

From Family Correspondence to the Mechanisms of Transnational Networking: The Wu Family's Remittance Letters in Taishan, Guangdong, 1898–1946

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Abstract

Drawing on 482 remittance letters and related documents of the Wu family of Taishan, Guangdong, preserved in the Guangdong Museum of Revolutionary History, this article examines the operation of a transnational family network between 1898 and 1946. Rather than treating qiaopi and yinxin primarily as records of remittances, family sentiment, or individual migration experiences, the study reads them as evidence of the recurring practices through which cross-border connections were organized and sustained. The analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions: the operation of remittance channels linking the United States, Hong Kong, and Taishan; migration strategies developed under the restrictions of Chinese exclusion; and the succession of key intermediaries whose absence could disrupt the network. The findings show that the durability of the Wu family network depended not on kinship alone, but on the routinization of verification, accounting, brokerage, and role succession. Receipts and account reconciliation made remittance transactions traceable and helped produce transactional trust; family and commercial intermediaries mobilized information, funds, and documentary resources to facilitate migration; and the replacement of key agents enabled network functions to continue across generations. By shifting attention from the existence of transnational ties to the practices through which they were reproduced over time, this study offers a microhistorical perspective on the operation and resilience of Chinese migrant family networks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Keywords: Qiaopi and Yinxin; Remittance Letters; Transnational Networks; Chinese Migration; Taishan

1. Introduction

Since Qiaopi and Yinxin: Correspondence and Remittance Documents from Overseas Chinese was inscribed on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register in 2013, qiaopi and yinxin—letters and remittance documents exchanged between Chinese emigrants and their families or relatives in

China—have attracted growing scholarly attention. The publication of major documentary collections relating to qiaopi from southern Fujian, Chaoshan, Meizhou, Jiangmen Wuyi, and other parts of Guangdong, together with the development of specialized databases by institutions such as Shantou University and Sun Yat-sen University, has provided an increasingly substantial source base for the study of Chinese migration, remittances, social relations, and cultural connections. Research in this field has consequently moved beyond an earlier concentration on the economic significance of overseas remittances to encompass social networks, cultural identities, family relations, and broader forms of transnational practice.

At the theoretical and macrohistorical level, Takeshi Hamashita (2021) examined the transnational connections forged by Chinese migrants through migration, trade, and remittances and conceptualized these interconnected relationships in terms of a “Chinese network” (Zhonghua wang). Gregor Benton and Hong Liu (2022), in their study of emigrant correspondence and remittances, systematically examined the origins, structure, characteristics, and operation of the qiaopi trade and demonstrated its structural significance in the economic and social transformations of modern China. Both approaches situated qiaopi within a wider framework of global history and transnational social networks and have exerted a substantial influence on subsequent scholarship. Studies by Jiao Jianhua (2017), Chen Chunsheng (2000), Zhang Huimei and Liu Hong (2020), and Chen Liyuan (2025) have likewise examined the networks, institutions, and social interactions associated with the qiaopi systems of Fujian, Chaoshan, Singapore, and Southeast Asia.

These studies also resonate with a broader body of international migration scholarship. Migration scholars have long noted that migration is rarely reducible to a series of isolated individual decisions. Once established, interpersonal and social networks may facilitate the circulation of information, resources, and assistance, reduce the costs and risks associated with mobility, and contribute to the continuation of migration over time (Massey et al., 1993). From a transnational perspective, migrants and non-migrants may simultaneously participate in social fields that extend across territorial and institutional boundaries, linking places of origin and destination through recurring exchanges and social practices (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Research on overseas Chinese remittance firms has further shown that private remittance networks were sustained through combinations of commercial practice, interpersonal trust, kinship, locality, and flexible relations among firms, allowing them to operate across changing political and regulatory environments (Harris, 2015). Such approaches provide a useful comparative context for understanding qiaopi not merely as letters or financial instruments, but as part of the infrastructure through which dispersed migrant communities maintained durable connections. This article uses “transnational” as an analytical description of historically observable practices rather than as a claim that such practices were unique to the modern era. Following Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt (1999), the emphasis is on sustained cross-border activities that linked migrants, firms, and home communities through recurrent exchanges.

At the same time, more focused case studies have demonstrated the richness and diversity of qiaopi as historical sources. Chen Liyuan (2011), for example, examined education and social transmission among transnational Chinese families; Shen Huifen (2021) explored the persistence of family connections among Hakka migrants despite prolonged spatial separation; and Xiao

Wenping (2008) analyzed the role of shuikē—private couriers who carried letters and remittances—in the formation of Hakka emigrant communities. More recently, Lin Dan and Liang Wanting (2025) investigated narratives of forced migration and dispersed families in Chaoshan qiaopi and their implications for cultural identity and consciousness of family and homeland. Together, these studies demonstrate that the analytical possibilities of qiaopi depend both on the particular characteristics of the surviving documentary collections and on the questions posed by historians.

Much of the macrohistorical literature on international migration, remittance economies, and wartime disruption necessarily takes states, regions, or major migrant communities as its principal units of analysis. Such perspectives are indispensable for identifying broader historical patterns, but they may obscure the activities of particular individuals and families through which these larger processes were actually realized. Even the most encompassing theories of transnational migration and social networks ultimately require historically grounded evidence concerning the actions of identifiable actors. Beneath common structures and large-scale patterns lie considerable variations in the ways individual migrant families mobilized resources, maintained relationships, responded to crises, and reproduced their networks over time.

This article therefore examines a collection of remittance letters and related documents belonging to the Wu lineage of Taishan, Guangdong. Its principal purpose is not to reconstruct the emotional content of individual letters or to quantify the amounts remitted in particular transactions. Instead, it treats this long-running correspondence as evidence of the practices through which a transnational and translocal family network was established, confirmed, maintained, and, when necessary, repaired. In this sense, the article shifts the analytical emphasis from reading remittance correspondence primarily for its content to reading it for the mechanisms of network operation that it reveals.

The case of the Wu family is particularly useful for this purpose because its correspondence records sustained exchanges among family and lineage members located in the United States, Hong Kong, and the family's native locality in Taishan over several decades. The surviving documents make it possible to trace recurring patterns rather than isolated events. This article focuses on three interconnected dimensions of these patterns: the routinized operation of remittance channels; the strategies through which family members organized and negotiated transnational migration; and the replacement of key intermediaries when death, return migration, or other circumstances threatened to interrupt network functions. Taken together, these dimensions illuminate how remittance correspondence helped sustain a family-based system of transnational organization linking overseas migration, commercial activity, and the society of the home region.

2. Sources and Characteristics of the Wu Family Remittance Letters

The principal sources for this study are a collection of Wu family remittance letters and related documents acquired by the Guangdong Museum of Revolutionary History in 2013. The collection contains 482 items, including 385 letters, 67 receipts and other transactional documents, 10 account books and contracts, and 20 photographs and other miscellaneous materials. The documents span nearly half a century, from 1898, the twenty-fourth year of the Guangxu reign, to 1946, the thirty-

fifth year of the Republic of China. Covering the transnational activities of four generations of the Wu lineage, the collection provides an unusually continuous body of primary evidence through which the everyday operation of a migrant family network can be reconstructed.

In genealogical terms, the documents concern two lineage branches of the Wu family from Doudong village in Taishan: the Hanyuan branch and the Zhuguo branch. The Hanyuan branch is represented principally by members of the twenty-second through twenty-fifth generations, whose generation-name characters included Ming, Hong, Xun, and Yao. The Zhuguo branch is represented mainly by members of the twenty-fifth through twenty-seventh generations, associated with the generation characters Xue, Yu, and Shi. Because the individuals represented in the correspondence belonged to a relatively concentrated set of lineage branches, their interpersonal relationships and patterns of communication can be reconstructed with considerable clarity.

The contents of the collection extend well beyond expressions of familial affection. They include discussions of remittances and currency exchange, the forwarding of goods, business operations, purchases of property, procedures relating to international travel and migration, responses to financial and personal risks, and a range of local affairs in the emigrants' home communities. The documents therefore offer unusually rich evidence for examining the practical operation of a transnational migrant society.

Four individuals—Wu Honggan, Wu Xunshun, Wu Quanxun, and Wu Xunshao—appear particularly frequently in the surviving correspondence and constitute the principal actors examined in this article.

Wu Honggan, a member of the twenty-third generation, was one of the collection's most prolific correspondents. Between 1898 and 1911, he wrote 105 surviving letters addressed primarily to Wu Xunshun at the Tailai firm and to other relatives. Born approximately in the 1850s, Wu Honggan migrated to the United States in the early 1870s. He later became involved in the construction of a water company in Elko, Nevada, where he emerged as one of its principal shareholders. He also held major interests in the Tailai firm and Hehetang and acquired several properties in the area.

After returning to China in 1898, Wu Honggan continued to extend his commercial interests across the Pearl River Delta and the Wuyi region. He invested in or helped establish the Jiantai firm at Shuikou in Kaiping, the Jiantailong firm at Gongyi, and the Heyuan pawnshop at Gongyi, as well as businesses in Jiangmen, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong. His investments encompassed jinshanzhuang businesses associated with overseas Chinese trade, paper shops, pawnshops, and the coal trade. In July 1917, he once again travelled to the United States and returned to Elko.

Wu Xunshun was the principal recipient of the surviving correspondence. Of the 482 documents in the collection, 342 were addressed to him. He appears to have migrated to the United States around 1896. Under Wu Honggan's guidance, he gradually assumed responsibility for the latter's American properties and commercial interests and oversaw the day-to-day affairs of the Tailai firm, Hehetang, and the water company. He became one of Wu Honggan's most trusted associates and effectively served as his principal agent in the United States.

Wu Xunshun briefly returned to Taishan in early 1913 and travelled back to the United States in July 1914. He died in a traffic accident in July 1917. Although he had spent many years working in

the United States, he left relatively little personal property there at the time of his death. A substantial proportion of his earnings had been remitted to his home region, where the funds were used to support relatives, purchase agricultural property, construct houses, and invest in family-linked commercial enterprises. His experience illustrates the extent to which overseas earnings and remittances were embedded in the economic life of the family and the home community.

Wu Quanyun was another major correspondent. Between 1899 and 1911, 148 surviving letters from him to Wu Xunshun are preserved in the collection. Wu Quanyun was the son of Wu Hongshu. Following his father's sudden death during an epidemic in 1899, Quanyun succeeded him in his position at the Dalun firm in Hong Kong and took over responsibility for forwarding letters and remittances arriving from the United States. In 1902, he established his own business, the Guangshengcheng firm, in Hong Kong. The firm regularly received remittance correspondence sent by Wu Xunshun from the United States, and Wu Quanyun consequently became one of the principal intermediaries responsible for the concentration, conversion, and onward distribution of the Wu family's overseas remittances.

Wu Xunshao was another significant sender in the collection. Between 1904 and 1917, 42 surviving letters from Xunshao to Xunshun are preserved. Wu Xunshao worked successively at the Jiantai firm and the Guangshengrong firm in Hong Kong. After Wu Xunshun returned to the United States in 1914, Guangshengrong became one of the principal Hong Kong institutions through which remittance correspondence from the American side of the Wu network was received and forwarded. Wu Xunshao thus assumed many of the distribution and transfer functions previously performed by Wu Quanyun.

An important characteristic of the collection is that most of these documents were exchanged among members of the broader lineage rather than exclusively among members of a nuclear household. They are therefore not private family letters in the narrow sense. Their contents are weighted toward such matters as the receipt and conversion of money, commercial forwarding arrangements, information exchange, property management, migration procedures, funerals and ancestral rites, and the coordination of responses to unforeseen problems. Explicit expressions of personal emotion occur less frequently than in many collections of intimate family correspondence.

This documentary characteristic is especially important for the present study. Precisely because the letters repeatedly address practical and organizational matters, they make it possible to move beyond an exclusively emotional or domestic reading of migrant correspondence. The Wu family materials provide a basis for examining the recurring procedures, interpersonal arrangements, and adaptive strategies through which lineage members used remittance correspondence to construct and sustain a transnational and translocal network. They also make visible the ways in which that network developed relatively stable rules of operation while remaining dependent on the actions, reputations, and relationships of particular individuals.

3. The Formation of a Transnational and Translocal Network

Among the emigrant-sending communities (qiaoxiang) of the Cantonese-speaking regions of modern Guangdong, Taishan offers a particularly revealing example of the formation of

transnational networks. Taishanese migrants were widely dispersed overseas, with major communities in North America, Southeast Asia, and Oceania, while remittances from overseas remained an important component of the local economy. Despite prolonged residence abroad, migrants maintained close connections with their home communities through remittances, correspondence, the transmission of goods, commercial investment, property purchases, ancestral-hall construction, house building, and participation in marriages, funerals, ancestral rites, and other family affairs. These recurrent practices produced a form of translocal social organization in which overseas remittances served as a major material link and lineage relationships provided an important organizational foundation.

The geographical world inhabited by members of the Wu family was therefore not confined to any single locality. Their movements and exchanges revolved primarily around a triangular axis connecting the United States, Hong Kong, and their home region in Taishan. Family members moved repeatedly among these locations, while money, letters, goods, commercial information, and instructions circulated along the same routes. In this sense, the effective boundaries of the family's social network were constituted by the actual range of its members' movements and exchanges.

Within this network, remittance correspondence served purposes that went well beyond the transmission of money or expressions of familial attachment. It provided a practical means through which geographically dispersed members coordinated everyday affairs across territorial boundaries. Letters carried instructions concerning payments and transfers, communicated information about business and property, coordinated migration and travel, confirmed completed transactions, and enabled family members to respond collectively when difficulties arose. Remittance letters thus functioned as one of the principal media through which the Wu family's transnational and translocal affairs were organized and sustained.

The present study consequently approaches qiaopi and yinxin not only as documentary records of what migrants wrote, sent, or received, but also as evidence of how their network operated. The letters record the activities of lineage members in the United States, Hong Kong, and the home region, the amounts of particular remittances, and the issues that concerned individual correspondents. More importantly, however, their repeated exchanges reveal how connections were established and confirmed, how responsibilities were assigned, how obligations were fulfilled, and how interruptions or crises were addressed.

Rather than concentrating on the emotional content of a small number of individual letters or on isolated incidents, this article therefore examines patterns that emerged through the continuous circulation of correspondence over many years. It is precisely the repetition of instructions, confirmations, accounts, requests, and responses across a large body of documents that makes it possible to reconstruct relatively stable structures and practices within the Wu family network.

Spatially, this transnational network was organized around several core nodes in the United States, Hong Kong, and Taishan, while also extending to Burma, the Philippines, Guangzhou, and other parts of the Siyi region—the “Four Counties” of the Pearl River Delta that historically constituted one of Guangdong's major emigrant-sending areas. From the 1870s onward, members

of the Wu lineage migrated successively to the United States and became dispersed across towns and cities in the American West, Midwest, and East.

Hong Kong occupied a particularly important position within this configuration. It served not merely as a geographical transit point but as a hub through which money, information, goods, and migrants passed between overseas destinations and the home region. The commercial firms established or staffed by Wu family members in Hong Kong gave the city an additional institutional role as a center for receiving, converting, sorting, and forwarding remittances and correspondence.

Four places were especially important to the network: San Francisco, Elko, Hong Kong, and Taishan. The Wu lineage members active at these locations were also among the principal senders, recipients, and intermediaries represented in the surviving correspondence. Their significance derived not simply from where they lived, but from the functions they performed within the circulation of money, information, people, and commercial resources.

The Wu family's network operated through several overlapping routes rather than through a single remittance channel. It was instead a multi-centered network that was continuously reproduced through everyday transactions, repeatedly confirmed through correspondence and accounting, and adjusted when disruptions occurred. Its operation depended partly on economic interests and commercial incentives, but it was also shaped by lineage obligations, kinship ethics, and attachments to place of origin. The interaction of these different elements gave the network both its durability and its distinctive organizational character.

4. The Institutionalized Operation of Transnational Remittance Channels

Although the Wu family's transnational and translocal network facilitated the circulation of information and people and the maintenance of social relationships, one of its most fundamental functions was the transmission of overseas remittances. The surviving correspondence makes it possible to reconstruct this process in considerable detail.

By 1898, and probably earlier, Wu Xunshun was already performing a central remittance function in Elko, Nevada. He collected letters and remittances from relatives and acquaintances living in different parts of the United States and then arranged for the correspondence and funds to travel to Hong Kong through separate channels. Letters were sent to designated commercial firms in Hong Kong, whereas the money was remitted through the Hudson Bank in Elko to banking institutions in Hong Kong.

Once the funds reached Hong Kong, Wu family members such as Wu Quanxun and Wu Xunshao collected the relevant bank drafts. The correspondence referred to such drafts by the historical term *zezhi* (晁纸). The funds were then converted into locally circulating forms of silver, including what the documents called *qi'er yin* (七二银) and *tongyong yin* (通用银), before being distributed in accordance with instructions contained in Wu Xunshun's letters.

The letters and money were subsequently forwarded to affiliated commercial firms in different parts of the Siyi region. Relatives could be notified to collect the remittances from these firms, while in other cases members of the Wu lineage in Hong Kong personally carried the funds back

to the family's home community in Taishan. In this way, the network combined modern banking facilities with lineage-based commercial intermediaries and face-to-face delivery.

Recipients normally paid a service charge amounting to approximately 5–10 percent of the remittance. Wu Xunshun himself, however, was exempted from such charges by Hong Kong firms including Guangshengcheng and Guangshengrong, because the volume and regularity of the remittance business he directed through them provided the firms with a stable source of transactions. Instead, he occasionally paid small sums described in the correspondence as “tea money” (chazi, 茶资) to Wu family members employed by the firms who assisted with the delivery of letters.

The remittance network became even more elaborate after Wu Honggan expanded his commercial activities in the home region. In 1902, he established the Jiantai firm at Shuikou, followed in 1908 by the Jiantailong firm at Gongyi. Remittance business constituted an important part of the operations of both firms. They received letters and funds forwarded by Hong Kong intermediaries and also provided direct delivery services to recipients. These firms therefore extended the network beyond the Hong Kong transit point and created a more finely articulated “last-mile” remittance system within Taishan and its surrounding localities.

4.1. Receipts, Accounting, and the Maintenance of Trust

The transfer of money across such a geographically dispersed network depended on more than kinship and personal familiarity. To ensure accuracy and maintain confidence in the remittance process, the firms operated by Wu Honggan and the Wu-affiliated firms in Hong Kong developed a relatively routinized system of confirmation and accountability. The Wu materials also suggest that remittances were not merely transfers of money. As Carling (2014) argues, remittances are social transactions structured by roles, expectations, and recurring practices. In the Wu network, receipts, account reconciliation, and repeated confirmation converted kinship-based confidence into a more routinized form of transactional trust.

Once a remittance had been delivered, the recipient was required to issue a receipt. Wu Quanxun, Wu Xunshao, or Wu Honggan would then send these receipts back to Wu Xunshun in the United States. Xunshun registered the completed transaction and could in turn inform the original sender that the money had safely reached its intended recipient.

This practice created a feedback loop linking the sender, the American intermediary, the Hong Kong firms, the home-region firms, and the final recipient. The receipt was therefore not merely evidence that money had changed hands. It was an instrument through which the completion of a transnational transaction could be verified across distance.

Parallel accounting procedures reinforced this system. Wu family members responsible for the Hong Kong firms and Wu Xunshun in the United States each maintained their own accounts. At the end of each year, account books or statements were exchanged so that the sums handled by the different intermediaries could be checked against one another.

Delays in the return of receipts could create difficulties. When relatives who had received funds failed to provide receipts promptly, overseas senders had no immediate confirmation that their remittances had arrived. Wu Honggan, Wu Quanxun, and Wu Xunshao consequently wrote to Wu

Xunshun explaining such delays. Their letters noted that employees sometimes had to make repeated requests before recipients provided the required documentation and asked Xunshun to explain the circumstances to relatives in the United States. These exchanges reveal the degree to which the reputation of the firms depended upon demonstrable accountability rather than solely upon assumptions of trust based on kinship.

Account reconciliation also provided a mechanism for tracing missing payments and correcting errors. Wu Honggan, Wu Xunshun, Wu Quanyun, and Wu Xunshao all handled substantial sums through the remittance chain and maintained detailed records of transactions. At the end of the year, statements of incoming and outgoing funds were sent with correspondence and cross-checked.

If a remittance appeared not to have arrived, Wu Xunshun could raise the matter on behalf of relatives or acquaintances in the United States. Wu Quanyun and Wu Xunshao would then trace the payment through the successive stages of the transfer process until its location had been identified. Where discrepancies were found in the recorded amounts, the accounts could be corrected after verification by the parties involved.

Such procedures formed an important basis for the long-term reliability of the remittance channel. The system did not eliminate error or delay, but it made transactions traceable. Its effectiveness rested on a combination of written records, reciprocal checking, personal responsibility, and the reputational interests of the firms and intermediaries involved. The surviving letters thus reveal that trust within the Wu family network was not merely inherited from kinship. It was also repeatedly produced and reinforced through documentation, verification, and accountability.

4.2. Cooperation, Competition, and Multiple Remittance Routes

The relationships among the firms participating in the Wu family remittance network were not purely cooperative. The Jiantai and Jiantailong firms associated with Wu Honggan and the Hong Kong firms Guangshengcheng and Guangshengrong sometimes competed for remittance business.

In correspondence with Wu Xunshun, Wu Honggan reported complaints from overseas relatives concerning the exchange rates—referred to in the letters as “yinshui” (银水)—offered by the Hong Kong firms. By comparison, the service charges imposed by Jiantai and Jiantailong were said to be lower. Wu Honggan therefore suggested that Xunshun encourage relatives and acquaintances in the United States to send their letters and money directly to Jiantai or Jiantailong, or alternatively to route the funds through the Lianyi Company in Hong Kong, which was operated by one of Honggan’s affinal relatives.

Wu Honggan also actively sought to expand the firms’ remittance business in the United States. In 1908, he proposed that Wu Xunshun place advertisements for the Jiantai firm at Shuikou and the Jiantailong firm at Gongyi in a Chinese-language newspaper in the United States. The advertisement appeared the following year.

These practices show that the family’s remittance network did not depend on a single fixed route. Multiple firms operated simultaneously, and relations among them combined cooperation with competition. Migrants could therefore choose among different channels according to such

considerations as exchange rates, fees, personal connections, convenience, and confidence in particular intermediaries.

The result was a multi-channel system linking the United States, Hong Kong, and the home region. Funds originated with migrants in different American localities, passed either through Hong Kong or through alternative affiliated firms, and were ultimately delivered to recipients in Taishan and the wider Siyi region. Receipts then travelled back through the network to confirm completion of the transaction.

The significance of this arrangement lay not only in its efficiency. Multiple routes reduced dependence on any single commercial intermediary, while receipts and cross-checked accounts enabled errors to be identified and transactions to be verified. In this respect, the remittance system demonstrates how commercial competition, lineage relations, record keeping, and reciprocal accountability could coexist within the same transnational family network.

5. Migration Routes and Strategies under Chinese Exclusion

The migration of Wu family members to the United States was not a series of isolated individual movements. It relied heavily on resources accumulated within the lineage network. After the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, legal channels of entry became increasingly restricted. The Wu correspondence shows that family members frequently resorted to what they called “buying papers” (mai zhi, 买纸)—purchasing identity documents that could provide a basis for admission to the United States.

This process was highly organized. Prospective migrants first had identification photographs taken in Hong Kong. Firms such as Guangshengrong forwarded the photographs to Wu relatives in the United States, who then contacted intermediaries to locate suitable identity papers. Relatives already in America often advanced the cost of the papers as well as the trans-Pacific fare. Guangshengrong itself participated in this documentary brokerage and supplied Wu Xunshun with information about firms in the United States that handled such matters. When migrants travelled through these arrangements, the Hong Kong firm informed Xunshun in advance so that relatives could receive them on arrival and assist with immigration formalities when necessary.

The Wu network also circulated information about indirect routes into the United States. In 1907, Wu Xunduan, then associated with the Anhe firm in New York, advised Wu Xunshun that his younger brother might first obtain documentation indicating an intention to conduct business in Mexico and then seek entry into the United States. He further suggested providing evidence of property to strengthen the credibility of the proposed “merchant” status. In September 1913, Xunshun’s younger brother Wu Xunzhan successfully followed another indirect route, travelling first to Havana, Cuba, and then entering the United States. The journey cost approximately 900 yuan, demonstrating both the expense of such strategies and their practical value under the exclusion regime.

Purchased papers did not, however, guarantee admission. Migrants could be detained and subjected to detailed examination at American ports, including Angel Island in San Francisco Bay,

and could be refused entry if their claimed identities failed to withstand official scrutiny. The Wu correspondence referred to such failures as “shenbao zhi” (审爆纸). In 1909, Wu Xunshun’s eldest son, Wu Huaqing, had his photograph taken in Hong Kong and sent it to his father so that entry arrangements could be made. By 1912 he had obtained what the letters described as “merchant papers” (shang zhi, 商纸), but he failed the immigration examination and was unable to land.

The failure did not end his attempt to migrate. In 1914, Huaqing again asked his father to contact Wu Xunxian, a relative in New York, to locate another set of papers. He eventually succeeded in entering the United States shortly before Wu Xunshun’s death in 1917 and subsequently worked for a Chinese firm in New York. His experience illustrates the repeated attempts that exclusion-era migration could require and the financial resources necessary to sustain them.

Taken together, these cases show that the Wu family’s migration strategies depended on a transnational network extending beyond the individual migrant. Relatives in different parts of the United States supplied information, funds, contacts, and reception arrangements; Hong Kong firms acted as intermediaries in the circulation of photographs, documents, and information; and economically established family members helped finance repeated attempts. Migration under Chinese exclusion was therefore not simply an individual response to legal restriction, but a coordinated family strategy supported by accumulated resources across several network nodes. This networked capacity enabled successive generations of the Wu family to sustain trans-Pacific mobility despite restrictive immigration controls.

6. Generational Succession and Role Replacement at Key Network Nodes

The long-term operation of the Wu family’s transnational network depended on the continued presence of reliable intermediaries at key nodes. When an important agent returned home, died, or otherwise withdrew, the functions associated with that position could be disrupted. The family therefore developed a recurring practice of role replacement, or *buwei* (补位), in which a suitable successor was expected to assume responsibility before, or soon after, a key intermediary left.

In 1898, when Wu Honggan decided to return to China, he first arranged for his nephews Wu Xunshun and Wu Xunpang to travel to the United States and work at the Tailai firm in Elko. After Honggan returned home, Xunshun took responsibility for his property, shareholdings, and other American interests. The transfer ensured that Honggan’s business affairs in the United States continued despite his physical absence. This case represents the most deliberate form of role succession: a replacement was put in place before the original intermediary withdrew.

A less predictable succession occurred in Hong Kong in 1899. Wu Hongshu, father of Wu Quanxun and an employee of the Dalun firm, died suddenly during an epidemic. Because Hongshu had been responsible for forwarding remittance letters and funds sent from the United States by Wu Xunshun, his death threatened to interrupt the remittance chain. Wu Quanxun and Wu Honggan quickly travelled to Hong Kong, retrieved the remittances that had accumulated at the firm, and forwarded them to their intended recipients. Quanxun subsequently succeeded his father at Dalun and continued to receive and forward remittances from the United States. Unlike Honggan’s

planned transfer, this succession was prompted by an emergency, yet the network was able to restore the disrupted function within a relatively short period.

The attempted replacement of Wu Xunshun proved much more difficult. From 1904 onward, Xunshun and his family repeatedly expressed a desire for him to return home. Wu Honggan agreed in principle but was unable for years to find a suitable successor. Several alternatives were considered. Honggan proposed travelling to the United States himself for one or two years or sending an employee from Hong Kong, but neither plan was realized. In 1905, he instructed Xunshun to arrange migration papers for his younger brother Wu Xunpu, hoping that Xunpu could assume responsibility for the American affairs. Although Xunpu had reached the United States by early 1908, he did not take over Xunshun's responsibilities.

Other candidates were similarly unsuccessful. In 1906, Honggan approached the younger relative Wu Dingfen, who declined the role. In 1909, he turned to Xunshun's eldest son Wu Huaqing, but Huaqing's failed attempt to enter the United States in 1912 prevented this arrangement from proceeding. Only in the early 1910s did Wu Yuanhong, a younger relative of Honggan, take over the management of Honggan's American property and related affairs, allowing Xunshun to return home in 1913. Xunshun subsequently returned to the United States in 1914.

These cases reveal two recurring features of succession within the Wu network. First, the departure of a key intermediary was generally expected to follow, rather than precede, the arrival of a replacement—a principle that may be summarized as “replacement before departure.” Second, potential successors were drawn primarily from within the lineage, including brothers, sons, nephews, and more distant male relatives.

This arrangement helped preserve continuity in the management of remittances, property, business, and information across national borders. At the same time, Xunshun's prolonged inability to return home demonstrates the limits of such a system. Key intermediaries were not easily interchangeable. Their effectiveness depended on personal trust, business experience, relationships, and familiarity with particular locations. The durability of the network therefore rested not only on kinship itself, but also on the availability of individuals capable of assuming highly specific intermediary roles.

7. Conclusion

The Wu family's transnational network was not simply a set of geographical connections linking migrants abroad with relatives at home. It was a dynamic system sustained through remittance correspondence, commercial intermediaries, migration strategies, and the succession of key agents.

First, remittance letters constituted an important operational medium within the network. They carried not only money and family information but also instructions, accounts, receipts, and confirmations. Through the circulation of remittances from the United States via Hong Kong to Taishan, followed by the return of receipts and the reconciliation of accounts, the Wu family developed a relatively stable system of verification and accountability. Trust within the network

was therefore reinforced through repeated practices of documentation and confirmation rather than resting on kinship alone.

Second, the network provided resources for migration under Chinese exclusion. Information, money, identity documents, commercial intermediaries, and reception arrangements were mobilized across Hong Kong and the United States to facilitate entry. When individual attempts failed, the existence of multiple relatives and commercial contacts made renewed attempts possible. Migration thus emerged as a family-organized and transnationally coordinated process rather than an exclusively individual undertaking.

Third, the continuity of the network depended on the replacement of key intermediaries. The cases of Wu Honggan, Wu Hongshu, and Wu Xunshun show that the departure or death of a central agent could threaten particular network functions. The practice of arranging successors—often according to kinship proximity—helped maintain the management of property, remittances, and information across generations. Yet the difficulty of replacing Wu Xunshun also demonstrates that such intermediaries were not fully interchangeable: personal trust, experience, and local connections remained essential.

The article's contribution is therefore threefold but closely connected: it shows how documentary routines made remittance transactions traceable, how family and commercial intermediaries organized migration under exclusion, and how role succession preserved network functions when key actors withdrew. The case shifts attention from the existence of transnational ties to the practices through which such ties were reproduced over time. The Wu family case therefore suggests that the durability of transnational migrant networks cannot be explained by kinship ties alone. Such networks endured because kinship was translated into recurring practices of remittance, brokerage, accounting, migration assistance, and role succession. By reading remittance correspondence not only for what it recorded but also for what it reveals about the operation of these practices, this study provides a microhistorical perspective on the ways Chinese migrant families sustained cross-border connections under changing commercial and immigration regimes.

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Conceptualization, H.H. and G.G.; methodology, H.H. and G.G.; formal analysis, H.H.; investigation, H.H. and G.G.; data curation, H.H.; writing—original draft preparation, H.H.; writing—review and editing, G.G.; supervision, G.G.; project administration, G.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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The primary archival materials used in this study are preserved in the Wu Family Remittance Letters Collection at the Guangdong Museum of Revolutionary History. Access to and reproduction of these materials are subject to the museum's relevant policies.

Conflict of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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