

Rethinking the “Left-Behind” in Chinese Migrations: A Case of Liberating Wives in 1950s South China

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Abstract

This chapter argues for an integrated approach to the history of Chinese migrations that considers how the homeland actively shaped the transnational experiences of the left-behind. During the early 1950s, the new Chinese Communist government sought to redefine marriage under the broad vision of creating socialist unions that labored domestically. While investigating conditions in the southern villages, the Party-state assumed that all wives left behind by emigrant men, known as *qiaofu*, were oppressed, adulterous and dependent, fundamentally misunderstanding the complex dynamics in the transnational family and the productive role of women. Soon after encouraging *qiaofu* to end their unhappy marriages under the new Marriage Law, the Party-state found the divorces contradicting a divergent goal of attracting the loyalty and remittances of men overseas. Subsequently, it reversed the attack on transnational marriages and demanded *qiaofu* to preserve their marriages in the interest of the nation. Like their Chinese counterparts in Southeast Asia and North America whose political loyalty became intensely questioned in the 1950s, the unexpected changes facing the left-behind women in China show that they were also at a center of controversies over transnational experiences.

Introduction

Historical scholarship on Chinese migrations has commonly focused on those who moved, rather than those who stayed. Studying Chinese overseas, scholars have emphasized their contributions to host societies and ties with the homeland, and delineated patterns of sojourning and settlement over time (Wang 1981, Wickberg 1982, Yen 1986, Pan 1990, Chan 1990).

Overall, these studies have tended to treat migrants as the central actors and rarely engaged the experiences of family members living in China. The homeland has appeared to be a recipient of change brought by emigration or otherwise largely static. Since men formed the majority of Chinese migrants from the nineteenth century until the second half of the twentieth century, the habitual focus on movement has also privileged male experiences for initiating change and struggle. Women living in the home villages have been marginalized as the “left behind,” seemingly passive and immobile.¹ Studies on female migrants, such as those who were students and workers, have provided an important corrective to the skewed focus on men (Topley 1975, Ye 2001, Kaur 2006). Nonetheless, it remains essential to ask: how would migration look like from the position of resident women who inhabited the transnational circuits no less than emigrant men? By better integrating the histories of those who went away and others who stayed behind, how would it change our understanding of Chinese migrations?

Drawing on Chinese government archives, this chapter seeks to answer these questions by examining how “wives of the overseas Chinese” in the emigrant south, officially known as *qiaofu*, became state targets of liberation in the 1950s. Shortly after the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, one of the immediate agendas of the new Communist regime was to abolish what it considered as the “feudal” patriarchal family system that had been victimizing women. The result was the 1950 Marriage Law, under which not only could marriages be

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dissolved through divorce, husband and wife were stipulated as “companions living together,” a basic unit of labor to build socialism. This redefinition of marriage posed a problem particularly to south China, where one-fifth of the population in Guangdong province alone – about 6.4 million people – belonged to a transnational household.² Convinced that all *qiaofu* were oppressed, adulterous and dependent on remittances – see below for a detailed discussion – the Party initially encouraged them to divorce their husbands abroad. But by the mid-1950s, overwhelmed by the repercussions of upset husbands on overseas Chinese support and remittances, the Party-state ironically reversed its position by reconfiguring itself as the guardian of transnational marriages.

By stressing the place of the left-behind in Chinese migration studies, I am not arguing for a Sino-centric framework that supplants localized and diverse studies of Chinese overseas. Rather, I propose to explore how the homeland actively shaped transnational experiences in the context of changing national and global phenomena.³ Given that migrant men were frequently away for years or even decades and remittances could fluctuate, the flexible and steady labor of *qiaofu* was crucial to the survival of a transnational household. However, as the Communist Party-state propagated new visions of marriage and family in the 1950s, the transnational household headed by *qiaofu* hardly conformed to the ideals of the socialist subject and union that labored and produced locally. Suppressing the transnational family, nonetheless, risked alienating men living overseas. The figure of the *qiaofu* thus embodied the ambivalence between migrant practices and socialist constructions in the 1950s. Like their Chinese counterparts in Southeast Asia and North America whom political agitators charged as unassimilable and potentially disloyal in those societies⁴, the left-behind women in China were demanded to reform themselves for the nation.

Official Images of the Left-behind Wife (*Qiaofu*)

In February 1953, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee of Guangdong Province ordered investigations into marriages in emigrant counties in which women were left behind. Here is one case reported by local officials in Dinghai county:

Pan Lüsü, 30 years old. Her social background is street hawker. Her husband has been [overseas] for more than ten years. She longed for her husband so much that she became mentally ill. She killed her daughter by pushing her into the river and drowning her. Later, she engaged in adultery and gave birth to a girl... Every day when she ate her meal, she always placed a portrait of her husband on the dining table, talked to his image, and offered it food. However, the masses said that her husband had already married another woman in [Southeast Asia].⁵

This dramatic account about Pan Lüsü – long separation from husband, mental illness, killing of her own child, adultery, childbirth out of wedlock, overseas bigamy of husband – exemplified all that the Communists found cruel and problematic about “overseas Chinese marriages.” To the Party, transnational marriages were not only oppressive of women like other forms of traditional marriage, the separation of couples caused women to become virtual widows, adulterous and dependent on their husbands abroad. Party cadres promoting the 1950 Marriage Law declared that *qiaofu* should be free to pursue happiness through ending loveless marriages with absent men. Besides, under Chapter 3 of the new law, husband and wife were to be “companions living together,” “bound to live in harmony, to engage in productive work, to care for their children, and to strive jointly for the welfare of the family and for the building up of the new society.”⁶ Harmonious and productive families were thus the primary goal of marriage.

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Nonetheless, the transnational family was configured differently to compensate for the separation of family members. Marriage functioned as an aggressive strategy of the left-behind, oftentimes a mother, to bond with an emigrant son. Filial obligations demanded that a son marry a woman of his parents' choice to continue the family line and incorporate the productive labor of a young daughter-in-law. Although he might have been absent for years or have formed a secondary family abroad, the wife arranged by his parents and progeny (adopted or natural) existed as his primary household, allowing the ancestral family to claim financial support. In return for supporting his ancestral family, the son was entitled to the benefits of retirement and property inheritance in the home village, even if his return was permanently deferred. His principal wife also enjoyed a higher formal status than that of any secondary wives living with her husband overseas. Seen in this light, the resident wife of an emigrant man was not so much as "left behind" or "alone" as having been actively recruited by his family members to ensure the continuity of the patriline.

Imagining a universally victimized figure of *qiaofu*, the 1950 Marriage Law did not address any of the complex gender and generational dynamics in the transnational family described above. Rather, Party cadres determined to eradicate "feudal" practices assumed that *qiaofu* awaited rescue. Taken together, the 1953 investigations, in which the experience of Pan Lüsü was documented, portrayed *qiaofu* with three dominant images, all of which emphasized the distinctive backwardness of transnational marriages.

The Oppressed Qiaofu

The prolonged separation between husband and wife was the most studied and criticized aspect of transnational marriages in the 1953 reports, which suggested that couples often did not see each other for years or even decades. Emphasizing the effects of separation on the wives at

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home, the reports uniformly portrayed *qiaofu* as sad and abandoned figures. Attracting the most attention were the “wives longing for their men,” women who became married to men after their departure and hence never knew their husbands. Although their actual number was small or otherwise unspecified, these “longing wives” provided powerful evidence that transnational marriages were a distinctly unreasonable type of union. Seeing *qiaofu* as oppressed, officials were also dismayed that some acquiesced to a life of widowhood:

Wen Zheng, 33 years old, was married at 18 years old. Her husband went to Thailand 15 years ago and never returned. Now he is dead. Wen wants to remain as a widow. In her family, there have already been three generations of widows—she herself, her mother-in-law, and her mother-in-law’s mother-in-law. It was because all of their husbands went overseas, forcing them to endure living widowhood [when their husbands lived overseas] and dead widowhood [after their husbands died].⁷

This account of three successive generations of women married to absent and dead men evoked images of woeful widows from a premodern era, implying that transnational marriage was backward. Rendering widowhood, voluntary or not, as cruel and wasteful, investigators told that transnational marriage left older *qiaofu* regretful of their vanished youth and younger *qiaofu* unaccompanied and neglected.

The Adulterous Qiaofu

The second dominant image of *qiaofu* had to do with adultery. Officials found that because *qiaofu* and their overseas husbands did not live and labor together as promoted under the Marriage Law, there were little prospects for them to develop “affection” for each other. The result was a common problem of “incorrect love affairs” driven by unfulfilling marriages, referring to female adultery. One case was reported by officials:

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Xu [?] mei, 30 years old. Her husband Chen Mingzhao... works in Thailand as a laborer. Xu gave birth to three children... In June 1952, Xu had sexual relations with “poor peasant” Chen Sixing (24 years old) and is now eight months pregnant. She was very distressed and wanted to kill herself. But she did not want to abandon her children and also feared getting punished for the crime. So she wrote to a female comrade to confess. Now the comrade comforted and encouraged her to keep the baby. This case has not been dealt with.⁸

Terrified of humiliation and punishment over their affairs, *qiaofu* in examples of adultery appeared as hapless figures. To the officials, the more problematic cases involved women who had secret affairs but continued to spend their husbands’ money or even share it with their lovers, attracting village gossip. One of these cases was recorded vividly in the reports:

Overseas Chinese Laborer Fang Menxin, sixty-some years old, married a wife surnamed Huang. She is 38 years old. After getting married, Fang went to Canada and Huang often had sexual relations with other men. She had abortions six to seven times. After Liberation, she fell in love with hired laborer Fang [?] and became pregnant again. She was going to have an abortion and was criticized by her neighbors. She gave birth to a baby this year. But Fang [her husband] has kept sending her money. Her neighbors asked if Huang has decided who to marry. She said, “I agree to marry both. I want money from the one overseas. I want the company of the one here.”⁹

Because *qiaofu* like Huang desired both a comfortable life and a love life, officials wrote that they were indecisive about leaving their present marriages. Nevertheless, these cases also suggest that some *qiaofu* were far from passive victims who possessed little desires and much less means

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to fulfill them. Adulterous husbands who had affairs and families overseas, were rarely discussed.

It is obvious that the state could not do anything about these husbands, since they were not in residence.

The Dependent Qiaofu

Mildly critical of adulterous *qiaofu*, cadres were nevertheless highly contemptuous of their perceived economic dependence and avoidance of physical labor. Assuming that *qiaofu* were completely reliant on their husbands overseas for support, cadres pointed out that some *qiaofu* suffered greatly when remittances fell short or stopped:

Zheng Zhihua's husband lives in Malaya. They have a son and a daughter. The son died last year. The daughter is only nine years old. The husband used to send remittances home every year. But since May last year, [Zheng Zhihua] has not received a letter or remittance. It has been causing great hardship to the livelihood of mother and daughter.¹⁰

Zheng and women like her suffered bad consequences, cadres pointed out, because they had been unaccustomed to productive labor. Many others feared that divorce would bring about a permanent loss of economic support, so most were unable to make a clean break with their husbands, said the cadres. Having just decided to end their marriages, some women wanted their divorces nullified after receiving new funds from their husbands abroad. In the villages of Bao'an County, when some women expressed hope that their husbands would take them abroad, this attitude was immediately criticized by the cadres as a sign of "desiring an easy and comfortable life."¹¹ This suggests that seeking a family reunion abroad was politically unacceptable and regarded simply as "avoiding labor."

The Role of *Qiaofu* in the Transnational Household

The portrayals of *qiaofu* as oppressed, adulterous and dependent suggest that Party cadres were critical of the transnational family for maintaining spousal separation and female sloth. In fact, a closer examination of the 1953 reports suggests that *qiaofu* performed a wide range of functions in the household, making divorce a complex negotiation for the woman and families involved. In households where remittances were meager or non-existent, *qiaofu* were commonly the ones working for income inside or outside the home. As the official data collected from eight overseas Chinese localities suggest, women who reported few or no remittances from abroad ranged from 6 to 33 percent, averaging a significant 18 percent of all interviewed.¹² In one township in Dinghai County, cadres reported that “besides relying on remittance as income, [resident families of overseas Chinese] also worked as tile makers and did other sideline activities.” They even said, “The standard of living in an overseas Chinese household was usually higher than that of others” because *qiaofu* could often bring in extra income.¹³ Scattered throughout in the reports but largely unexamined, these pieces of information suggest that *qiaofu* played a far more substantial role in the family than that acknowledged by the investigators.

The range of functions performed by *qiaofu* could be further gleaned from the cases that officials used to illustrate general apathy to the Marriage Law. In these cases, women managed family investments and properties, worked in factories, did sewing at home, cared for young children, or were supported by other family members. Some cases of adultery also pointed to the fact that women participated in market activities, ran businesses, and hired farming labor for the household. To compensate for the absence of their husbands, *qiaofu* brought in male labor to work the farm land or worked for income outside the home, both of which brought them into direct contact with other men.¹⁴

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The important role of *qiaofu* in labor and production thus illustrated challenges to the dominant portrayal that emigrant men provided the sole income and labor in the household while resident wives indulged in leisure and comfort. Although it was unusual, the mother-in-law could sometimes be an ally of the *qiaofu* who committed adultery, because her valued role in production found favor with the mother-in-law:

Fu Guiying, 30 years old (married at 18). Her husband has been overseas for 8 years. Last year, she and a youth Yang Qingshan (22 years old) had an incorrect love affair. She later became pregnant and had an abortion during the eighth month of the pregnancy. Her husband overseas heard about it and wrote home last year saying that he did not want her any more and told her to go back to her mother's house. That youth [with whom she had an affair] also did not want her. But her labor production was very good. Her mother-in-law was very fond of her... Right now, she is still living in her husband's house.¹⁵

This unusual arrangement suggested that older *qiaofu* sometimes wielded a great deal of power in the transnational household because of the absence of men. Despite her son's protest of Fu Guiying's alleged sexual immorality, the mother-in-law let Fu Guiying stay in the house because she liked her and needed her contribution to production.

Besides being already supported by their own labor power and that of daughters-in-law, some women did not desire any change to their marriages because a divorce could bring other forms of instability to their lives. Some feared that they would lose their current rights to land and abode. Others sought to improve their lives by focusing their energies on raising their young children and earning a living, instead of trying to fix their marriages. Given that all divorcees were expected to remarry and pick a local husband, some women decided that their age and

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marital backgrounds narrowed the prospects of finding a desirable marriage partner, making divorce less than appealing.¹⁶

All these examples suggest that the decision whether to pursue a divorce was a complex negotiation for many women in the transnational family. Far from simply being immobilized by feudal oppression, *qiaofu* were motivated by active considerations about their current lives. They were also expected to shoulder a greater amount of work and responsibility to compensate for the absence of men and shortfall of remittances, the latter situation a more common one than officials had recognized.

Conflicts provoked by the Marriage Law Campaign

Although the investigators treated *qiaofu* as uniformly reluctant to get divorced, many wound up taking advantage of the Marriage Law, causing the state to identify a different problem. By 1955, transnational families accounted for over 20 percent of all marriage disputes in Guangdong province, a figure roughly proportional to the population of transnational households. Over 90 percent of these divorces were brought by *qiaofu* against their husbands overseas.¹⁷ This rate was consistent with the fact that women were the vast majority of plaintiffs in divorce cases throughout the nation. But such a rate was also one of the highest, compared to 75 percent in Shanghai, 77 percent in thirty-two cities and thirty four counties across China, and 92 per cent in Shanxi province (Johnson 1985: 118).

These unexpected developments caused serious conflicts in Guangdong. Some mothers-in-law desperately tried to stop the departure of their daughters-in-law by threatening to kill themselves. Others formed groups to badmouth divorce-seekers as immoral people who would come to no good end. Overseas Chinese men were also upset about the divorces. Interestingly,

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their resentment was often directed at the officials. In one township of Dinghai County, some husbands sent angry letters from abroad demanding to know if their wives had been “three togetherd,” charging that the socialist slogan for Party cadres and the masses to “eat together, live together, labor together” was a pretext for sleeping together, causing overseas men to be cuckolded. To guard their own interests, some men began to send less money home, which then upset their wives. Consequently, these wives became resentful of any woman who had affairs or sought divorce, and were often involved in isolating and verbally attacking them.¹⁸

Party officials did not have a unified approach to these disputes. Some believed that *qiaofu* should consider remarrying local men or help bring their overseas husbands home. Other officials tried to persuade *qiaofu* to drop their petitions for divorce altogether. These officials explained to *qiaofu* that their overseas husbands were historical victims driven out of China by feudal landlords, then the Nationalist rule in the 1920s and 30s, and also Japanese invasion of China from 1937 to 1945. Here, it was not *qiaofu*, but overseas Chinese men whose experiences of oppression should be heard. As the PRC had been fighting the Korean War against the U.S. in 1950-53, some officials began to educate *qiaofu*, who wanted a divorce because their remittances had stopped, that their resentment toward their husbands had been misdirected. Instead, the true culprit was American imperialism. Pointing out that American imperialism was destined to meet its doom, officials told *qiaofu* that, “The day when the world returns to the people, the husbands will come back.”¹⁹ Calling on the women then to be diligent and patient until the end of the anti-imperialist struggle, officials aligned their marital happiness with national interests, an approach that would become the official line by the mid-1950s.

Preserving the Transnational Family, 1955-1957

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By the mid-1950s, widespread discontent about the new right of *qiaofu* to divorce their overseas husbands had forced the PRC state to control what became increasingly seen as a runaway problem in emigrant south China. In particular, state officials grew concerned about the “excessive use” of the Marriage Law by *qiaofu*.²⁰ This shift was indicative of a broader reinterpretation of the Marriage Law by the state as a medium for family harmony, a development happening nationally. In the case of transnationally connected south China, the Party-state was not simply aiming to build family harmony, but also became quite concerned that it could lose the support and remittances of displeased overseas Chinese men.

From the beginning of the PRC in 1949, the Communist government targeted overseas Chinese in numerous overseas broadcasts of propaganda in order to compete with the Nationalist government that had fled to Taiwan but still threatened to retake the mainland. Following the late Qing and Nationalist governments before them, the Communists tried to incorporate overseas Chinese as essential and loyal members of the nation and project the image of a strong and protective motherland of Chinese abroad (Godley 1981, Kuhn 2008, Peterson 2011). During the Korean War (1950-1953), the Party’s appeal for overseas Chinese allegiances was accompanied by fear that overseas Chinese who maintained substantial ties with communities in south China could collaborate with the enemies, such as a Western power or the Nationalist government in Taiwan.²¹ Therefore, the Party-state regarded the support of overseas Chinese as crucial to political stability.

After the completion of the land reform in 1953, the PRC state also viewed overseas Chinese remittances as an important target of mobilization because of their potential role in restoring local order and funding national production. The international situation during and after the Korean War, which brought the trade embargo of the U.S. and full onset of the Cold War,

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also made the PRC increasingly isolated economically. Remittances provided a key source of foreign exchange in Hong Kong or American dollars, which the government could then use to pay for imports to invest in agriculture and industrialization. Therefore, apart from implementing the Marriage Law to abolish the feudal patriarchal family, the competing agenda of raising national production by the mid-1950s had forced the government to move toward strengthening the bond with the overseas Chinese. One of the important channels was through preserving, not attacking, transnational marriages.

Reforming Court Proceedings

Given the political and economic ramifications of *qiaofu* divorces, state officials began to emphasize a new concern for the neglected needs of overseas Chinese men. The first set of central guidelines came in 1954, which laid out the basic principle that any court ruling about overseas Chinese marriage and family must “take care of the overseas Chinese, as well as take care as appropriate of the demands of [*qiaofu*].”²² In an official handbook that provided information on government policies to overseas Chinese in 1956, the principle was changed to “First take care of the overseas Chinese. Then take care as appropriate of the demands of [*qiaofu*]. Strive to maintain the marriage and family of overseas Chinese.”²³ Under this new set of guidelines, the “care” of overseas Chinese received preferential treatment over that of *qiaofu*. The legal leverage of *qiaofu*, who had been the center of attention in the 1953 reports, was drastically reduced.

This could be seen through measures initiated by the Higher People’s Court of Guangdong province. In 1957, it issued a new set of guidelines emphasizing mediation, persuasion and education in the adjudication of overseas Chinese marital disputes. These

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directives were sent to the lower courts, which the Higher Court severely criticized for being “sloppy” and “irresponsible” for neglecting the legal rights of overseas Chinese and overemphasizing those of the *qiaofu*. According to the Higher Court, some lower courts rarely bothered to consult the concerned overseas Chinese husband in the proceedings, causing some to know about the divorce only after it was granted. Furthermore, some courts failed to keep detailed records of trial minutes or issue formal notices of adjudication. Periods for the submission of written defense and appeal varied wildly. Because the *qiaofu* was the only party in attendance, some judges conducted divorce trials behind closed doors without a jury. To make things worse, court correspondence mailed to overseas Chinese frequently appeared in illegible handwriting and on poor quality paper, for which official stamps and appeal information were frequently missing, words badly chosen, and tone condemnatory toward the overseas Chinese recipient. All these inappropriate occurrences “affected the correctness and solemnity of the adjudication,” suggested in a report by the Guangdong People’s Higher Court in 1957, “making it extremely easy to provoke overseas Chinese discontent and enemy attacks.”²⁴

The new guidelines strived to uphold the basic principle that “whenever possible the marriages and families of overseas Chinese should be maintained as the material foundation of the bond between overseas Chinese and the ancestral nation.” There were two objectives. First, there were efforts to standardize divorce proceedings related to overseas Chinese marriages. The local court was instructed to conduct a thorough investigation upon receiving a petition and decide if the plaintiff had a legitimate reason to file a divorce. If not, the petition should be dismissed. If there was a legitimate reason, the court should contact the overseas Chinese defendant and ask his opinion. A reply from the overseas Chinese must be received or a year

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must have had elapsed before the court should proceed with the trial.²⁵ In other words, it would take longer for *qiaofu* to get a divorce.

Second, the new guidelines sought to tighten the rules of adjudication. In cases where the scarcity or lack of remittances was the cause of dispute, the court should persuade the *qiaofu* experiencing financial difficulties to stay in the marriage. If the overseas Chinese agreed to send more remittances, the court should then dismiss the divorce petition of the *qiaofu*. Alternatively, it could contact related government departments to offer financial aid to the *qiaofu* in need.²⁶ In other words, it became harder for a *qiaofu* to get divorced simply because her husband had not been sending any or enough remittances to support her.

As for cases of bigamy and adultery, if the overseas Chinese who was sued for divorce because of bigamy said that he would leave the other wife, the court should then persuade the *qiaofu* to withdraw the petition. In cases of overseas Chinese who sued for divorce because *qiaofu* committed adultery, the court should go ahead and approve it. However, if the *qiaofu* applied for divorce because of her own adultery, the court should deny the application.²⁷ In other words, women were to accept bigamous husbands who were willing to correct themselves. But women who wanted to leave a marriage after committing adultery might not be able to do so, unless their husbands agreed. This double standard became official policy, which was especially ironic for a state that had professed to promote free choice in marriage and gender equality.

As for property settlements, a *qiaofu* was entitled to property that she possessed prior to marriage, received from the land reform, or obtained through laboring in the overseas Chinese family. All other property belonging to the overseas Chinese, including his house, should be allocated back to the overseas Chinese. However, it was unclear how the assessment of the contribution of a *qiaofu* to the family income was worked out in reality. Some court cases

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suggest that assumptions that overseas Chinese men were the sole and primary income earners of the household, while *qiaofu* did not do any work contributing to wealth, would sometimes work to the disadvantage of *qiaofu*. In some cases, they were persuaded to drop their claims for property and accept a reduced amount of alimony. As for child custody, if the overseas Chinese insisted on raising children resulted from the marriage and such an arrangement “would not cause any harm to the children,” the court would persuade *qiaofu* to transfer them to the care of the domestic kin of the overseas Chinese. This meant that the ties of overseas Chinese men to their offspring in China were preserved at the expense of *qiaofu*.

What did all these changes mean in reality? Officials in Wenchang county reported one case involving Li Yue’e, who ran away from home and applied for divorce. Her husband, Wang Jingbin, had been living in Southeast Asia for nineteen years and rarely sent any letters and remittances home. The relationship between Li and her mother-in-law was poor. The court then made several attempts to “educate her about family values, spousal relations and the pros and cons [of staying in or leaving the marriage].” Consequently, “her basic attitude improved,” but “family unity was still poor and Li was still anxious.” To resolve the conflict completely, officials said that the court helped her conduct a family meeting, during which “everyone brought up the issues, analyzed them, and distinguished between right and wrong.” Later, officials wrote to Wang to say that his wife had returned home to work eagerly after receiving education from the court. Relations between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law got better. But the economic situation at home was still difficult, so officials asked Wang to send some money to help support the family. After receiving the letter, Wang sent home four consecutive remittances in two months. Because of that, Li came to the court to express her gratitude.²⁸

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In this example that officials called a success, they appeared as the guardian of transnational marriages, providing marriage counseling and reminding overseas Chinese of their obligations to the family. Their accounts the restoration of harmony to the family, removing the conflicts that had been harming production for the building of socialism. This reflected the new official position that as long as the overseas Chinese fulfilled the traditional duty of supporting the family in the home village, there was little reason that their wives should need a divorce.

Conclusion

Although Party cadres implementing the Marriage Law in 1953 first portrayed *qiaofu* as oppressed figures, the Party-state soon withdrew its commitment to liberating them from transnational marriages. The desire for overseas Chinese support for the new Chinese state, as well as the focus on building productive families to raise national production, eventually caused marriage reform to backfire. It led state officials to downplay conflicts between *qiaofu* and overseas Chinese that they had helped instigate at the beginning.

The sources used in this essay do not tell us how local courts administered the central directives and how individual *qiaofu* responded to the new restrictions. However, the sources do suggest how the Party-state viewed transnational families in the mid-1950s. In attempting to balance conflicting objectives, the Party-state ultimately aligned with the patriarchal family that it had attempted to abolish, echoing its traditional demands for duty from emigrant sons and resident wives. It even went on to demand that all transnational marriages must be kept intact in the interest of the nation. In the end, as many nation-building goals in the 1950s relied on family stability, the Party-state chose to keep transnational families together, even when it meant that the attack on the oppression of women had to be toned down.

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Finally, the conflicts discussed in this essay suggest an important point about the history of Chinese migrations. It is that the unexpected changes facing the left-behind were central to transnational experiences in the 1950s. Far from being immobile and passive, *qiaofu* adapted creatively to the challenges of male absence and aggressively pursued welfare of the self and household, defying expectations under the conjugal family model. They did so in a changing political environment of the 1950s, during which they concretized the promise and threat of transnational practices to the new socialist order. “Mobile” in practice and meaning despite a fixed location, the left-behind was a key site to examine the ambivalences about migration provoked by conflicting state agendas. Their stories offer us a more complete picture of transnational lives in the 1950s.

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¹ For exceptions, see Yuen-Fong Woon, *The Excluded Wife* (Montreal, 1998) and Madeline Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration between the United States and South China, 1882-1943* (Stanford, 2000).

² Transnational households comprised over 7 million "overseas Chinese" (huaqiao) living abroad and an additional 6.4 million "overseas Chinese family dependents" (qiaojuan) and "returned overseas Chinese" (guiqiao) domestically. See Yi Meihou, "Guangdongsheng gedi qiaolian gongzuo gaikuang," in *Zhonghua quanguo guiguo huaqiao lianhe hui chengli dahui tekan* (October 1956), 50; Glen D. Peterson, "Socialist China and the Huaqiao: The Transition to Socialism in the Overseas Chinese Areas of Rural Guangdong, 1949-1956," *Modern China* 14, No. 3, 311.

³ Adam McKeown has argued cogently for a global approach to migration studies. See McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900-1936* (Chicago, 2001), 4-24.

⁴ For an example of the political charges against Chinese overseas in the 1950s, see Robert S. Elegant, *The Dragon's Seed: Peking and the Overseas Chinese* (New York, 1959). For analysis, Charles Coppel, *Indonesian Chinese in Crisis* (Kuala Lumpur, 1983) and Daniel Chirot and Anthony Reid, eds. *Essential Outsiders: Chinese and Jews in the Modern Transformation of Southeast Asia and Central Europe* (Seattle and London, 1997).

⁵ Guangdong Provincial Archives (GDPA), 237-1-3 (1953).

⁶ M. J. Meijer, *Marriage Law and Policy in the Chinese People's Republic* (Hong Kong, 1971), 77-78. See also Meijer, 300-301, Appendix VIII, "The Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China," Chapter III. Rights and Duties of Husband and Wife.

⁷ GDPA, 237-1-3 (1953).

⁸ GDPA, 237-1-3 (1953).

⁹ GDPA, 237-1-3 (1953).

¹⁰ GDPA, 237-1-3 (1953).

¹¹ GDPA, 237-1-3 (1953).

¹² GDPA, 237-1-3 (1953). Although scholarship focusing on the prewar period stresses the high collective volume of remittances to China (Hicks, 1993), local records in 1950s Guangdong

suggest the role of local economic activities among transnational families and that not every family enjoyed a stable income from remittances at all times.

¹³ GDPA, 237-1-3 (1953).

¹⁴ GDPA, 237-1-3 (1953).

¹⁵ GDPA, 237-1-3 (1953).

¹⁶ GDPA, 237-1-3 (1953).

¹⁷ GDPA, 250-1-8 (1957).

¹⁸ GDPA, 237-1-3 (1953).

¹⁹ GDPA, 237-1-3 (1953).

²⁰ GDPA, 250-1-8 (1957).

²¹ For example, He Xiangning, “Yi jiu wu ling nian xinnian dui huaqiao de guanbo ci,” January 1, 1950. For other overseas broadcasts, See He Xiangning, *Shuang qing wenji*, Vol. 2 (Beijing, 1985).

²² GDPA, 250-1-8 (1957).

²³ Beijing guiguo huaqiao lianyihui ed., *Guanyu qiaowu zhengce ji qita ruogan wenti de dafu* (May 1956).

²⁴ GDPA, 250-1-8 (1957).

²⁵ GDPA, 250-1-8 (1957).

²⁶ GDPA, 250-1-8 (1957).

²⁷ GDPA, 250-1-8 (1957).

²⁸ GDPA, 250-1-8 (1957).