

**COSMOPOLITAN IMAGINATION:
A METHODOLOGICAL QUEST FOR QIAOPI ARCHIVAL RESEARCHⁱ**

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For migrants, a family letter may define an absence: of home, of family, of love. It is written to an absence. It may also serve as a way of transporting a migrant home, imaginarily. Each time a migrant writes a letter home, they are making a journey to their family: scenarios with family are developed in their imagination, and thus relationships are crafted, and home is constituted. The practice of letter-writing creates a space that is neither at home nor away sojourning, but somewhere in-between, a space for a migrant to be at home in the world. It is, I argue, a space for cosmopolitan imagination. On the one hand, it is the creation of the space, the act of imagining oneself neither at home nor away, but ‘in the world’ that is cosmopolitan. One creates the space, and in turn, the space opens a door for one to be free from one’s social, cultural or historical boundaries and to be anywhere in the world. That is to say, on the other hand, the space is cosmopolitan. As a key term, ‘cosmopolitan imagination’ emerges over the course of the case study and its analysis in this paper, and it serves for the methodological quest in endeavouring to better understand human existential conditions in a world of movement. Specifically, the paper examines the creation of such a cosmopolitan space through imagination in the context of *qiao pi*—correspondence between Chinese diasporas and their families in China, and emphasises the value of *qiao pi* as a space for negotiating one’s self in two disjointed worlds.

Qiao pi correspondence is a specific kind of family letter from overseas Chinese to their families in China that accompany the process of remitting money earned abroad. The word *qiao pi* is composed of two Chinese characters: *qiao*, which means ‘emigrants’ in Chinese, and *pi*, meaning ‘letters’ in Minnan (southern Fujian dialect). People from southern Fujian and the Chaoshan region in Guangdong also call *qiao pi fan pi* (‘foreign letters’) or just *pi* (‘letters’). The word *qiao pi* has commonly been used since the late nineteenth century in southern Fujian and the Chaoshan region of northeast Guangdong. It prevailed throughout the enormous labour emigration movement from south China to the outside world over

the period of mid-nineteenth century to the late twenty century, along with the proliferation of the *qiaopi*-delivery business (Chen 2015b). Nowadays, the *qiaopi*-delivery business has faded away, leaving us a great treasure of *qiaopi* archives; these have been included in the world's documentary heritage of UNESCO, named 'Memory of the World,'ⁱⁱⁱ since 2013.

Most surviving *qiaopi* have been collected and organised by archives in Guangdong and Fujian in China. The preservation of hundreds of thousands of *qiaopi* in such a specially constructed archive represents 'the constitution of a form of collective consciousness' (Chen 2012: 62). *Qiaopi* have been perceived as historical, social or cultural products, in line with as most of the recent research which has focused on issues such as the ethnic emigration history (Huang 2004; Wang 2010; Xu 2010), the sea-borne culture (Su and Huang 2013b; Wu 2008) and the ethnic merchant culture (Chen 2008), or the social-cultural institution of *Qiaopi-ju* ('Overseas Chinese Remittance Firms') (Harris 2015). Shifting the research focus from the socio-cultural or historical milieux that *qiaopi* may show us, this paper is concerned with how individual migrants authored their life through *qiaopi* correspondence. That is, *qiaopi* will be examined as a living process that inscribed their authors' (the Chinese diasporas') individual consciousness, rather than as a frozen 'collective consciousness'. Within the enormous landscape of *qiaopi*, I will scrutinise a small subset of individual *qiaopi* that were written and sent by one individual, Zeng. Through archival research of Zeng's *qiaopi*, I explore the way in which Zeng authored his life—that was for him simultaneously virtual and actual, imaginary and real—through *qiaopi* correspondence and his awareness and attachment to the world that was thereby created then.

Zeng was born in the 1920s in a village in south China. He was an ordinary person. He migrated to Thailand in his twenties and did not return home to China until he was in his fifties. During the 26 years he spent in Thailand from 1947 to 1973, his main objective was to send a *qiaopi* home every month to support his Chinese family, though this was always a difficult task for him. He left hundreds of *qiaopi* dealing with his life in-between his home in China and his sojourning life in Thailand. Through his enduring effort of sending *qiaopi* home, he became a 'real' man, a 'filial' son, a 'reliable' father, a husband 'to wait for', a 'tricky' son-in-law, a 'hopeless' shopkeeper, a 'miserable' sojourner, and a 'foreign guest', just to name some identities, at each moment of his life. He was

constantly struggling with his sojourning life, fighting with his internal feelings about his external relationships in his world. All of his writing, documenting his struggle in his life as a migrant, his feelings about home and his concerns about future now reside in the Shantou *Qiaopi* Archive in China. His 110 pieces of *qiaopi*, which were preserved, along with others, have been collected and compiled into a series, *Chaoshan Qiaopi Dang'an Xuanbian* ('*Chaoshan Qiaopi Archives Selection*') (Wang 2011), housed in the Shantou *Qiaopi* Archive. Besides the 110 pieces of *qiaopi* written by Zeng, the series also contains seven replies by Zeng's family: six from Zeng's mother and one from Zeng's son and younger sister. I draw on these 117 pieces of family letters here as my primary source of ethnographic data.

Writing Qiaopi: Genre and Beyond

Zeng's story. It is a story of love, absence and time. As is evident from his *qiaopi*, Zeng's sojourning life in Thailand was fraught with a constant struggle. The endless hardship of everyday work and lack of a promising future brought him frustration, guilt and a sense of failure in life, as he wrote:

Dear and respected mother, ...I am ashamed of myself for being neither physically strong nor intelligently outstanding [in order to set up my own business]. To make matters worse, there is no support from any relatives or friends here... It is too miserable to express the hardship of everyday work here [7 February 1949], (Wang 2011: 3).

Not fulfilling his ambition of setting up his own business and earning good money, he felt bad about his lack of success, as he confessed:

Dear and respected mother, ...It has been several years since I left home. I am ashamed that I cannot go back home for a visit [7 March 1951], (ibid.: 23).

Dear and respected mother, ...I, your son now work in a friend's shop but with very little income. I still cannot run any business of my own. I feel extremely abashed [1 May 1953], (ibid.: 37).

No matter how hard he toiled while sojourning and how much he wanted to return home, his concerns about domestic finances made him stay in Thailand. Working as a daily drudge without any job security, Zeng felt exhausted and unhappy. He was often with his family in his recollections. For example he wrote:

Dear and respected mother: It has been a few years since I bade farewell to you. I'm always lost in quiet recollection of the past each time when your kind face comes into my mind [30 March 1953], (ibid.: 36).

Even if a day had been stressful at work, each time Zeng spread out a blank piece of paper and nibbed his pen, the setting might immediately create a break that allowed him to enter a different mode from that of the miserable reality. Momentarily, he might step out of his regular life sojourning: in his mind he might have already made a journey to his family. He usually started a piece of *qiaopi* vividly with: '[d]ear and respected mother: Please read this letter as if I were kneeling down in front of you; I would like to report to you respectfully about...', '[d]ear wife: Please read this letter as if we were seeing each other...' or, '[d]ear wife: I miss you so much as if I were in front of you...'

The Qiaopi Genre: the Supposed-to-Have Relationship

One may believe that words such as this kind of greeting are just a conventional style of writing in *qiaopi* correspondence. When Zeng wrote the words '[d]ear wife: Please read this letter as if I were in front of you and we were seeing each other', he might not really have been missing his wife that much. This could be true. As Zeng's *qiaopi* tell us, being separated for years was not easy either for Zeng or for his wife. Their marriage had been fraught with tension since the beginning. During those 26 years, the relationship between Zeng and his wife evolved. In the first ten years after he left home (which were also the first ten years of their marriage), his main concern with regard to his wife was that she always complied with his mother's kind advices in order that she could become a good daughter-in-law. While their relationship changed over time, Zeng changed his attitude towards his wife and mainly emphasised how grateful

he was to her for taking care of his mother and looking after his own son at home.

Indeed, expressions like ‘[p]lease read this letter as if I were kneeling down in front of you’ or ‘[p]lease read this letter as if I were in front of you and we were seeing each other’ belong to the greeting manner of classical Chinese correspondence, which mainly shaped the *qiaopi* writing style, or writing genre.

Genre, a term derived from the Latin *genus*, means a type. Fredric Jameson states that ‘genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public’ (1981: 106, as cited in Rapport and Overing 2007: 275). In this statement, Jameson points out a key issue: for a certain genre there is an agreement between a writer and a reader with regard to a relatively recognizable and established style of written work. In other words, writers of a certain genre expect that their readers will agree with the style by reading it as what it is, and they write accordingly; and vice versa, readers expect writers of a certain genre to write according to what it is supposed to be. For example when reading a novel, readers do not usually critique the fictional characters or plots. They know that they are reading something that belongs to a genre called ‘fiction’. They are not reading a piece of news, or an ethnographic account, for instance.

To some degree, this means that the *qiaopi* genre implies an agreement within the communication between the migrants as *qiaopi* writers and their family as readers. To Zeng and his wife, for instance, regardless of whether or not it is true that Zeng was missing his wife that much, both of them were momentarily—when he was writing the sentence and when she was reading it—placed in a supposed marital relationship under the migratory circumstance: *missing each other so much*. Within the moment, they opened themselves to the possibility of being in the supposed-to-have relationship: *You are my dear wife and I express my love and propriety to you*; or, to use a local term, *qing-yi* (‘affection with propriety’, or ‘affective righteousness’).

This is similar to our modern life when a couple say ‘I love you’ to each other every morning before going to work, with a kiss-goodbye when they are in a rush. But do they always necessarily mean that? Not necessarily. At least the emotion they have may be not as strong as when they fall in love with each other and may say ‘I love you’ for the first time, slowly and gently, perhaps accompanied by long-lasting eye contact and then a long

kiss. In the general speeding-up of contemporary life, the busy day may not allow them to always give their partner a long-kiss before going to work in the morning; they may be too rushed. By doing it again and again everyday, the word 'love' and the act of giving a kiss may lose their rich meaning gradually and eventually become a daily routine for the couple. Notwithstanding, even if they just do it as a daily routine, the acts performed are still based on the mutual assumption of loving each other as a couple. Thus, although rushed, this act of '*supposedly I love you*' still has an impact on their relationship, both for the day and in the long run.

Let us go back to Zeng's case with his wife. The supposed-to-have relationship that comes from the *qiaopi* genre thus allowed Zeng and his wife to begin to work on their relationship in reality: it might have cultivated a positive mood for them to start communicating with each other—through *qiaopi* correspondence—even in intense situations. For a short while, they played their imaginary roles in the marriage as if there were no tension. The moment gave their life continuity. In the long run, the repeated practices of *qiaopi* correspondence shaped the relationship between couples who did not live together for years. Broadly speaking (not just for Zeng and his wife but also for other migrants and their families at home), *qiaopi* correspondence gradually shaped various moral landscapes such as *qing-yi* ('affection with propriety') or *xiao* ('filial piety') between husbands and wives, among siblings, or from sons to parents.

Take the moral duty of *xiao* ('filial piety') as an example. In the Chinese patrilineal family system, respect and care for one's parents are two crucial aspects of the Confucian philosophy of *xiao*. Being away from home, it was almost impossible for the migrants to carry out filiality in their daily routine. The only way they could show their reverence was through the manner in which they 'spoke' to their parents in *qiaopi* writing. Whether it was long or short, a piece of *qiaopi* from a son to his parents was always written in a meek and humble manner. The meek and humble phrasing, combined with the conventional macrostructure of the *qiaopi*, can be considered as a constitutive characteristic of the genre of *qiaopi* writing.

In general, the *qiaopi* genre derives from the classical Chinese correspondence genre in which linguistic norms, grammar and etiquette were considered very important. There are set-phrases and honorific expressions that are commonly used in *qiaopi* writing to achieve certain rhetorical effects. From the salutation with preliminary words to the

closing greetings, the *qiaopi* genre communicates great respect for elders and courtesy to peers.

The convention of the genre—either in the case of writing *qiaopi* or kissing—may affect individuals differently; some may be emotionally shaped by the genre—so as to actually feel what the genre indicates—but others may not. No matter how much sentiment was attached to a conventional greeting in a piece of *qiaopi*, it created a possibility for both parties (the migrants and their families) to participate in imaginary roles in the practice of *qiaopi* correspondence. With this possibility, in the process of writing of a piece of *qiaopi* a migrant's (like Zeng's) imagination about their family could unfold. Thus, the very process of writing a *qiaopi* became the movement of the migrant's imagination and a way to trace of his or her feelings. I will try to elaborate this point with the following example.

Beyond Genre: Imagination in Qiaopi Writing

Let us return to the moment when a blank piece of paper was spread out and the pen was nibbed and moved by Zeng as he wrote, '[d]ear and respected mother...' for instance. While the pen traced his thinking about his mother, he was perhaps shaping the mental image of his mother that he normally conjured when he put down such a salutation.

He continued—take one piece of *qiaopi* that Zeng wrote to his mother as an example—'I was extremely worried to know that you were unwell, having chest pains and could not sleep well at night... Please do go and see a doctor' (Wang 2011: 75). On that specific occasion, he might have had a tendency to ascribe a new feeling about his sick mother to the mental image he usually had when she was physically well. That is, the normal mental image of his mother immediately took on a new quality based on his intention towards it at that moment—his sentimental attachment to his sick mother and his wish that his mother would get well soon. While his imagination went on and the scenarios with his mother developed, the mental image of his mother also became alive: he might see his mother lying on a bed suffering pain; he might hear her coughing badly; and he might even feel the chest pains that his mother had when coughing.

He therefore tried hard to think about how she could relieve the pain even for a little bit, and he wrote: 'Dear mother, you could please apply a few drops of the White Flower Embrocation that I sent home last time to

your chest where you feel painful. Or, you could please take it orally with cooled boiled water. Please be sure not to drip too many drops’ (ibid.). He might then suspend his pen, stop writing for a while and imagine that he was carefully preparing the medicine for his mother by counting the drops ‘one, two, three’, and then offering it to her, hoping that she would feel better afterwards.

He then completed the piece of *qiaopi* with the closing greeting—‘I *kowtow* (“touch the ground with the forehead”) to pay respect to you and bless you with golden well-being’ (ibid.). He carefully sealed the *qiaopi* envelope. On the way to post it, he might have held it cautiously as if he were holding his wish, as if he saw his mother reading his *qiaopi* when it arrived with smile on her face, and using the remittance that was attached as medical fees, consulting the local village doctor, having some herbal medicine, and so on and so forth.

Through the imaginary process, the situational (she was unwell in this case) affective sense of his mother became obvious. It was the feeling of being in his mother’s presence that counted. While thinking of his mother, the mental image of his mother lost its own sense and took on the sense of his mother—the subject that the mental image represents. In other words, at some level, the mental image of his mother ceased being merely an image appearing in Zeng’s mind and instead stood in for his absent mother. It is from this point of view that, I argue, the imagination in *qiaopi* writing enabled a ‘meeting’ between Zeng and his mother across space and time. Through his imagination, his *absent* mother became *present*. For a brief moment, he was living in an ‘as-if’ world: being together with his mother.

Being Free in an ‘As-If’ World

How is it essentially different being in an ‘as-if’ world from being in reality? And what is the connection between the two? As I have argued, writing the expressive part (that beyond genre) of a piece of *qiaopi* served as an outlet for the *qiaopi* author’s imagination, one that accommodated the creation of an ‘an-if’ world. I contend that the expressive elements of a piece of *qiaopi* were not merely documentary; they can be understood as conforming to what John Langshaw Austin (1962) called ‘illocutionary acts’ or ‘performative utterances’ whose expression entails ‘the performing

of an action' (1962: 6-7). The expressive elements of a piece of *qiaopi* are constituted, at least in part, if not entirely, through the actual performance of acts that have the potential to alter the current reality and thereby instantiate a contingent 'as-if' world. Let me continue with the same example to elaborate this point. In reality, Zeng struggled in his sojourning life in Thailand, and he suffered even more because he could not be with his beloved mother at the specific time when she was unwell. In the 'as-if' world, it became possible for him to play his role as a filial son: for example in showing his concern for his mother's health, and in carefully preparing medicine and offering it to her. Nevertheless, the 'as-if' world was not necessarily fictional insofar as it did not merely exist in Zeng's imagination. Instead, it had, to use Austin's (1962) terminology, perlocutionary force and effect (contingent consequence) in reality. Being in the 'as-if' world, however briefly, created a short-lived alternate reality that returned Zeng to his regular life, slightly altered. At the moment the piece of *qiaopi* was posted, he might sense great relief and feel good in himself. His life would move on as his energy was built up. Again and again, those moments of being in an 'as-if' world that Zeng had each time he wrote a piece of *qiaopi*, became moments of connection throughout his sojourning trajectory over the 26 years. For Zeng, those moments might have been crucial as they linked him to his beloved ones and gave his life meaning.

Here, the 'as-if' world did not come out of nothing but from the concrete situation in which, as in the example above, Zeng became upset about his absence when his beloved mother was unwell. And Zeng's intention in dealing with the situation was embedded in the process of creating the particular 'as-if' world. In other words, it is his intentionality in a specific situation that motivates or stimulates an imagination, and directs the developing of scenarios. As a break from his normal way of being, for a short time, the 'as-if' world allowed him to become a person whom he wished to be and to be where he wished to be. That is, he was temporarily free, not just hopelessly mired in his mislabelled sojourning world.

On the relation between imagination and freedom, Nigel Rapport and Mark Harris explain Jean-Paul Sartre's point in *Reflections on Imagination: Human Capacity and Ethnographic Method*:

The defining feature of the imagination, asserts Sartre (1963 [1948]), lies in the ability of the human mind to imagine what is not the case. Key to the phenomenon of the imagination is the mind (and a wide bodily awareness) detaching itself from its immediate environs. We can distance ourselves from an immediate experience and so gain a distinct perspective on it. This is our freedom, Sartre goes on to assert, and the proof of our not being programmed to react to stimuli or otherwise determined (Rapport and Harris, 2015: 5).

For Zeng, his momentary freedom came from his consciousness's momentary detachment from its immediate environs—probably, after a whole day's toil that left him with an exhausted body, he might have semi-reclined on his bunk bed, writing the letter in dim-light and feeling homesick. Simultaneously, in his mind, he placed himself in the 'as-if' world: being at home with his mother.

At Home in the World in Qiaopi Writing

For the first ten years of sojourning, Zeng wished to return home, either to resume the life as a farmer at home or even just to visit home; but he could not do so due to his great concern for his family. Unfortunately, Zeng often lost his job and thus could not send remittance home on time. Those became extremely hard times for him as he was in great distress and very weary. He was worrying about his family and the household maintenance while feeling helpless. The exceptional hardship was made even worse due to suspicion from his family when he did not send money home on time. He wrote to the family again and again, trying hard to explain and asking for forgiveness and understanding:

Dear and respected mother, ...It has been more than a month since the last family letter. On one hand, I was thinking to look for another job in January so I dared not send my earnings in that month. On the other hand, the currency system has been unstable recently in China so the money I earned by hard toil would be exchanged for less than 30~40% of its value; so I do not want to send more. Dear mother, please understand the situation. It is not that I, your son, am conscienceless and do

not wish to send *qiaopi* on time. I will send more money home to support the household maintenance as soon as the currency system becomes stable in China. ...Attached with this letter please receive thirty Hong Kong dollars [15 March 1950], (Wang 2011: 12).

Dear and respected mother, ...Attached with this letter please receive sixty Hong Kong dollars. Please give five dollars for my elder sister, five dollars for my younger sister, and five dollars for my wife and my son. The remainder will be useful for maintaining the household. After reading your recent letter, I have known all of the situations. Please forgive me that I cannot send lots of money now. I, your son, am still in the dark about my livelihood. I will send more once I have a good opportunity and a large profit [1 Jun 1950], (ibid.: 14).

Dear and respected mother, ...Attached with this letter please receive forty Hong Kong dollars. Please designate five dollars for brother Jia and the remainder will be useful for maintaining the household. I had been jobless for two months and that is why I have sent fewer *qiaopi* these days. Please forgive me. I am afraid at the moment I cannot send a large amount of money home [15 May 1951], (ibid.: 24).

Dear and respected mother, ...Attached with this letter please receive ten Hong Kong dollars. I have been jobless for several months. Sending remittance back home monthly has become very difficult for me. I, your son, do not have any malicious intentions. Please understand my hardship and difficulties in Siam [28 December 1953], (ibid.: 42).

On the one hand, he suffered his internal feeling of failure and shame. On the other hand, he suffered due to his external relationship with his family; in particular he found it tough when his family asked for more money. These are some of Zeng's responses to his family's requirements:

Dear and respected mother: ...In your letter, you mentioned that [you wish me] to give some money to my elder sister

every month. I am willing, yet unable. I am not heartless. Please forgive me. I will absolutely take care of her livelihood once I can [18 January 1950], (ibid.: 11).

Dear and respected mother: ...Regarding the purchase of a toilet you mentioned in your letter, maybe it is wiser to just rent one from neighbours [22 September 1954], (ibid.: 51).

Dear and respected mother: ...About his mother's [Zeng's wife] request to buy coverlets, I am sorry that due to my financial difficulty at the moment, I am afraid I cannot afford it [7 November 1956], (ibid.: 69).

Zeng's disappointment with his Chinese family gradually grew. After having lived there for over fifteen years, he eventually took a second wife in Thailand. Without a divorce from his first wife in China, he then needed to fulfil his duty towards both homes.^{iv} Under the 'dual family system' (Chen 1939), he settled into a life in which he had a home here in Thailand and a home there in China. He laboured to accommodate his 'dual self' under the exigencies of his 'dual family'. The multiple homes became a manifestation of his internal multiplicity. He managed and manifested this multiplicity by writing *qiaopi* home. Since a piece of *qiaopi* is a letter attached to remittance, Zeng could express his sentiments through individual written messages, while also attaching remittances as part of his duty, putting both in an envelope, sealing it up and sending it away. Each piece of *qiaopi* served as the physical proof for Zeng himself that he was performing his duty and expressing his love. And yet it was also a metaphorical means of separating one part of himself (the part with sentiments for his Chinese family) from another (the part with sentiments for his Thai family). At the moment the *qiaopi* was dispatched, he might imagine that one part of himself would sail away to China while the other part would be temporarily freed to fulfil its obligations in Thailand.

Like the two sides of a coin, home combines both the expression of Zeng's self and his social obligations. Throughout Zeng's life abroad, the experience of home was never simple and easy for him. He left his family because of his love for them; he called somewhere 'home' when he was not home for more than twenty years; he loved home but the home became a source of his emotional distress. While imagining home in his *qiaopi*

writing, therefore, he would tend to single out an experience of home, which he could handle, and with which he could be comfortable and fulfilled, or in Sartre's words, one in which he could 'take possession of it':

The act of imagination...is an incantation destined to make the object of one's thought, the thing one desires, appear in such a way that one can take possession of it. There is always, in that act, something of the imperious and the infantile, a refusal to take account of distance and difficulties (Sartre 2004 [1940]: 125).

Whenever he wanted to return home but was unable to do so, he made a virtual return each time he wrote a piece of *qiao pi* home. Writing *qiao pi* served as a way of transporting him to home imaginarily, as 'a refusal to take account of distance and difficulties'. Each time he wrote a piece of *qiao pi* to his family, he was able to make a journey home through his imagination.

What exists beneath his attachment to home and his years of toil in Thailand, it becomes apparent, is him constantly fighting and negotiating with his various kinds of struggle—between at-home and away-from-home, between his dual-family and his dual-self, between his social obligation of being a son, a father, a husband, a brother, a son-in-law or a *fanke* ('foreign guest') and his self-fulfilment, between his past and his future. Victor Turner (1967: 93) explores these kinds of 'betwixt and between' or 'liminal' periods in rites of passage as an 'interstructural situation' and discusses the 'nature of "interstructural" human beings'. As Thomassen elaborates,

Turner realized that 'liminality' served not only to identify the importance of in-between periods, but also to understand the human reactions to liminal experiences: the way in which personality was shaped by liminality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience (Thomassen 2009: 14).

Within the 'liminal period' represented through the writing of *qiao pi*, Zeng's understanding of home and his experience of home were betwixt and between; that is to say, they are the 'tying together of thought and

experience'. The liminality affords a space for him to negotiate his identity between two seeming disjointed worlds. To apply Homi Bhabha's (1994) phrasing, such a space is called the 'third space', referring to a state of 'hybridity'. This 'in-between' space provides 'the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood' (Bhabha 1994: 2). Through his *qiaopi*, one is able to see that Zeng's whole migrant life becomes a constant effort to work things out in a way he could live with. While writing *qiaopi*, Zeng was consciously exploring how he wished to live and balance his obligations to different people. Either by making a virtual return or by imagining sailing one part of himself away (while leaving the other part), here were ways in which Zeng managed to live a life with hope, love, duties, dilemmas, distance, separation, difficulties, frustration and tribulations. *Qiaopi* correspondence became a way for Zeng to author his life, which was simultaneously virtual and actual, imaginary and real. Each time he wrote a piece of *qiaopi*, he momentarily created an alternate reality for himself: he was neither at home nor sojourning, but somewhere in-between.

Let me be clear. When Zeng was writing a piece of *qiaopi*, he did not confuse the salutation with the person to whom it was addressed, i.e. his mother. He knew that she was far away at home in China and he was sojourning in Thailand. But at the same time, his mother was imagined when the salutation was inscribed on a piece of paper, and he met his mother in his imagination. Immediately, the 'meeting' with his mother at that moment in his imagination became an alternative reality for him. The moment for him was simultaneously imaginary and real: he was neither exactly at-home nor purely sojourning, but somewhere in-between. The in-betweenness afforded a space for him, as a migrant, to negotiate with himself regarding the dilemma between the distance and his love for his mother. It was an oxymoronic way of being separate from a family that he loved in order to demonstrate that love. And the in-betweenness is exactly where his consciousness accommodates such an oxymoronic human condition for him, as a migrant, to be 'at home in the world', neither here nor there (Jackson, 2000). It is, I argue, a space for 'cosmopolitan imagination'.

Qiaopi and Cosmopolitan Imagination

Cosmopolitanism derives from the Greek conjunction of 'cosmos' and 'polis', a linking up of the whole world and a 'membership' of a local life

(Rapport 2007a). With a cosmopolitan vision, one lives an individual life in one's particular way ('polis') and at the same time opens up to an appreciation of universal human conditions ('cosmos'). As an ontological project, a cosmopolitan pursues the possibility of a bringing together of the two. That is, 'an attitude of openness to, tolerance toward, and a desire to comprehend, the standpoints of others and their ways of being' (Wardle 2015: 42).

For most of us (if not all), there is a tension, nevertheless, between the self's locally lived existence and the human potentialities of a wider world (the self and the others), most of the time. Moreover, this tension could become more obvious in the world of movement, since the practice of displacing oneself—away from home—requires one to make sense of the distance, the displacement, or the newness that accompanies migrancy. The process of making sense of these experiences would bring the tension between one and the world, one and the others, to the surface of one's life in reality. To deal with the tension, the Chinese diasporic individuals like Zeng (for instance) managed to live a life through *qiaopi* correspondence, as I have argued. Their practice of *qiaopi* writing created a space for them to mediate tensions of many kinds in relation to the self and others—a cosmopolitan space. One created the space, and in turn, the space opened a door for one to express oneself, first through genre and then going beyond genre: to play roles that one wished to but could not play in reality; to be free in an 'as-if' world by distancing oneself from one's immediate environs; to self-negotiate the self and the world (precisely, the self and the particular others in a particular situation) by placing oneself in the in-between; to be free from one's social, cultural or historical boundaries even just momentarily.

It can be contended that only when one manages to free oneself from one's various self-boundaries does it become possible to open up to or tolerate the standpoints of others and their ways of being, and to break the dualism between the self and the others. Within the space, it becomes possible to bring together the 'cosmos' and the 'polis'. That is, not only is the space cosmopolitan, but also the creation of the space, the act of imagining oneself neither at home nor away but 'in the world' is cosmopolitan—the 'cosmopolitan imagination'.

It is worth emphasising that my use of the term 'cosmopolitan' here entails as a kind of imaginative horizon beyond what is being defined, bound and classified to something potential, which may influence how one

experiences one's life and how one interprets those experiences. To introduce the term 'cosmopolitan', I do not intend to label an individual or a group of people—like Zeng or the Chinese diasporas—as 'cosmopolitan' or not. Cosmopolitan imagination does not necessarily always make one open to or tolerate towards the standpoints of others and their ways of being, but it has the potential to do so. It is 'a medium of experience and an interpretation of that experience' (Delanty 2009: 14) in a way that may (or may not) open one up to new perspectives on the world. It offers an opportunity. One may or may not accept the opportunities; it depends on one's intention within a specific moment. After all, our imagination is to 'formulate meaningful possibilities of otherness—of the world beyond our bodies—and build up interpretive models of the world'; it is 'what is our wish and may and will do with ourselves and others within it' (Rapport 2015: 19).

In his book, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination: The Renewal of Critical Social Theory*, Gerard Delanty (2009: 14) argues that such kind of imagination is 'a matter of...an immanent orientation that takes shape in modes of self-understanding, experiences, feelings and collective identity narratives'. He addresses the cosmopolitan imagination as the way in which societies respond to the experience of globality while emphasising 'the critical moment in which changes in self-understanding occur as a result of global challenges' (ibid.: 16). In other words, it serves 'as a form of reflexivity in which global issues enter into the self-consciousness of people and movement' (ibid.: 78).

Let us once again briefly review the process of writing *qiaopi* that inscribed the self-consciousness of the Chinese diasporas and their movement, as the act of cosmopolitan imagination, and also as the process of creating a cosmopolitan space. To write a piece of *qiaopi*, one starts from genre-type greetings. Although these conventional epistolary expressions may not capture the essence and extent of the *qiaopi* author's (a migrant's) experience, they provide a stage for both parties (the *qiaopi* writer and its readers) to act on. A *supposed-to-have* relationship within the conventional allows both parties to start performing a social interaction across space and time. As one continues to write, addressing particular concerns, tackling specific difficulties, or sharing exciting news, one's imagination unfolds, and scenarios thus develop in one's mind, purposively. Momentarily, one places oneself in an 'as-if' world that is built with self-awareness. In the 'as-if' world, one becomes free from one's

self-boundaries and thus it becomes possible to open oneself to self-negotiate in the way in which one wishes with oneself and others.

Here, we reach a point where we may address the significance of *qiaopi* in constructing a cosmopolitan space for the Chinese diasporas, and hence the implications for (future) *qiaopi* studies that examine *qiaopi* as a living process that inscribe their authors' individual consciousness within the Chinese diaspora. Most recent *qiaopi*-related studies in China focus on the social-cultural value of *qiaopi* at different levels of social organization, such as international (e.g. Zhang and Huang 2016, Hong and Li 2006), national (e.g. Zhang and Li 2016, Li 2016), regional (Wei 2016, Liu 2009, Wang and Yang 2007) and familial (e.g. Wang 2016, Li 2016, Chen 2016). They do so in order to examine the dynamic relations between the Chinese diaspora communities and the homeland. What little has been published in English tends to tackle issues such as transnational capitalism (e.g. Liu and Benton 2016), charity (e.g. Liu and Benton 2014, Johnson 2007), gender (Shen 2010, 2012) and family business (e.g. Liu 2005). They are all of great importance since they have helped establish a foundation for *qiaopi* studies from which we can interpret *qiaopi* as historical documents and the practice of circulating *qiaopi* as a historical phenomenon. Their greatest shortcoming, however, is in treating *qiaopi* not as a living process of coming-into-being but rather as a historical finished product. Rather than a fixed set of communities, Shelly Chan (2015) critically treats 'diaspora' as a dynamic series of moments. She argues that 'diaspora represents a shifting dialogue about Chinese connections' and 'encapsulates the fluid condition of being Chinese in the world' (2015: 120-122). For diaspora, the ideas of home may exist in particular moments within an individual's consciousness: they are especially obvious in moments when one consciously attempts to make sense of one's self and others, home and the world, and the relations among them. To examine *qiaopi* as a living process of coming-into-being is to insist upon a temporal approach to the diaspora's momentary experience of home and the world. Simultaneously, it opens up fresh perspectives on related issues such as the social-cultural values of *qiaopi*, *qiaopi* and gender, or *qiaopi* and charity, through the consideration of the space for, as well as the act of, cosmopolitan imagination in writing *qiaopi*. That is to say, by interpreting the same 'material'—the *qiaopi* archives—as illocutionary acts, time and space may no longer be taken as fixed realities, but rather as constituting new contingent realities. To add this additional ontological dimension to the

investigation and achieve an appreciation of related issues in turn requires a researcher to approach the *qiaopi* archives with his or her cosmopolitan imagination.

Cosmopolitan Imagination as a Methodological Quest

From 2011 to 2013, I conducted archival research on *qiaopi* in Shantou, China (Chen 2015a), by reading piece after piece, for hours after hours, going from one story to another. After reading thousands of pieces of *qiaopi*, I found that underneath the neat and civilised *qiaopi* genre are tumultuous lives full of groans and noise. So many of the lives expressed through *qiaopi* are about suffering, for the self and self-justification, for their family and for the sake of love, for the ever-lasting nostalgia and the ever-coming future. Many times, I dissolved into helpless sorrow; my eyes filling with tears. It seems to me that, to try to understand these *qiaopi* the task becomes to make sense of kinds of human suffering; or to put it more precisely, the task of making sense of their making sense of their migratory experience.

To ‘access’ the individual *qiaopi* authors’ consciousness through reading their *qiaopi*, first of all requires me to read their *qiaopi beyond the genre*. The act of writing a *qiaopi* is constrained by social conventions so the opportunity for personal expression is limited. Thus, to understand the personal aspect of those documents requires a clear impression of what is and is not part of the convention. Therefore a large number of documents must be studied in order to identify expressive elements. More importantly, trying to understand an individual author is necessarily a creative and imaginative act on the part of the reader (in this case, me, an anthropologist): it requires one to imagine their imagination. In other words, the reader’s imagination breathes new life into the *qiaopi* authors’s imagination.

But, how can I read their minds? How can I know their imagination in their minds? One’s imagination is one’s own secret, about anything to do with the external world. The process of imagination is an individual’s intimate act. It is the external world internally inhabiting one’s mind. For instance, I am not Zeng. I can never be Zeng. And I can never know what Zeng felt like to be himself exactly. His imagining is hidden from me because of the discrete embodiments between Zeng and me. Where might the two different biographies converge? Is it possible to bridge the gap in-

between two individuals, when each is in his or her own biography and attached to his or her own socio-cultural constitution? I would answer 'Yes'. There is a possibility. The possibility comes from our human potential to have a cosmopolitan imagination.

Let me explain by using Zeng's case again. In the course of carefully reading over 3000 pieces of *qiaopi*, written by more than 45 migrants, Zeng was the first whom I 'met' in my 'field site'. The very first time I visited the archive, I encountered Zeng's *qiaopi* as soon as I opened the first page of the first volume of *The Chaoshan Qiaopi Archives Selection*. Reading his first piece of *qiaopi*, I felt like I was making my first visit to Zeng's family and that he had started introducing himself, his mother, his wife, his son and his two sisters to me. The more *qiaopi* by him I read, the more I learned about Zeng and involved I became with his family. I became more and more familiar with the 'field site environment' of *qiaopi* research, began to know about the genre of *qiaopi*, and to learn the hidden 'culture' that undergirds the writing of *qiaopi*, such as traditional Chinese morals and values. Indeed, in the process of becoming familiar with this 'exotic' environment, I even experienced what I can only call 'culture shock'. Learning the local language of a 'field site' entails developing familiarity with individual idiolect. Here, in this written archive, this includes classical Chinese in traditional characters occasionally mixed with homophones of the Chaoshan dialect—words that would be considered to be written incorrectly. The texts are very different from the official archive: they are preserved in a 'language' of ordinary people, which, while not necessarily identical with spoken language, nevertheless preserve many artefacts from it. The 'peoples' whom I study such as Zeng are 'ordinary' emigrants—or at least inasmuch as any human being can be reduced to 'ordinary' status. By becoming more and more 'involved' in Zeng's family, reading his *qiaopi* at times makes feel sad, excited, bored, or even tear up, and this empathy finds reflection in the 'field notes' I recorded after reading each piece.

More importantly, when I read Zeng, I read him as an individual who made decisions throughout the writing of his *qiaopi*. Besides the conventional parts, Zeng might have needed to decide what else he would/should put in a letter. 'Should I tell my mother about the flood disaster here?' 'Would that worry her too much if I told her?' Or 'should I let them know I feel lonely especially during the Spring Festival?' Eventually, to express his homesickness and concern for his mother's

health, Zeng just wrote down sentences such as ‘I, your son, as a guest here far away from home, was extremely glad to know that you were in good health and everything went well at home’ and ‘I hope that our homeland is at peace’. Instead of using words like ‘I miss home’, ‘sad’ or ‘lonely’, Zeng chose words like ‘extremely glad to know’ and ‘I hope’. His homesickness and nostalgia were laid out on the page in a hesitant and almost invisible manner. He did not just write a letter; he wrote a feeling. His family did not just read a letter; they also read a feeling, and I do likewise. As a reader, I feel Zeng’s homesickness *in between the lines*. The very hesitancy, the limited use of words like ‘as a guest’, or ‘our homeland’ serve as fleeting clues about his difficult circumstances. That is, a piece of *qiaopi* is to be read *as much for what is not said as for what is said*.

In conducting *qiaopi* archival research, how can I read for what is not said? How should I, as an anthropologist read this ‘field’ between lines? Tristan Platt and Quisbert Pablo (2007: 119) examine the historical practice of ‘re-enactment’ described by R.G. Collingwood and argue that knowing the past involves ‘the imaginative re-enactment of other people’s thoughts, purposes, experiences and intentions’. To re-enact the thoughts and actions of people in the past, as Platt and Quisbert (*ibid.*: 126) put it, ‘a deal of imagination is required’. At this point, they introduce another idea from Collingwood, ‘piori imagination’ (*ibid.*). Historical traces that remain even until today are always incomplete and the imagination provides the historical reconstruction. As Platt and Quisbert (*ibid.*) interpret Collingwood’s point, the ‘webs of imagination’ are not spun between the fixed points of ‘facts’ given us by our authorities. We have to criticise the authorities in order to ‘achieve’ these fixed points. So, when I ‘read’ the ‘field’, I try to read against the grain: to read *qiaopi* not just for what is said but also for how it is said, not just for what is included but also for what is omitted.

Furthermore, in order to grasp and comprehend his intentions, I try to explore any possible ‘as if’ scenarios. For every single situation that Zeng faced, I keep my openness to read him as an infinitely complex human being—a multifaceted person who performed a different self at different moment of his life. By considering any possible ‘as if’ through the ‘dialogic imagination’ instead of the ‘monologic’ (Beck 2002), I attempt to free a space from my own biography and socio-cultural boundaries in order to internalise the perspectives of Zeng, and then imagine his world from his perspectives. Here, it is the attempt to internalise the perspective of

others—‘an attitude of openness to...and a desire to comprehend the standpoints of others and their ways of being’ (Wardle 2015: 42)—that makes the imaginative act (of reading the *qiaopi* archives) cosmopolitan. In doing *qiaopi* archival research, it is out of the experience of cosmopolitan imagination that any *qiaopi* author’s voice becomes audible to me and thus any *qiaopi* author becomes knowable. This is what I mean by using cosmopolitan imagination in doing *qiaopi* archival research, or broadly speaking, researching any kinds of international migration correspondence.

Nevertheless, even having a cosmopolitan imagination in conducting research does not mean that there is no challenge. An obvious one in doing *qiaopi* archival research is that a substantial amount of *qiaopi* were not written by the migrants themselves but by *daixie* (‘dictation for the illiterate’) agents. *Daixie* agents wrote *qiaopi* on behalf of the Chinese diasporas overseas and some also wrote *qiaopi* replies on behalf of the diasporas’ families in China. Usually, *qiaopi* written by *daixie* are in good handwriting. For those *qiaopi* not written by *daixie*, some are written in rather unpractised writing, some mix homophones of local dialects and some contain many errors. Whether they were written by *daixie* or by inarticulate and inexperienced correspondents it becomes a challenge in doing research on them; especially when attempting to explore the author’s individual consciousness on the process of writing.

Another obvious challenge is that sometimes it is difficult to know if those letters genuinely illustrate the intentions of their authors, or if they wrote in a way in which they thought their recipients across the ocean wanted to read; even I tried hard to read it against the grain. Or, they may simply have lied to their families. This would require research to explore any possible ‘as if’ situations, which may sometimes result in a mess, or an endless imagination. However, sometimes it can be an exciting clue to reveal a hidden inward world of the author—such as the fear of failure, the stigma of shame—if we explore further questions such as ‘if it is a lie, what roles (social one or imaginary one) may the author play when lying in writing a piece of *qiaopi*?’ Or ‘if it is a lie, why are they lying?’

The End

After leaving his homeland for 26 years, Zeng eventually made his first trip home in 1973. However, he fell into despair after having been reunited

with his Chinese family. His disappointment was fully expressed in the last piece of *qiaopi* he sent to his wife and son in China (five years after his mother passed away), written after he ‘returned’ to Thailand and finally cast away his idea of retiring and returning to his place of origin:

To my wife and my son: Due to the amount of gold ornaments I brought back home last year, you thought that I had lots of savings in Siam. In haste, you have started building a new floor [on our home]! ... You are all wrong, however! Within a year [last year], I, as a wage earner, had used up all that I had saved over more than twenty years. Now I am over fifty. I even worry about myself. My income is inadequate to meet my expenses. How can I have money for you to build new floor? Please don't kid yourself.

In addition, the last time when my boss returned to China, is it true that the whole family, including the kids, visited him with the intention of begging for more gold ornaments and money? ... You are all shameless! I felt so ashamed of you when my boss mentioned to me about your whole family's begging visit. The stuff I had already brought home last year was rather considerable. You are so greedy! Now I am old, I can only work in my cousin's shop, though he has shown no favourable attitude towards me at any time [12 July 1974], (Wang 2011: 112-113).

He, in the end, gave up his Chinese family as a way of making sense of his self and his world in his new life in Thailand. I do not want to express any judgement here over whether Zeng's wife and son were greedy, as I cannot go back to investigate the situation in which his wife and his son were living. What interests me is how Zeng's attitudes towards them changed, together with his expression of self-autonomy against (as well as in relation to) the institution of the household and his understanding of the idea of ‘home’.

No more *qiaopi* were sent by Zeng. This last piece of *qiaopi* shows us the end of a relationship and the end of an effort to continue making a home, a home that eventually left him disconcerted and to which he did not wish to return. It is the end of Zeng's imagination of his Chinese

home; and thus the end of my imagination of Zeng's world and the end of this paper.

Notes

ⁱ The archival research for this article is based on my fourteen-month-long fieldwork in China between 2011 and 2013, supported with funding from the Foundation for Urban and Regional Studies. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Nigel Rapport, Dr. Stephanie Bunn and Professor Walter Hakala. Special thanks are due to Professor Guowei Zhang, Professor Haiming Liu, Professor Jin Liu, Professor Minghuan Li, Dr. Emma Moreton, Professor Zuoyue Wang, Professor Chikong Lai and many others for providing valuable comments for the working paper (draft of this article) presented at the Symposium on International Migration Correspondence in Jiangmen, 19 June, 2016. Not least, I wish to express a humble thankfulness and respect to Chaoshan *qiaopi* expert Mr. Shengsheng Chen who introduced me to the Shantou *Qiaopi* Archive in China and provided me with valuable local knowledge.

ⁱⁱ St Andrews University, Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies.

ⁱⁱⁱ Here is the web page of Memory of the World, which includes *qiaopi* in the list of registered heritage: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/register/access-by-region-and-country/asia-and-the-pacific/china/>.

^{iv} This is a common phenomenon in the history of Nanyang emigration, which Chen Da (1939) called the 'dual family system'. During their Nanyang career, many emigrants acquired a non-Chinese wife or concubine, and formed a second family abroad.

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