethnographic case studies, we find that the desire for social status compensation elsewhere is a key determinant and that the sending of cultural remittances to the migrant hometown serves a mechanism for filling the social status gap. However, In order to realize social status compensation, we must consider factors beyond the individual migration. Our comparative analysis leads to several significant observations.

First, the choice of hometown as a site for social status compensation is out of the migrant's rational consideration. International migrants' social status is less entrenched in the status hierarchy of their hometowns vis-à-vis those who have never migrated, and their identities as compatriots overseas (especially those in receiving countries that are more developed and of higher geopolitical status), are generally admired and respected. Thus, immigrants who experienced social status gaps can possibly use their hometowns, in person or spirit, as alternative sites for displaying and performing social status. A classic means is through conspicuous consumption. Another means is through the sending of cultural remittances. The latter has been practiced more frequently among Chinese immigrants because, compared to conspicuous consumption, the sending of cultural remittances is more respected for its seemingly altruistic or philanthropic motive, allowing the sender to avoid the envy and resentment in a closely-knit society.

Our case studies show clearly that the felt or experience social status gap in host societies is the main driver for migrants' sending of cultural remittances to their hometowns. Earlier emigration

from Kan Town was part of labor migration, and contemporary migration from Kan Town, as a family chain migration, also comprise of migrants from rural and low socioeconomic backgrounds. Upon arrival in the United States, many are residentially segregated and work in ethnic enclaves. Even if they are able to achieve economic gains through ethnic entrepreneurship and employment in ethnic enclaves, they find it hard to get their social status recognized because of their marginalized group status in mainstream American society. By contrast, Wen Town migrants historically played the role of “middleman minority” and had integrated into the mainstream host societies under the pressure of assimilation by newly decolonized nation-states after World War II. So the social status gap that Wen Town migrants face in their host societies is not as large as that faced by Kan Town migrants in the United States, and Wen Town migrants are in a better group position to realize their social status in the mainstream host society than their Kan Town counterparts.

While the social status gap propels migrants to seek social status compensation via the sending of the cultural remittances, the ability to do so is not merely determined by individual socioeconomic circumstances, but also by the relative costs of cultural remittances as social status symbols. Such costs are relatively low for Kan Town migrants and high for Wen Town migrants due to the differences in currency exchange rates and wage differential. The average wages of Kan Town migrants in the United States are much higher than those in their hometown, so the cost for them to obtain social status compensation through cultural remittances is low, making it feasible and affordable even for low-skilled migrants. By contrast, average wages of Wen Town migrants in Southeast Asia are not high enough to create a clear income advantage. The high costs of social status compensation via cultural remittances hence weaken Wen Town migrants’ ability to remit.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, whether immigrants can realize social status compensation in hometowns depends also on how hometown institutional actors—local

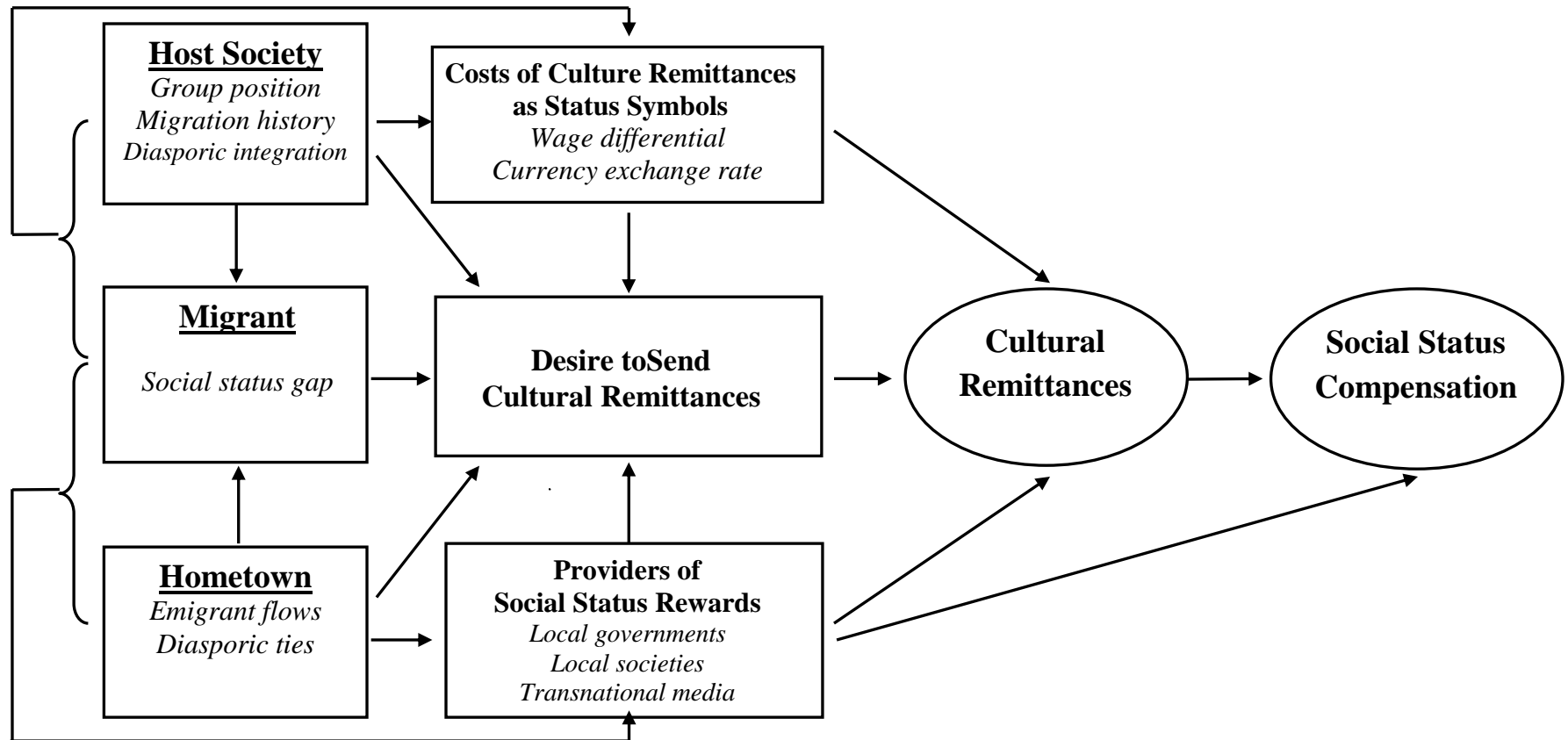
government, local societies, and transnational media—can serve as providers of social status rewards or conformation. We have found that the receptions of cultural remittances differ significantly between Kan Town and Wen Town. In Kan Town, local governments, out of the political needs for economic development and diasporic network-building, have spared no effort to create a “history of glory” for compatriots overseas, which has greatly compensated for the social status gap resulting from compatriots’ marginalized life circumstances in the United States. Meanwhile, local societies that have maintained close and extensive transnational ties to compatriots overseas have also offered venues for migrants to bring honor to their ancestors and to return home in full glory. Moreover, *qiaokan* in Kan Town have constantly celebrated compatriots’ achievements and praised their good deeds and unselfish support for their hometown. These institutional actors interact to promote the realization of social status compensation. In contrast, the enthusiasm in receiving compatriots overseas has gradually waned in Wen Town because of decreased international migration and weakened diasporic ties. The lack of institutional supports at the local level to offer social status rewards further discourages compatriots overseas to send cultural remittances back to Wen Town.

Our findings suggest that migrants’ sending of cultural remittances cannot be understood either from a self-interested or an altruistic perspective. For immigrants who encounter significant social status gaps, real or imagined, in the host society, the sending of cultural remittances to hometown can be a feasible, affordable, and effective means for social status compensation. Unlike conspicuous consumption, cultural remittances are a type of social performance which allows immigrants to demonstrate their advantaged economic status and to show off in ways that conform to the informal cultural norms in hometowns and are readily accepted by local societies and local social networks as philanthropic donations for community welfare without causing envy and resentment to the senders. However, whether the senders can realize social status compensation

depends on whether the receivers in hometowns can provide venues to the senders to perform as well as attend the senders' performances, acting as engaging audience and referees to offer rewards. As a performer, the migrant would try to build an image of an altruistic and generous hometown lover. The purely non-profit nature of his or her cultural remittance can generate public praises, which are transferred into social prestige and reputation. Thus, hometown reception becomes a powerful factor to explain migrants' remitting behavior and variations by hometowns.

Our theoretical framework of social status compensation enables us to go beyond individual motives to understand why some migrants are more likely than others to send cultural remittances and to account for regional variations. It contributes to the literature on migrant remittances by establishing the linkage between cultural remittances and social status compensation and by offering a nuanced understanding of how individual self-interested motives are imbedded in processes of migration and resettlement and constrained by institutional factors in both receiving and sending countries. However, our findings are not conclusive because of data limitation and because of our narrow focus only on the sending of cultural remittances to hometown at the level of the village or township. Further empirical research is needed concerning the application of our theoretical framework to explain other forms of transnational practices by international migrants from different hometown contexts.

Figure 1: Social Status Compensation: A Theoretical Framework



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NOTES

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Conference on “New Horizons of Diasporic Chinese Studies: Evolving Themes, Changing Frameworks, Future Directions,” Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, March 21-22, 2014. This research is supported by a faculty start-up research grant at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore; the Wang Endowed Chair’s fund, University of California, Los Angeles, USA; the Chang Jiang Scholar Chair Professorship and Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, Sun Yat-Sen University, China; and a research grant from the School of International Studies, Jinan University, China (grant number: 13JNUHRGJ001). The authors thank Alejandro Portes and Hasan Mahmud for their helpful comments and suggestions.

² *Kaiping County Annals*, 2002, compiled by Kaiping Local Annals Office (Beijing: Zhonghua Publishing House); *Statistics of Donations by Overseas Chinese, Foreign Citizens of Chinese Origin and Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan Compatriots Over the Years*, 2010, compiled by Kaiping Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (internally circulated official documents); *Hainan Statistical Yearbook 2011*, 2011 (Beijing: China Statistics Press). In official data collection, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan compatriots are often put into the same category as overseas Chinese and foreign citizens of Chinese descent. There is no separate data for Chinese immigrants. However, as Wenchang and Kaiping share the same statistical criteria, these data are comparable in value.

³ *Wenchang County Annals*, 2000, compiled by Wenchang Local Annals Compilation Commission, Hainan (Beijing: Fangzhi Press); *List of Wenchang City’s Overseas Chinese Donors*, compiled by Wenchang Foreign and Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (document for internal circulation), p.17 and p. 34.

⁴ Guests of the gold mountain, *jinshanke* in Chinese, referred to those who migrated to and sojourned in America prior to World War II.

⁵ “Wuyi” is a traditional migrant-sending region, encompassing five counties of Xinhui, Taishan, Kaiping, Enping and Heshan, under the jurisdiction of Jiangmen City, Guangdong Province. It is called Wuyi *Qiaoxiang* because of the large size of its compatriots overseas.

⁶ Ethnoburb is a term coined by geographer Wei Li to refer to an ethnic suburb that has a large concentration of ethnic minority immigrants and ethnic businesses.

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

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

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

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

¹¹ Guests of Nanyang, *Nanyangke* in Chinese, referred to those who migrated to and resettled in Southeast Asian countries. *Gui fan* was a term used by overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia to Chinese migrants who had merged or assimilated into the local culture of the host society. *Fan* means “alien land” in Chinese, and *gui* “being assimilated to.”

¹² Similarly, the more integrated native-born children of Kan Town migrants also have less desire to remit to their ancestral hometown even though they have greater ability to do so as compared to

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

¹³ Interview with Mr. Yan, a Chinese Singaporean in Wen Town, Wenchang, Hainan Province, February 11, 2011.

¹⁴ Interview with Mr. Kuan, an American Chinese in Kan Town, Kaiping, November 3, 2011.

¹⁵ Reference obtained by one of the authors at Wen Town Guannan Reading Society, November 3, 2011.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See <http://qwgzyj.gqb.gov.cn/qwhg/146/1346.shtml>, accessed on January 22, 2010.

¹⁸ Face-to-face interview with Mr. Li, a Kan Town migrant who lived in Chinatown, Los Angeles, September 7, 2012.

¹⁹ Interview with Mr Wang, a leader of overseas Chinese in Wen Town, February 12, 2011.

²⁰ Interview with Mr. Huang, Vice Chairman of Wen Town CPPCC in charge of overseas Chinese affairs, February 15, 2011.

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

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

²³ See <http://wqj.kaiping.gov.cn/qkxx/gdqk.htm>, accessed on February 15, 2014.

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

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