Transnational Social Practice from Below: The Experiences of a Chinese Leneage
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Chapter 3

Wenyao Zheng and His Romanticism

In overseas Chinese transnational social practices, making donations to one's hometown has been a noticeable phenomenon.

There are two current schools of thought to explain the general behaviour of donors. From the rationalist viewpoint, the decision of a donor is made logically and is inextricably linked to economic profit making. In other words, the purpose of the donor in making a donation is to gain bigger economic returns. The other extreme considers the donor a pure philanthropist. Those making this argument say that Chinese overseas make a contribution back to China because they foster strong sentiments towards their hometown. For Chinese the concept of hometown may range from one's birthplace to the land of one's ancestors, it may even refer to the whole of China. Neither of these views takes the historical-social context into account. And they try to simplify intricate phenomena and motivations.

In my view, the logical force of the context in which the actor is located deserves more attention than isolated concepts like desire or rationality. For a simple but a principal reason, any actor should be understood in his context as Fredric Jameson stresses that the world possesses its own developing logic and rhythm (Jameson 1997:30-36). In this case, the context implies a social space corresponding with a geographical border-crossing region; namely, a region which covers South China, Hong Kong and Southeast Asian countries. From the historical, social and cultural perspective, the logical force of the context may explain most appositely why the actor is enthusiastic about being involved in making a contribution to his native place,
and in what and how he does. The case of Wenyao Zheng below is presented in such a context with a focus on the developing logic of this space.

As mentioned earlier, Wenyao Zheng won himself the title of the “Tan Kah Kee of Yongchun”. This can be seen as the highest accolade for an overseas contributor in the local context. The reference to the Tan Kah Kee model means that the actor has devoted the bulk of his property to supporting his philanthropic projects. According to the standard of wealth set by the Malaysian Chinese of Yongchun origin, however, the position of Wenyao Zheng is that of a mid-range scale businessman. Given the limitation of his financial power, his enthusiasm and donation behaviour were both spectacular. In the opinion of the Yongchun community and that of the local government, Wenyao Zheng is held in high regard for being a noble-minded person who devoted his entire liquid assets and his personal passion to establishing an institution of highest learning, which had never existed before, for the future generations of Yongchun County. Wenyao’s unparalleled donation cannot be regarded as having been prompted by profit making because of the manner it was carried out and terms placed on the recipient, not just for his final gesture but also for all his donations.

Therefore it is necessary for us to see firstly what is the historical logic of Wenyao’s deeds embedded in both real localities: Yongchun on one side, Segamat and Malacca on the other side, and in the virtual transnational social space which connects the two sides. This angle will help us to draw up a continuous narrative and furthermore, to understand how this figure’s romantic dream had been forged and constituted historically and socially. Secondly, how other factors of the suggested cultural logic such as the government, the market, and networks play roles in this
case, which together gave impetus to as well as pushed him to put his romantic dream into practice.

1. The Story of Building up Fortune

Wenyao Zheng’s story is full of elements of mystery and wonder. He spent all his youth in both trans-territorial places: Yongchun and the inland of the Malay Peninsula, trying to find a means of livelihood. He struggled for a long time on the bottom rung of society, being successively a butcher’s assistant, a rubber tapper, a peddler and a small rubber trader, toiling all the year round with never enough to eat or wear. Undeterred, he never ceased looking around for opportunity. By what was seemingly sheer chance, he literally dug up his first crock of gold. From then onward, he built up his family firm. When I conducted my fieldwork in Malaysia, his close friends, his business associates, his clansmen told stories of how he made his fortune with great relish. The following narrative will help us to understand Wenyao Zheng.

Wenyao Zheng was born in 1917 and migrated for the first time to the Malay Peninsula, where his uncle was, to seek shelter at the age of twelve. The uncle was a butcher and Wenyao Zheng worked as an assistant pig slaughterer. He helped to grasp the tail of the pig tightly while his uncle delivered the deathblow. According to the recollections, he led a hard and tough life at that time. His so-called home was nothing more than a thatched cottage and the only table in it was a soapbox. He scrimped and saved until he had a small sum of money to buy five acres of rubber land in Segamat. While waiting for his trees to reach maturity he tended them and he earned his living as a rubber taper. In those days, rubber tapers were paid by the day so when it rained Wenyao Zheng faced a tough choice. He could take the day off, but no work meant no pay and his was a hand-to-mouth existence; no pay, no food. His usual working day was very long. It started from dawn because latex flows best in the cool dawn air. Once the sun nears its zenith, the sap flowing from the rubber tree dries up and the flow stops. Then Wenyao Zheng had to re-visit every tree he had
tapped to pick up the latex that had collected in a small cup tied to each tree. A medium-size plantation is around 150 acres and collection points are spread out over that area. The rubber tapers had to take their loads to these collection points on foot as no motor vehicles could manoeuvre between the trees which are planted very close together. So, by the time Wenyao Zheng finished delivering the latex he had collected, it would be close to evening. In the evenings, he looked after another clansman's coffee shop where his job was to serve drinks, fetching and carrying drinks for the customers who came in to play mahjong after work. When the coffee shop closed near midnight, he slept on a bench in the shop.

In 1935, when Wenyao Zheng was eighteen, he went back to his village in Yongchun, China to marry a girl adopted by his family as his future wife when she was child.

Living in straitened circumstances, Wenyao Zheng developed a strong desire to find a way out to escape from his life of grinding toil. Before the spring festival of 1948, he borrowed 1 liang (50 grams) of gold at 0.02 liang interest and went on foot to Xianyou, the neighbouring county to Yongchun to collect wild *kumquat* (a kind of lime with a golden coloured peel) and carried them back to Yongchun. He cooked the *kumquat* in a syrup and then dried them, turning them into semi-dried, candied *kumquat*, which is a sort of sweet the people of Yongchun like to take with tea. He made a few *dan* (a *dan* = 50 kilograms) of the candied kumquat with the intention of selling it in Singapore and Malaya. Full of hope, he conveyed his load of semi-dried candied *kumquat* to Xiamen, the port city that services southern Fujian, and from there he took a ship to Singapore. After a ten-day voyage, when he arrived at his destination, the entire semi-dried candied *kumquat* had gone mouldy and he could not sell any of them. Thus, he had lost his stake and he had no money to return to China. He deeply regretted his failure because it meant that he could not keep his promise to his mother. Before his departure, Wenyao Zheng told his mother that he would definitely return home before the ninth day of the Lunar New Year (Chinese New Year) to enjoy with her the special white sugared New Year cake she prepared for him every year. He had no intention at all of staying in the Malay Peninsula. His dream was to earn a sum of money, then return to his village to continue running his rice retail shop and be an agent selling ceramic utensils. In his leisure time, he could enjoy playing the *suona* horn (a long pipe like a wind instrument made of wood used
in folk music). Now he could not return because of the failure of his first venture into small business.

His brother-in-law was raising pigs in Segamat and had some ready money which he had just received from selling a number of mature pigs. He wanted to deposit his money in the local Chinese coffee shop; a normal practice back then when there was no banking service available. When he heard of the sad plight of Wenyao Zheng, he lent the latter his spare cash. That was how Wenyao Zheng ended up once again in Segamat. Another of his relatives, an uncle, offered Wenyao a job at his local rubber trading house where he did the work of collecting and selling the unprocessed latex to bigger trading houses.

The nature of his job entailed Wenyao Zheng going into big plantations to collect filiform dried latex. When Wenyao visited a rubber plantation he liked to stroll around. One day, while he was on one of the British estates called the Lunglob Estate in Bahau, Negri Sembilan Darul Khusus, he happened to jump over a ditch. At the spot where he landed, the ground felt different. In fact, it felt a little elastic. Out of curiosity, he asked one of the foremen and was told the following story.

In World War Two, the Japanese invaded the Malay Peninsula and for quite a while they were winning. Many British employees decided to leave and, before evacuating the Lunglob Estate, the British manager ordered his workers to break a container full of fresh, pure latex that was due for shipment to London for making aeroplane tyres and rubber gloves. The latex was drained into a ditch. By now, a thick layer of eroded soil had covered the ditch and long, wild grass has grown on top of it. The British firm had already forgotten about it. However, lately, because of the foliage on top of the ditch it was ‘growing’ higher than the surrounding ground and when there was a heavy rain, water accumulating on the ground could not be drained away freely. The manager had asked to have the ditch cleared up, but this was a difficult, back-breaking job because the rubber beneath the soil was elastic.

From his experience as a rubber trader, Wenyao Zheng knew that it takes maybe a hundred years for rubber to deteriorate, so certainly the latex that lay in the ditch must still be in good condition as it had just been there only a few years. Wenyao Zheng asked to be introduced to British manager to make him an offer. Wenyao Zheng would provide the required labour to dig out the ditch and cart away the soil for free in return for being allowed to buy the old latex buried in the ditch at five cents per pound. The British manager who was in charge of this matter was new to the job and
a contract accepting the offer was drawn up and signed. In order to complete the contract, Wenyao Zheng borrowed some money and then bought a ring costing M$600 and gifted it to the wife of the British manager. The workers he hired dug out the earth and sawed the solidified latex underneath into blocks. The purity of the latex was not affected and it could be used for making high-quality rubber clothing. From this transaction, Wenyao earned about M$70,000!

Using this golden nest-egg as venture capital, Wenyao Zheng opened a rubber trading house at Pantai, Seremban. With his enterprising spirit, it did not take him long to exceed the performance of other more senior businessmen with support from a crucial source – the Lunglob Estate, with which Wenyao Zheng had already built up a personal relationship. He was signed on as a middle agent for the company, which was one of the largest and most influential international British estates at that time. His contract as a middle agent gave him permission to sell the liquid latex he collected to Lunglob and buy inferior latex from the latter to sell it to other Chinese rubber-trading houses. This business liaison with Lunglob lasted for fourteen years.

The people of Yongchun have a common saying: that a hole the size of a foot (in a paddy field) was not large enough to raise big grass carp. This applied to Wenyao Zheng the scope of whose business had outgrown Pantai, Seremban. Although he was still young and had just started his rubber trading business, his contract with Lunglob provided him with the opportunity to trade in liquid latex, while other local Chinese could only deal in the inferior filiform of dried latex. Since Wenyao Zheng was fired with the ambition to develop his business further, the next logical step was to move on as opportunities at Seremban were limited. His close friend suggested that he should either shift to Kuala Lumpur, the capital city in the north, or to Malacca, the port city in the south.

In Kuala Lumpur, Di Zheng (a figure presented in Chapter 5), a fellow-clansman, had already built up a solid basis in rubber trading. So Wenyao Zheng decided to move to Malacca, partly because the head office of Lunglob was there.

He shifted to Malacca and set up a medium-scale rubber processing factory called Haiyuan in 1959. The factory could process up to 180 tons of latex monthly. In 1981 the factory was sold to another company which continued to operate it until 1988.

Not long after the arrival of Wenyao Zheng in Malacca, he was approached by a Hainanese whose surname was Zhan, the owner of a transport company called Xinglian. Zhan asked Wenyao Zheng if they could co-operate in operating a rubber
planted as he was illiterate and he admired the innate business acumen and industrious characteristic of the Hokkiens (in the Malay Peninsula, Chinese who come from Fujian province are generally called Hokkiens). Wenyao Zheng agreed to contribute his accumulated experience in the rubber industry. After much searching they settled on Segamat, an area with which he was familiar from the days he used to be a rubber tapper and later a rubber trader. They purchased a 3,500-acre rubber plantation, owned by a British citizen who wanted to leave Malaya, for M$2.4 million. The soil was rich and Wenyao Zheng proposed that 3,000 acres be used to plant rubber, while the other 500 acres be used to grow durians (locally referred to as the King of Fruits) as a cash crop. Wenyao Zheng and Zhan called their new company Xinghai (using a combination of the first Chinese character of their respective companies) in 1966. Diverging from the practices of most of Chinese Yongchun origin, Wenyao Zheng was inclined to depend on bank loans. They borrowed M$2 million from the Malacca Overseas Chinese Bank and the company of Zhan, Xinglian, not only stood guarantor for the new joint venture company, it also put in part of the capital. In this joint venture, Zhan held a 40% share while Wenyao Zheng kept 30%. By the mid-1990s, Wenyao Zheng’s share in Xinghai had reached 60%.8

When the joint venture company, Xinghai, made profit, Wenyao Zheng used it to buy a share in Zhan’s company, Xinglian, a bus transportation company. Wenyao Zheng personally held 38% of Xinglian, the Xianghai company having 12%, and Wumei company, a company set up later for his personal ownership and a few of his close friends also held some of the shares. Consequently, the business partnership between Wenyao Zheng and Zhan became complicated and inextricably linked. A conflict between them later developed and eventually grew fierce.

According to the Zheng community in Segamat, the reason that led to the conflict between Wenyao and Zhan was that, when Xinghai, the joint company, had made a profit, Wenyao refused to divide it into bonus to be shared out among shareholders. Zhan was so furious that he reported Wenyao Zheng to the Inland Revenue Department which consequently instigated an investigation into his affairs. From then on, there was bad blood between the two. Zhan was shot by a professional gunman, but he survived the attack. Wenyao Zheng, however, died in 1995. He was shot by an assassin in front of his house as he alighted from his bulletproof car. Speculations were rife in the local newspapers and among his clansmen that the murder of Wenyao might have been spawned by the unresolved conflict between Wenyao Zheng and
Zhan. But not enough evidence could be brought to prove the suspicions and neither side even brought the case to court.

At the time Wengyao was murdered, his fortune consisted of a 38% share in the Xiinglian bus Company; a 60% share in the Xiinghai plantation and trade company; 12% of Wuimei Holdings (a company Wenyao Zheng set up with his close friends for investments only); and 8 acres left over from the closing of the rubber processing plant in Malacca. Its estimated current worth is around M$10 million and the family intends to develop it into real estate.

Wenyao Zheng’s personal history seems to have been a typical one, because like the majority of Chinese migrants, he had struggled at the bottom of society for a long time before he gained his success in business. His achievement was due especially to his strong, unwavering desire to find a way to bring changes in his poverty-stricken life and to stand out among his fellows.

An understanding of the difficulties of his early life and his unflagging effort to change his fate is critical for comprehending what it meant to him to make a spectacular contribution to his hometown. One cannot take for granted that Chinese immigrants would make huge sums of donations to their hometown just because it holds an affectionate place in their heart. They would not easily part with their hard-won wealth.

2. Multi-aspects of the Social Image

Wenyao lived in Segamat for a long time, especially in his later years. Despite the length of his residence in the place, there was no love lost between most of his clansmen in Segamat and Wenyao Zheng. In some of his clansmen’s eyes, Wenyao was heartless and mean towards his lineage fellows as he never took part in any of the
more personal social occasions like weddings and funerals, let alone have much personal contact with the local folk.

There is a story current about how illogically Wenyao Zheng treated two of his benefactors.

R.X. Zheng was the lineage uncle of Wenyao who allowed Wenyao to work in his rubber trading house after the venture of selling semi-dried candied *kumquat* failed upon his arrival in the Malay Peninsula.

The second benefactor, W.S. Zheng, was a peddler selling snacks in the market. When Wenyao Zheng was arrested by the Japanese during the Japanese occupation of Malaya, it was the former who went to see him and sent him food. After Wenyao Zheng was released from prison, W.S. Zheng once again came to his assistance as Wenyao Zheng thought of being a pork-selling peddler. He lent Wenyao Zheng a sum of money for capital, but the friendship turned sour because Wenyao Zheng blew it on smoking opium.

Much later, when Wenyao Zheng had gained fame and fortune, he did not repay the kindness of these two clansmen who once stood beside him in his hour of need.

What gave these clansmen in Segamat the most cause for complaint was the time they went to Malacca to ask Wenyao Zheng to make a donation to the Zheng Clan school, the *Peng Siong* School, and they met with a flat refusal. Around the same time, when the Yongchun Association of Segamat wanted to hire a military band to celebrate a festive occasion, Wenyao Zheng immediately made a contribution.

Another incident cited to support the antagonism of the clansmen in Segamat was over the fight for the position of chairman of the *Taoyuan* Club (a social association of people Yongchun origin). Wenyao Zheng lavishly spent thousands to secure the position for himself.

It was therefore easy for these clansmen in Segamat to draw the conclusion that Wenyao Zheng did not care about the affairs of the lineage, and was instead determined to grab the limelight for himself and was only in search of self-gratification. These stories end with these Zhengs speculating that the murder of Wenyao Zheng had something to do with his mean personality.
From the portrait sketched above, we can see that the role of philanthropist did not sit easily on the shoulders of Wenyao Zheng. He was not interested in the undertaking and welfare of his lineage, either in the local Malaysian Zheng community (Segamat) or in the hometown Zheng community. Therefore a careful examination is required to understand his desire to endow Yongchun County with his wealth.

In contradistinction to the narratives above, the account given by Jishi Zheng of Wenyao presented a completely different image. Besides having been a life long friend of Wenyao, Jishi Zheng was intimately involved in all the donation projects undertaken by Wenyao Zheng. In fact, if it were not for the intervention of Jishi Zheng, the last and grandest donation of Wenyao Zheng would not have taken place. So, given the depth of this relationship, it is valuable to quote Jishi Zheng’s with regard to Wenyao Zheng. This is Jishi Zheng’s side of the same story:

The reason Wenyao behaved so coldly towards his clansmen in Segamat stemmed from the bitter experience Wenyao suffered at the hands of the Japanese. Wenyao was engaged in fruit trading between Segamat and Johor when he was arrested by the Japanese. Life in the Japanese prisoner of war camp was horrible and everyone was fighting to remain sane and alive in the face of daily executions, near starvation and forced labour. Food in the Japanese prison was unsalted so gradually the prisoners’ legs felt like jelly. To survive, Wenyao voluntarily joined the burial fatigue gang whose main job was to carry out dead bodies for mass burial or cremation. Since the gang could get out of the prison when they were engaging in this work, Wenyao could make use of the chance to beg money from a passer-by to buy salt and cigarettes.

At every opportunity that came his way, Wenyao begged anyone among his clansmen in Segamat to pay the 350 yun (Japanese currency) needed to bail him out of the prison. He would reward his benefactor with everything he had, namely 5 acres of rubber plantation. Nobody stepped forward.

Even after his release, his clansmen regarded him as a leper and nobody would have any contact with him because he had been arrested by the Japanese. Jishi Zheng ended this story with his personal conclusion: this world is very pragmatic, when you
are better off, you are flattered by others, but when you meet with misfortune, nobody wants to get involved.

The description given by Jish appears to give Wenyao a more human touch and Jish Zheng insisted that Wenyao knew how and when to reward people who had once bestowed favour on him. Jish Zheng illustrates his claim with these examples:

When Wenyao was a rubber tapper on a daily wage, one day he had only three cents left in his pocket and was hesitating in front of the market. He felt hungry, but he dared not spend his last three cents immediately because he was not sure if it would rain tomorrow. If it did rain, he would receive no income and the three cents would have to get him through to the day after that. A peddler of Yongchun origin who was selling taro rice (a Yongchunese favourite food) in the market intuitively sensed Wenyao's problem. He called out to the latter: "You can eat first. Pay me when you've got money later". Wenyao thus could eat his fill and he never forgot this. When he got rich, he aided the peddler to get married and repaired his house. Wenyao even let him contract one piece of his rubber plantation. Jish Zheng added that Wenyao never forgot a single person who had once done him even smallest favour and he could even remember who had once given him a few eggs when he was in difficulties in his hometown.

Another case Jish cited shows Wenyao knew how to give a plum in return for a peach, which is a Chinese expression meaning to give back double what had been received. Wenyao kept up very good personal relationship with the people at Lunglob; from the manager to workers. When the manager retired and was going to go back to England, Wenyao spent M$6000 to buy him a brand new car as a goodbye gift and they continued to keep in touch. Every Lunar New Year Day (first day of the Chinese New Year), Wenyao did not stay at home enjoying this biggest of Chinese festivals, instead, he always asked Jish to accompany him to the plantations of Lunglob to distribute *hongbao* (money contained in red packet to wish the recipient good luck) to the workers.

A glance at the personal network of Wenyao shows that the blood relationship was still one of his primary personal connections. Take Jish Zheng for example. Jish
and Wenyao became friends in late the 1970s. There have been several factors behind this friendship. First of all, Jishi is his lineage nephew; he lives in Malacca; he is a banker by profession working at the only overseas Chinese bank in the locality where Wenyao handled his financial affairs; he is an educated man. Wenyao himself did not attend school after joining his uncle in the Malay Peninsula at the age of twelve. Jishi supported him in the competition for the leadership of the Malacca Yongchun Association and Jishi could act as the spokesman and representative, carrying out all his donation programmes, both in Malacca and Yongchun (the details about Jishi Zheng’s role in realizing Wengyao’s donation projects are presented in chapter 8). Wenyao grew to trust the counsel and friendship of Jishi. Pertinently, the friendship and respect Jishi bore for Wenyao has extended to the latter’s sons and daughters after the death of his good friend.

Wenyao also had a good relationship with Di Zheng, the most successful businessman among Zheng members in Malaysia and the chairman of Zheng Lineage Association of Malaysia for three decades. They had a business relationship in the field of the rubber trade and when Wenyao needed capital, he could borrow from Di Zheng. In the lineage association, Di was the chairman and Wenyao the vice-chairman; they supported each other and co-operated quite well.

This narrative reveals the duality of Wenyao Zheng’s social image in his community. On the one hand, he is depicted as one who was sensitive towards social relationships and was grateful to others who once bestowed a favour on him and sought ways to return this kindness. On another hand, he is shrugged off as a mean and heartless man, showing no sympathy toward his fellow clansmen and who had no interest in the collective interest of his lineage which could have been expected of him. The ambivalent image of Wenyao Zheng indubitably has some connection with
the hardship of his early life. But more importantly, it indicates some clues to understanding the complex motives behind his later donation behaviour.

3. Spectacular Scale of the Donations

Although Wenyao Zheng is regarded as a medium-size entrepreneur and his public image in the Malaysian Zheng community is debatable, he has been considered the most generous philanthropist in his hometown, Yongchun, for as long as two decades. How did his enthusiasm start? What kind of contribution did he make and how have his major projects been carried on? To answer this, the following details should be taken into consideration.

After almost three decades of disconnection between the overseas communities and the county, in 1980, the Taoyuan Club of Malacca (a club of people of Yongchun origin) received a newsletter-cum-invitation from the county. This was the first newsletter issued by Yongchun Number One High School to Yongchun Chinese communities overseas. The school invited its alumni home to celebrate its 80th anniversary. Wenyao Zheng saw a copy of this newsletter. In the newsletter, the school also appealed to its alumni to make contributions as it was in need of a new assembly hall. The estimated sum required was 200 to 250 thousands yuan RMB. As a mark of appreciation, any donor contributing an amount exceeding 5,000 yuan would have his or her name carved on the wall of the assembly hall. Some alumni countyfellows commented: “Why not? The cost of leaving one’s name to posterity is only five thousand”. Unbeknown to others, Wenyao Zheng brought home the newsletter and consulted Jishi Zheng who responded that to his knowledge, the Number One High School was the best school offering the highest level of education in Yongchun. Indeed Jishi Zheng himself is an alumnus of the school. Wenyao Zheng’s enthusiasm was aroused by this opportunity to leave an indelible legacy.

In fact, Wenyao Zheng became quite obsessed and sometimes he would sit down for hours discussing this matter with Jishi Zheng. He decided that he would pay the full cost of the construction of the assembly to ensure that only one name, his father’s, would hang above the doorway. Naming an edifice after the donor’s parents is not
new behaviour among the Chinese in Malaysia. However, given the circumstance that China had just been released from the trammels of the Great Cultural Revolution and the “Ultra-Left” movement, it was not possible to have any name publicly displayed other than that of the acknowledged leader, that is Dr. Sun Yat Sen or Sun Zhongshan, the Father of Modern China as he is known throughout the land. Wenyao Zheng would have to find an acceptable reason for the Chinese to agree to his condition of having the hall named after his father who had just been an ordinary peasant.

Coincidentally, Kaike Zheng, who had served in the education field first in Yongchun county then later on in a Malaysian Chinese school, was about to visit Yongchun. He was one among the first group of Malaysian Chinese to return to their hometown after three decades of being cut-off. Kaike Zheng was entrusted with passing on the message of Wenyao Zheng’s intention to donate the entire cost of the school assembly hall to Yougchun County. When Kaike Zheng delivered this message to the authorities in Yongchun, he reminded them that he was merely a go-between, the plenipotentiary would follow later were the local government to have accepted the offer. Needless to say, as the bearer of good news, Kaike Zheng was warmly received by local government.

Two years later, at the end of 1982, Jishi Zheng paid his first ever visit to Yongchun and his father. Wenyao Zheng assigned Jishi Zheng the major task of realizing his plan. Jishi Zheng’s first stopover was Hong Kong and he was given a warm reception by the Hong Kong Yongchun Association since they had been fully informed of his philanthropic task.

So by the time Jishi Zheng arrived in Yongchun, the local authorities had been duly primed. Jishi Zheng felt that he had become a very important personage overnight as he was accompanied everywhere by the local government leaders. Present at the reception purposely called to welcome him were the top local leaders, the secretary of the county Party committee, the head of the county, the chairman of UROC, and other officials and dignitaries. The head of the cultural bureau saw to the taking of pictures so that Wenyao Zheng could share the moment too. Jishi Zheng recalled that he was deeply touched by the scene.

That was the first time I had been back to Yongchun since China came under communist rule in 1949. I felt very nervous indeed. I could not even recognize my sister even when she stretched out her arms to pull me from the crowd around me.
The atmosphere was stimulating and after the reception, Jishi Zheng was taken right away to see the design of the assembly hall. The red carpet treatment did not end there. For the ninety days until his return to Malaysia, Jishi Zheng was the VIP guest of Yongchun county, lodged at the Guest House of UROC, chauffeur-driven everywhere and treated with great respect as the final decision on any aspect relating to the school assembly hall rested with him, despite the presence of a group of professionals and representatives from local administrative departments; including the leaders from Hong Kong Yongchun immigrant community.

Wenyaoo Zheng and Jishi Zheng highlighted two issues with regard to the construction: one is that they wanted to have a grand hall. Another request was that the name plaque should be over the finished hall. Building according to the original plan would cost 200 to 250 thousand yuan and the width of the hall was designed to be 30 metres. Jishi Zheng put forward a revised plan, aimed at making it wider and longer. The new hall would measure 2,400 square metres with a seating capacity for 2,200 students. To make it even more desirable, Wenyao Zheng offered to equip the new hall fully, increasing the donation to 400 thousand yuan. Now the issue of naming had to be put on the table. One of the most reputable members of the Zheng clan went to see the Head of the County and delivered Wenyao Zheng’s request that the hall be named in memory of his father. Notwithstanding the attractive package donated by Wenyao Zheng, the head baulked at the idea of going against the conventional rules. Fortunately for him, a higher official from Quanzhou District (Yongchun is under the jurisdiction of Quanzhou) was present and when the case of Wenyao Zheng was presented in such favourable terms, the Quanzhou official commented: “Why not?” Taking that as assent from his superior, the local head bravely agreed to the requirement. Then Jishi Zheng set the size of the five characters of 2 square metres each which together read: Zheng Xing Shun Memorial Hall and this eye-catching plaque now hangs above the entrance of the Number One High School assembly hall.

There was one last thing that still irked Wenyao Zheng, the position of the school gate; it opened at the end of the wall instead of in the middle section and the grand entrance of the assembly hall could not be seen by passers-by. He wanted a perfect result, so he donated HK$300,000 to demolish the original gate and build a magnificent archway over the new school gate with an impressive driveway that
opens in the centre of the wall facing the road. Anyone stepping through the gate of Number One High School could not help but see Zheng Xing Shun Memorial Hall.

Jishi Zheng stayed in Yongchun for three months to settle the final design. When he returned to Malacca, Wenyao Zheng never tired of poring over every detail of the construction progress reports that were regularly submitted by another clansman who had been working in the Yongchun education sector for a long time. Jishi Zheng recalled that until the assembly hall donation project was completed, he went to Wenyao Zheng's home every morning to discuss matters pertaining to the progress of the construction over a typical simple southern Fujianese breakfast of rice porridge, green vegetables and dried shredded meat. Wenyao Zheng was full of zest and every step, requirements and details, was examined carefully. To make sure that the Yongchun side also took this matter seriously, a committee for the construction was formed. Wenyao Zheng demanded that Number One official of the county should be the chairman of the committee and he appointed the head to the position. He made this gaffe because he was not well acquainted with the Chinese political system. At any level of government bureau, the secretary of the party is higher up in the hierarchy of authority than the Head of the County. Anyway the operation of the committee proved that they could be trusted and the project was carried out without a hitch.

In acknowledgement of the contributions made, the Fujian provincial government awarded Wenyao Zheng a silver medal mounted horizontally on a plaque. Mr. Liu, the Deputy Head of the County, recorded the ceremony and when he next visited Singapore, this award was presented to Wenyao Zheng. The meeting with Wenyao Zheng took place in the former residence of the Indonesian Ambassador in Singapore, which Wenyao Zheng had bought. Liu reported to Wenyao Zheng on how well the ceremony had passed off. The latter was very satisfied with the well-done project and said that:

"It is worth spending 480 thousand yuan for this. Were I to have as much money as Di Zheng, I would have given more."

Wenyao’s enthusiasm for making contributions took on a new impetus. He decided to establish a pioneer project in the county in the form of a scholarship foundation in the Number One High School in memory of his mother. The Mrs. Xingshun Zheng
Foundation is geared to the needs of all students of Yongchun origin ranging from middle school to graduate level. The preparation undertaken indicates how seriously he regarded the undertaking to be. To properly launch this project, Wenyao made his first trip to Hong Kong with his son and Jishi Zheng to discuss it with Deng Yu Zheng, the founder of Hong Kong Yongchun Association and the former chairman of Yongchun UROC and Piyun Lian, a well-known educationalist of Yongchun origin. Wenyao Zheng started by donating HK$5 millions to the Foundation. Guided by Piyun Lian, a set of rules and policies for the Foundation was formulated. This is because Wenyao Zheng had witnessed many cases in the first half of the twentieth century where a donation never reached its intended recipients. So he was deeply concerned about the durability, stability and efficiency of the organization of the Foundation. He insisted on having two forms of checks and balances written into the policies of the Foundation.

The Chair of the Foundation should be the Head of County together with heads of the local Educational Bureau, of the local UROC, and of the Number One High School in the vice-chair positions simultaneously. There would be eleven seats altogether on the Board of the Foundation and the rest of the members should be heads of departments or bureaus. Thus the local People's Congress, the People's Political Consultative Conference, propaganda, cultural departments and all the rest would be involved. The last seat would hold by Wenyao Zheng himself as a representative of his family.

Each seat carries one vote, so when the leaders in different department change, the person exercising the vote will be the current head. In this way, there will be stability and there is no lifelong membership or in-house politics.

In Wenyao's view, an individual could change but the duty of the government (thus its executives) is supposed to be invariable. By having this system checks and balances, Wenyao Zheng hoped that the members would vote fairly in their assessments, awards, payments and running of the Foundation and ensure its continuity.

To guarantee the foundation a stable financial resource, Wenyao Zheng deposited the five million in a bank of Singapore and every November he would personally make a special trip to Singapore to send the interest to Yongchun. He rejected the suggestion that he invest the sum in some business in Yongchun, though it was supposed to give a 50% profit return, as the Chinese government could offer
favourable conditions. He also kept to his own counsel about keeping the fund in Singapore dollars instead of changing it into Chinese money and depositing it in Yongchun to gain a higher interest rate for fear of devaluation of the Chinese currency.

The Mrs. Xingshun Zheng Scholarship Foundation has turned out to be a model of its kind in Yongchun. From the time it was launched, 1984, to 1999 it helped 12,343 students who received 2.2 million yuan in scholarships (though the amount per student is not high, it could at least cover the tuition fees). Following the example of its mode of operation, the structure of the organization and the principal regulations, more than a hundred foundations have been set up by other donors within the county since.

Another feature of his donation behaviour is remarkable. He did not simply remit a sum of money, but always showed a strong desire to direct and control the setting up and running of the projects he launched. For this purpose, he adopted a modern management method, formulating a complete set of rules and regulations and laying out the organizational structure to guarantee of enduring running of the foundation.

This sort of full and firm involvement by an overseas migrant donor in projects implemented far away in his distant hometown is a new phenomenon. It stresses the power of migrants in this social space.

Wenyao’s lofty aspirations and great ideals may well be best embodied in his third project. In 1984, with the successful completion of the Memorial Hall, Wenyao Zheng expressed his desire to establish an institute for the highest learning in Yongchun. This information was duly conveyed to the provincial government by leaders of the county. Ye, the Head of Higher Learning Department of Fujian Province, accompanied by a leader of Fujian Provincial Office of UROC who is of Yongchun origin, were sent to meet Wenyao Zheng in Hong Kong on 25th July 1983. The host was once again the Yongchun Association of Hong Kong. The duo came with a proposal to establish an economics college because there was a shortage of teachers in the economic field in the province. The presentation Ye made to Wenyao Zheng and Jishi Zheng was an impressive one, complete with promises of co-
operation and support from the provincial level, rows of figures and a huge model of the building. This is the description of Jishi Zheng:

The model showing the entire economics college project was as big as a ping-pong table. We needed several people to carry it up to the home of our Yongchun clansman. The estimated budget was for as much as HK$12 million. The provincial government promised to make up for any deficit and the project would be counted as a provincial project.

The sum of 12 million was the exact amount Wenyao Zheng had in his savings account in the Singaporean bank. I told Wenyao that this amount was certainly not enough for the project. If you remit the entire savings over without anything in reserve, what will you do when you are informed that more capital is needed? His personal property was a 400-acre oil palm plantation. Others belonged to the family company. Even if he could find something, the money could not have been remitted out from Malaysia to China because diplomatic exchange between Malaysia and China did not come about until 1990. On top of that, Foreign Exchange Currency (FEC) was traded only at a controlled price in the Bank of China in Hong Kong.

The money deposited in Singapore had been painstakingly accumulated over the years. Whenever Wenyao Zheng went to Singapore, he always brought with him some bank drafts and cash to deposit in his savings account. Unlike most Malaysian Chinese who put their money into Singapore banks because Singapore is the financial centre of Asia where money can flow freely in and out to facilitate foreign investments and for security, Wenyao Zheng maintained his account solely for the purpose of paying for donation projects in his hometown.

Jishi Zheng continued his comments about Wenyao Zheng by stating that the latter tended to be an impetuous person and had no patience with pomp and ceremony. When it came to decision making, he could cut through the heart of the matter in seconds while others might take months. Therefore Jishi feared that once he knew about the predicted short fall in the fund for the donated project, he would be worried to death.

Between Wenyao Zheng and Jishi Zheng this economic college project was simply referred to as the ‘25th July Project’. Jishi Zheng again went on alone to Yongchun to investigate its feasibility. His report to Wenyao Zheng showed that there were twenty-two secondary schools in the county with only fifteen among them fully fledged secondary schools (including high school –six years of study after
finishing primary school in preparation to enter college). He cautioned that since the 25th July Project would be under the jurisdiction of the provincial government, Yongchun County would have neither any say about its running nor the financial capacity to take responsibility for it.

After seeing this report, Wenyao Zheng worried about the possibility of the economics college turning into just another high school. His ambition was to build an institution of learning at the supra-high school level. He said to Jishi: "If the future economics college is assumed to be a common middle school, all my hopes die with it." The 25th July Project was therefore shelved.

Meanwhile, the donation project to repair the ancestral houses, temple and the family house of Wenyao Zheng in Yongchun continued. So Jishi Zheng made the customary stopover at Wolong Village. For his visit, the village heads arranged a tea party at the village primary school where he was shown the rundown exterior. Jishi Zheng dutifully took pictures and showed them to Wenyao Zheng when he returned to Malacca. Jishi Zheng half jokingly mentioned to Wenyao Zheng that were the wall to collapse, people there would think of Wenyao! Although the school was not Wenyao Zheng's Alma Mater, he felt a sense of responsibility towards it and granted an endowment of HK$1.5 million, not just for the walls, but for an entirely new building and grounds with an additional half a million to set up a school foundation fund.

Having left his hometown more than half a century ago, at the age of seventy-six, Wenyao Zheng finally made his first and last trip home to Yongchun alive in March 1993. In preparation for this trip, Wenyao Zheng asked his nephew to buy and put a safe in the room where he was going to stay in his hometown. He closed his Singaporean savings account and brought all HK$15 million with him. HK$5 million was re-deposited in a Chinese bank in Yongchun to earn the higher interest required to cover the scholarship grants given by the Mrs. Xingshun Zheng Foundation. Although Wenyao Zheng had no specific intention about what to do with the 10 million in hand, the very act of bringing back all his savings bespeaks louder than any message, written or verbal, his wish to fulfill his destiny in life – to spent his remaining years and be buried in the soil of his homeland, Wolong Village.

Wenyao Zheng was not a person to embrace ostentation and extravagance. None of his family members nor the local government knew the exact date of his return to Yongchun. Just before their departure, Jishi Zheng placed a call to Jingshuh Zheng, his friend and clansman, who was the Deputy Chairman of UROC in Quanzhou District.
to arrange for a Benz to pick Wenyao Zheng up from Xiamen city. Jingshu suggested bringing a few leaders of the county to the airport and when Jishi Zheng turned around to check with Wenyao, the latter took the phone and said: "In that case, you don't need to come either!" Thus, Jingshu Zheng went to the Xiamen airport alone in a Benz borrowed from a high-ranking officer and there were no flying banners or reception lines greeting Wenyao Zheng.

On the Yongchun side, after receiving word of the trip planned by Wenyao Zheng to buy land for a villa and grave at Wolong Village, the local government held a series of meetings. Their aim was to create a donation project in which Wenyao Zheng could invest his millions. Having learnt a valuable lesson from the failed 25th July Project, the donation project that they had to come up with had the following basic requirements: first, it must be a school of some sort as Wenyao Zheng had stressed his keenness to invest in educational projects. Secondly, this school had to cater to a level beyond high school. Instead of the usual three years, the study period had to be extended to five years so that it could be elevated to a college later.

This time, the local government was determined to play the whole 'chess game' expertly by making conditions as close as possible to meeting to Wenyao Zheng's requirements. It went to the extent of re-arranging local educational distribution. The final proposal after many discussions was to build a teacher training school with the potential of being upgraded to college level and for it to be located in Wolong Village, right at the foot of the hill where Wenyao Zheng had indicated he would like to buy land for his villa and a grave site at the top.

On the arrival of Wenyao Zheng, Shenqia Liu undertook the mission, and visited him on behalf of the government. Liu was one of the Deputy Heads of the County with the official responsibility for making connections with Yongchun people overseas. He had also been in charge of the affairs of education and propaganda for almost two decades. This experience made him a well-known figure to Wenyao Zheng and other migrants of Yongchun origin in Singapore and Malaysia as he visited them often. Moreover, Shenqia Liu was an offspring of a Malaysian Chinese couple of Yongchun origin. Thus, he was familiar with the thinking of many overseas Chinese. This fulfilled one more criterion to capture the imagination of Wenyao Zheng.

During his stay in Yongchun, Wenyao Zheng was taken to inspect the site of his future villa and grave plot which the local government had enclosed on top of Wolong
Hill. At the same time, he was also taken to the proposed teacher training school at the foot of the hill with the assurance that it would be built following the blue print made for the economics college (25th July Project). The school would train teachers for the three inland counties of Yongchun, Dehua and Anxi. Therefore, all three counties were vying to have this school built in their county. It was also pointed out that in the event that Yongchun County were to build this college by its own effort, another more remote site would be chosen as getting consent from every member of the family of the occupants of the graves at the foot of Wolong Hill would be extremely troublesome and tiresome.

Wenyao Zheng was not easily convinced. When he asked for the budget. Liu informed him that it would need 10 million yuan, to which Wenyao Zheng pointed out that it would probably cost twice as much because it often happens that budgets made in China are rough and incomplete. The budget shown did not include projections for probable expenses like a geological survey, possible land filling and the building of an access road. As a result, the donor was put in an awkward situation. He spoke frankly: "Now you are saying that ten million would be enough, and I am afraid that I have to give twenty million in the end." Liu admitted as much.

Other than seeing to his endowments at the Number One High School and the Mrs. Xingshu Foundation, Wenyao Zheng also went round to take a look at other donation projects undertaken by other Malaysia Chinese donors; like the County Culture Centre contributed by Di Zheng.

His feeling toward the hometown was many-sided. On the one hand, he visited his family house in his village and walked along the little path that he used to follow up Wolong Hill when he went to cut grass. On the other hand, he hired guards to keep away unwanted visits from village fellows. Most of his visitors were local leaders but he refused all kinds of invitations to dinner parties from the local authorities. During his stay, Wenyao Zheng himself hosted one official lunch to meet 'everybody' to express his appreciation for the support given to the donation projects he had sponsored in his hometown.

Wenyao Zheng left Yongchun two weeks later. He said he would come back in autumn for staying a longer period after settling his business. For the return trip to Malaysia, Liu was sent to see Wenyao Zheng and Jishi Zheng off and during the overnight stay in Xiamen, he made a last pitch to Jishi Zheng to get him into their camp for the college donation project, talking to the latter until way past midnight as
no firm answer had been given by Wenyao Zheng. It was the assurance of having a five-year period of study that sold the idea to Jishi Zheng.

After their return to Malaysia, Wenyao Zheng was finally convinced by Jishi Zheng who pointed out that the five-year study period planned for was evidence that the county is going to establish a university or college. Once Wenyao Zheng was convinced, Chen, the current Head of the County, was informed by phone that he would support the donation project. Along with the decision, came several prerequisites: first, the site must be in Wolong Village. This specification was fired by the imagination of seeing dynamic young students going in and out of the college from his hilltop villa. A more practical aspect stemmed from the life experience of Wenyao Zheng. By locating the college in Wolong Village, his fellow villagers would have an extra source of income rather than having to depend solely on the produce from their fields, which is dependent on the weather for a good harvest. Second, the villagers should be exempted from grain tax amounting to about 45,000 kg that has to be paid in kind annually. In the emigrant’s memory, the grain tax for villagers was a heavy burden, especially during the time when he and many of his contemporaries had emigrated.

Chen promptly consented to these conditions because Wenyao Zheng was following in the footsteps of Tan Kah Kee who had established Jimei Village School in his hometown. As in the case of Jimei, the county would absorb the grain tax. Other duties to the state were still applicable. An extra requirement was advanced by Jishi Zheng, namely a bronze statue of Wenyao Zheng should be cast and put up in the college square.

Jishi Zheng will never be able to forget his long negotiations over the phone on 11th June, 1993, not because of their length, but because of what happened afterwards. This is his recollection of the drama:

“I presented all the above conditions to the county as my own opinion. In the negotiations, I never made a commitment right away. Instead I always asked Chen to hold on while I consulted Wenyao Zheng. To do so is to avoid giving the impression that we have already discussed everything in advance”.

This was about 11 p.m. After reaching a verbal agreement, Wenyao Zheng returned home. When getting out of his car, he was shot dead in front of his home.
4. Personal Experience and Romantic Imagination

It is clear that it is difficult to discern any motive of seeking economic benefit in Wenyao Zheng's transnational practice. However, this does not mean that his actions were pure philanthropy. “Provincialism” or a sense of belonging and nostalgia for home has been a concept popular among Chinese scholars to explain the motives of overseas Chinese for making donations to their native places. (Lin 1993: 280-342; Wu 1996: 173-270; Chen 1989:21-29) As this explanation has been always linked with patriotism it conveys a heavy flavour of political propaganda. In my view, this term reflects an attempt to try to find one single cause in order to interpret all overseas Chinese donation behaviour. This seems a grandiose but impractical assumption.

Pertinently, Wenyao Zheng’s case rather unfolds the complex nature of motives behind overseas Chinese transnational behaviour. Indubitably, he was determined to do his best to benefit Yonghcun education but in his negotiations with the local community and government he was tough and uncompromising. One of the best ways to explore the complexity in my view is to place it in a concrete context, in the environment of the localities concerned. We can see how historical, social and cultural logics have played fundamental roles determine a person’s identity and decision making. The following three sections will further explore how Wenyao’s motives were forged by these forces.

**Hometown Experience in Youth**

Wenyao Zheng’s life in his youth was full of hardship and bitterness. He came from a poor family of peasants where three generations lived under one roof. When he was just about ten, a tragedy struck his family. His grandfather fell ill and his father had no money to ask the village shaman to make the house calls to perform the sorcerer's
dance in a trance. According to conventional practice, the shaman was the only
doctor available in most rural areas in the early twentieth century. So the father of
Wenyao Zheng decided to induce himself into a trance-like state to perform the
healing dance for his father. After a few days of constantly dancing in a stupor, his
father was totally exhausted and passed away followed shortly by his grandfather.
For this poverty-stricken family to lose the breadwinner and the head of the family
within a few days was like a virtual deathblow. As the eldest of three brothers,
Wenyao Zheng had to go to take refuge with a lineage uncle in the Malay Peninsula at
the age of twelve.

Migrating to Southeast Asia, however, did not improve his life. Hence, when he
went back to the hometown to marry at the age of eighteen, he decided to remain
there. The following thirteen years did nothing to change his lot either. In fact the
reverse was true. His hardships increased, as he now had to support his wife, his
widowed mother and two younger brothers. Every time he had a spare moment, he
would stroll around his village to find some more means to add to his meager
livelihood. His major means of subsistence was to go up Wolong Hill to cut grass to
sell. Later, he spotted an empty lot in his village from which he could retail rice,
while his wife shouldered ceramic utensils to more remote areas to sell. In this way,
he struggled on to 1948 when he carried his first small amount of self-made local
product to Singapore try to make some money. Because of the failure of this attempt
at business, he had to remain in Malay Peninsula eventuality for which he was not
mentally prepared. Even so, this time the stay lasted half a century.

In the memories of his friends and fellow clansmen, Wenyao Zheng is unique because
he never was content with things as they were and always tried to find his own way
out. His poor, tough youth strongly stimulated his unquenchable thirst to stand out
among his fellows. After he obtained success in his business, he still kept a frugal life-
style in his family but he developed a great ambition to make projects which would
allow him to rise head and shoulders above others. This desire to make himself known
was deeply rooted in his youth experience in his hometown. He often recalled his
hometown life when he chatted with his best friend - Jishi Zheng. Two stories explicitly reveal his longing to enjoy a reputation in his hometown.

One is about his village temple. In contrast to other temples in the region, where the gates usually face outwards, the special feature of this temple was that the gate is set inwards, facing the mountain which is behind the temple. Wenyao told Jishi that he had been told by a local geomancer that the feature of the gate facing toward the mountain was called: carp comes close to shore. And that indicated that an outstanding figure would appear in this village. This saying left a deep impression on Wenyao. He believed that someday he would be the one to become a well-known figure and exert an influential impact on this place. When Jishi Zheng returned to Yongchun for the first time, Wenyao Zheng asked him specially to visit this ancestral temple.

Another event he often mentioned was that when he was ten years old, he was once chosen by his village to play the Number One Scholar in a Buddhist ceremony. The ritual was a parade from his village through the major streets of the town to the temple. To play the Number One Scholar, he was dressed up in a grand robe and he sat on a palanquin which was carried by eight bearers. That symbolized the highest honour one could reach because the Number One Scholar was ranked at the highest level in the feudal bureaucrat system. In his village there are four major surnames and Zheng is only one of them. To be chosen and to receive public approval, the chosen child is supposed to be intelligent and show promise. He believed that from the beginning he had been distinguished by his own people as being above the run-of-the-mill.

**Imagination at a Distance**

For an emigrant, the experience of a long separation from his native place may romanticize his imagination about the place. This imagination is constructed on the basis of the memory of his earlier experience embedded in his new locality. In Wenyao’s imagination, the ideal pattern of living was always inseparably linked with his home village. Before he became successful, for a long time, his dream of leading a agreeable life was to go home to run a small rice retail shop in his village. As for his
spare time, his favourite amusement would be sitting in the narrow lane that divided the two houses, the *Yougong Hall* (literally translated, the hall of great meaningful success), his ancestral hall on one side and the *Lianxin Hall* (literally translated, the hall of connecting hearts), his family house, on the other. He would sit with his back against on one wall and his feet against the other wall and play music from the *Nanying*, a local opera in southern Fujian.

So when Jishi Zheng, his close friend and confidant was about to visit Yongchun after China opened its doors again the first thing Wenyao Zheng asked him to do was to look over those three important buildings that were engraved on his memory: the temple in his village, his ancestral house and his family house. He eagerly wanted to give money for their upkeep. His anxiety seems to have been raised by things that formed the fundamental component of the picture of his hometown as reflected in his memory. In this frame of mind, Wenyao Zheng sent money to Yongchun to rebuild and repair these buildings with specifications that nothing be changed. This required that whoever was entrusted with the task would have to restore and maintain the appearance of these buildings unchanged. For instance, two households now lived in the family house of Wenyao Zheng- that of his first wife and that of his brother. For the sake of convenience, his brother had opened up a side door. When Wenyao Zheng saw the pictures brought back by Jishi Zheng, he noticed the existence of this new door. He immediately sent word to his brother to reseal the wall so it would be as his grandmother had built it.

In his later years, he intended to realize his lasting dream in a seemingly more ideal way. He bought land on top of Wolong Hill to build both his villa and grave. He wanted to spend his remaining years in Wolong Village, close to his ancestral house and die there instead of in Malacca where he had lived most of his life. The Yongchun Teacher’s Training College donated by him is located right at the foot of Wolong Hill. So imagine what a pleasant feeling of satisfaction he would enjoy every day when he heard the laughter and the sound of reading by the students and could see the dynamic picture presented by the campus.

Another impressive picture enshrined in Wenyao’s memory of his home village was more socially related to the locality. Often at the Lunar New Year, Wenyao had seen Yiyu Zheng, the master of *Xingdeshun*, carrying a beautiful lacquer basket
containing a pile of silver dollars. Yiyu Zheng would visit every household in the
village and present two dollars to each. This treat greatly endeared Yiyu Zheng to the
villagers and for years, they often told the younger generation this story.

Yiyu Zheng’s generosity to his fellow villagers was also recalled in another
anecdote. He planted an abundance of vegetables in front of his house. One night, the
dogs kept barking and Yiyu Zheng opened his door and saw somebody pulling up his
vegetables, but he said nothing and just turned around and closed his door. Wenyao
appreciated his attitude toward poor neighbours.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Yiyu Zheng represents a sort of adorable “public figure”
in the imagination of the Zheng lineage. The image is often given more colour in
oral circulations therefore it becomes a symbol of “qiaoxiang” culture. It exerts a
powerful influence on this social space. When Wenyao Zheng became well off in the
1970s, he instantly wanted to follow Yiyu Zheng’s example.

His first donation was M$6000 which he sent to his brother with written
instructions to distribute it evenly to all the households in his village on Chinese New
Year day as a New Year’s gift wrapped in a red packet with the words: “Happy New
Year” on it. Wenyao Zheng also insisted that pictures be taken when the villagers
received his gift. Disappointingly, his brother replied that he had deposited the sum in
the bank instead because at that period in time, China was just at the end of the
Cultural Revolution and the Ultra-“Left” trend of thought still exerted some influence.
So any distribution of money to the villagers would have been misconstrued as
currying favour. Wenyao Zheng would not accept this explanation and from then on
mistrusted his brother. For many years after that, Wenyao Zheng paid no heed to his
brother’s letters and tore them whenever he received any, unread.

Educational Complex
Malaysian Yongchunese consider the scope of business handled by Wenyao Zheng
and his family to belong to the mid-scale category. Wenyao Zheng & Son’s Xinghai
Company Limited is the major shareholder in three companies of which a detailed
discussion has been provided above. So even though he was a millionaire several
times over, Wenyao Zheng was comparatively less wealthy by the standards his clansmen have set. However, in terms of donations made in proportion to financial capacity and in a spirit of sacrifice to Yongchun, the position occupied by Wenyao Zheng ranks far above others.

Among the numerous overseas Chinese donors from Southeast Asia determined to improve living conditions and promote development in Yongchun, Wenyao Zheng was number one till the late 1990s when another overseas Chinese from Hong Kong donated a sum to the value of 30 million RMB from gains made in the stock exchange. Although the 20 million RMB given by Wenyao Zheng is the lesser of the two, from the biography of Wenyao, it can be seen that he earned every cent of his money as opposed to the windfall gains through speculation. It is no wonder, that off the record, people of Yongchun still rank him number one.

It is therefore worth looking into what kind of factors led Wenyao Zheng to devote himself to the educational undertaking. His intentions too set him apart from others. What he was eager to leave behind as a legacy, as the very presence of the ancestral buildings of halls and temples in Yongchun county testify to future generations of Zheng, was the building of the highest institution for learning for his home county and the neighbouring areas.

Actually, from a long-term view, Wenyao’s enthusiasm for education had a social logic. Education has historically been a major concern of the locality. From the Tang Dynasty (the seventh century A.D.) onward, through the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, till modern times, education has flourished in Fujian province. Both in terms of numbers and quality took first place in the country as a whole. A great number of northern literati and members of officialdom settled down in this province in the wake of the chaos caused by wars over the centuries. Numerous family
genealogies bear witness to the fact that education was a top priority. Instead of material property, education was regarded as the only undertaking which would really benefit later generations since gold would be spent and landed property would be reduced after a number of generations. Through education, a successful person could obtain scholarly honours or official rank and therefore could also win his family wealth and rank. A successful candidate in the highest imperial examination could also bring honour to the local community because his achievement proved the high quality of local education. This was why from lineage organization to local government, all social resources were mobilized to support educational enterprise.

For Hokkien communities overseas, donating a sum to set up a school in a hometown can be traced to as early as 1827. In that year a returned Hokkien from Huian county and his son contributed 2000 silver dollars to establish a local academy of classical learning. This action received the emperor’s commendation and a title was conferred on the donor. This set a precedent. Up to 1911, more than twenty primary and secondary schools had been established by overseas Hokkiens in Yongchun and neighbouring counties such as Jingjian, Nanan, Tongan. This trend was catalyzed by the sharply rising upsurge in Chinese nationalism caused by Japanese invasion. A theory prevailed among the overseas community which claimed that promoting education could save China. Donations for setting up schools in the hometown area therefore became an even more popular practice among Hokkien migrants. Several outstanding public figures emerged in this period. Among them, Tan Kah Kee was the most famous. He sold almost his entire property to build up a Village of Schools in Jimei, his hometown. Simultaneously he established the institution of highest learning, Xiamen University, to serve the southeastern area of China. He therefore was addressed by Mao Zhedong as “the banner of the overseas Chinese, the glory of
the nation”. Influenced by such public figures, the donated schools sprang up like mushrooms in the hometowns of emigrants. Incomplete statistics show that from 1915 to 1949, there were 967 primary schools, and 48 middle schools in Fujian province run by overseas migrants, most of them located in the South Fujian area. After 1949, under the impact of the Communist Party policy, donations sharply decreased and ceased after beginning of the Great Cultural Revolution. However, the undertakings revived as soon as China started pursuing its reform policy. From 1979 to 1990, the donations from migrants overseas for education enterprises reached 500 million RMB in Fujian province and about 2000 thousand square metres of school area were constructed. There were 1,732 schools newly established. Most of them again in the South Fujian area.12

This collective undertaking has been promoted by local societies through every means: local newsletters, newspapers, ceremonial gatherings and spreading the word orally. It was rewarded by governments at various levels. Consequently, a collective memory has been forged. In other words, a collective ethos has emerged historically and socially. Inspired by such an ethos, it is not surprising that Wenyao Zheng took Tan Kah Kee as his model and regarded making a contribution to education a significant enterprise.

From the angle of the individual, pouring one’s enthusiasm into an educational undertaking may embody one’s own dream, even though he might not realize it in his own lifetime. In Wenyao Zheng’s case, he had benefited from only a little education, but being influenced by the cultural logic of the locality, he believed in the idea that education is the best means to improve society. Wenyao’s life shows that besides his smart sense of entrepreneurship, he was also imbued with a strong sense of romanticism. This showed in the artistic sphere as well. He organized a Nanying
music (local opera of Fujian) club and enjoyed himself deeply by playing the music there in his spare time. Like other Chinese operas, Nanying music has been a vehicle for conveying the message of Confucian culture such as returning in glory and bringing benefit to the hometown. If we claim that his entrepreneurial activities were rational, then this non-profit seeking undertaking may be regarded as poetic behaviour to a certain extent mixed, however, with other rational ends like seeking approval, status and fame.

In his first and only trip back to the hometown in the 1990s, Wenyao’s flight landed in Xiamen, but he was not eager to continue his journey to Yongchun immediately. Having been dubbed the ‘Tan Kah Kee of Yongchun’, he wanted to stay overnight in Xiamen in order to pay a visit to the tomb of his namesake, which is in Jimei, a suburban district of Xiamen. That evening, Wenyao was taken around Xiamen city and he sighed at the tremendous changes that had taken place from the time he last left this same port for Singapore on his maiden attempt to set up a business. The next morning found Wenyao standing at the tomb of Tan Kah Kee for a long time, lost in thought. No one could guess if he was interested in the architecture. Jingshu Zheng who had come specially to receive Wenyao hazards a guess that maybe Wenyao was contemplating choosing the same style for his own tomb or he was sincerely worshipping Tan Kah Kee, the "Banner of the Overseas Chinese", or both. One thing was obvious, Tan was among the few influential figures in the life of Wenyao.

As a matter of fact, the government and the community of Yongchun also see Wenyao Zheng as Tan Kah Kee’s disciple. When Wenyao’s first donation project: building an assembly hall for the No 1 School was completed in 1983, the local government made a pair of golden scissors and the Governor of Fujian province deemed the occasion of sufficient importance to grace the opening ceremony as its guest of honour to cut the ribbon. It was during this ceremony that Piyun Lian, the well-know educationalist of Yongchun origin, referred to Wenyao Zheng as the "Tan Keh Kee of Yongchun". Dubbing Wenyao the Tan of Yongchun was undoubtedly the highest honour Yongchun could bestow on one of her faithful sons.
Those Yongchun people who witnessed how Wenyao lived feel that Wenyao possessed the same virtues of devotion and sacrifice as Tan Keh Kee. In comparison to the houses in his neighborhood in Malacca, the home of Wenyao was simple and humble. Wenyao still slept in the same bed he had when he had first arrived in the Malay Peninsula half a century ago; his desk wobbled because one leg was shorter than the other three and two pieces of bricks had been stuck under it to hold it up.

I also noticed a small detail, which Jishi Zheng felt rather embarrassed about. The first time Wenyao Zheng and he went to Hong Kong to discuss the intended donation project with the leading figures of the Yongchun community in Hong Kong, the host brought tickets to visit the famous Undersea World for these guests from Malaysia. Wenyao refused to go in because he considered the price of the ticket outrageous. The host took the rest of the group in but felt duty bound to leave a companion to stay with Wenyao. When the group finished their tour, Jishi Zheng saw Wenyao still talking earnestly to his companion about what needed to be constructed in the Yongchun county seat. So, even though Wenyao was frugal and at times seemed stingy, he was the first to endow a big sum to support educational enterprises at his hometown.

5. Epilogue of Wenyao's story

After Wenyao was murdered at 11 p.m. on 11th June, 1993, an hour later, at 12 a.m., the county government received the news informing them of this tragedy. According to the terms of his will, Wenyao Zheng was to be buried in Yongchun, so his family asked for the help of the local government to airfreight the body of Wenyao. The local government immediately held an emergency meeting. A grand funeral ceremony befitting the return of a son of the Zheng was promised. On the Malaysian side, the Chinese Embassy in Malaysia offered their condolences to the family and assisted in airlifting Wenyao's coffin back to China. Shengqia Liu, deputy head of the county, recalled the grand events that marked the return of Wenyao Zheng mortal remains

A task force consisting of government leaders and prominent people from all walks of life in Yongchun was formed. The Secretary of the Party was the chairman with six other top leaders of the county such as the head and vice-heads to plan the lying in state in Yongchun.
The higher authority, the administration of Quanzhou District, sent two police vehicles to Xiamen airport to receive the bier – such an arrangement is only reserved for recognized leaders above the rank of deputy-governor of a province.

Shenqia Liu, who had just seen Wenyao Zheng off three months ago at Xiamen, now led a huge group of leaders from various units of the county and the foundation committee of the Number One School to the airport to receive the coffin.

Although it was already dark when the remains of Wenyao Zheng arrived in the county, thousands lined the road to witness his return. A few days later, the county government held a solemn ceremony for Wenyao Zheng in the assembly hall of Wolong School. Among the many wreaths were those sent by the governor of Fujian province, of the municipal authorities of Quanzhou district and by the authorities of the county. The eulogy was given in the form of a memorial speech by the Head of Yongchun County to the tens of thousand people who showed up to attend the funeral. Piyun Lian, the well-known, locally born 87-year-old educationalist, who is the Chairman of Macao Union of Returned Chinese, wrote an elegiac couplet as a portrayal of Wenyao’s identity:

Sweat streaming in (the) Straits,
Blood shedding in (the) Straits
Love hometown when living,
Love hometown when dying.

The story of Wenyao Zheng has far from ended with his death. After the abrupt demise of Wenyao Zheng his family members took up the task of the completion the donation project to which Wenyao Zheng committed himself.

To understand why this became a far from a simple process, a brief introduction is necessary.

Wenyao Zheng had once had four wives. His first wife was a child bride and she remained in Wolong Village with their only daughter till her death in 1980s. Wenyao Zheng married his second wife, Wu, a Hainanese and former waitress of a Chinese cafe when he worked at a local rubber trade house in Johor and the Seremban area in
the 1950s and they had one child, a daughter. In a traditional family, usually the first wife or the concubine who bears a son can occupy the position of mistress of the house. Wu maintained this position in the absence of the first wife. To make up for the lack of an heir to strengthen her claim, she adopted the second son of Wenyao Zheng’s brother living in China. The third wife also gave birth to a daughter and it was the fourth wife who bore Wenyao two sons in the early 1970s.

Wenyao Zheng had two brothers. One died in his youth while the other remained in Yongchun throughout out his life and he had two sons too. As said, the second son, the nephew of Wenyao, had also become his adopted son in Malaysia.

Now a two-faction struggle broke out, not to decide whether to complete the Wenyao’s commitment or not, but to see who controls the donation project for with it comes power to grant and advance favours for monetary and social gains. The group led by Wu, who is pro-nephew-adopted son and the brother of Wenyao, wants to see these rewards which were denied them because, while Wenyao Zheng was alive he retained absolute right of decision making with Jishi Zheng acting as his counsel and executor. Wenyao detested any member of his family in China using his own respected name to feather their own nest. The other faction was led by the eldest son of Wenyao by the fourth wife who was then in his middle twenties. He inherited the business and with his wife and third sister wanted to continue taking counsel from Jishi Zheng. They were in favour of completing the college donation project following the low key no fanfare approach set by Wenyao.

Chart 1, Wengya o Zheng’s family relationship

Note:
1: Zheng Weyao
2 and 3: Zheng Wenyao’s brothers
A, B, C and D: Zheng Wenyao’s wives
a, b, c, d and e: Zheng Wenyao’s children
f and g: suns of Zheng Wenyao’s brother
Faction one: B + 2 + f + g
Faction two: D + c + d + e + Zheng Jishi (Zheng Wenyao’s agent)
Ever since his first donation encounter with his brother, Wenyao Zheng had not trusted him. Wenyao Zheng never let his brother participate in any of his donation plans, no matter how peripheral that role may have been. For example, he refused to have his brother sit in as a member of the Construction Committee for the building of Zheng Xing Shun Memorial Hall for their father, nor did he allow his brother to show his face at the opening ceremony. Wenyao Zheng feared that his brother would use these donation projects to further his own self-interest.

The nephews and eldest daughter of Wenyao Zheng were also kept out of his donation projects because they seemed to take after their father and uncle. Once, his nephews tried several times to keep the funds (bank interests from a large sum deposited in a local Chinese bank) meant for several projects, like the setting up of a co-operative medical station and building a bridge in Wolong Village.

In Yongchun, the county government was worried that the project would melt away into thin air after the passing away of Wenyao. But it did not seem entirely beyond the bounds of possibility as he had already taken the money back to Yongchun where it was still in the safe. It was not an appropriate time to meet the bereaved family to talk ‘business’ so the local county government used the ensuing period to build an imposing gravesite for Wenyao Zheng. This generous gesture was made not just in recognition of all that he had done for Yongchun, but with the intention that it will be a memorial that may encourage other donors as they can see how the grateful county honours her sons. At the same time, the government did not give up the hope of the college project. A Preparatory Committee was set up to start drawing up the design for the construction of the college and the provincial designing institute was asked to make a fitting architectural plan. Throughout this period, the county officials kept in close touch with Jishi Zheng who is in their eyes the acknowledged representative of Wenyao.

On the first anniversary of the passing of Wenyao Zheng and right before the date of anniversary of the Foundation, the whole family and Jishi Zheng went to Yongchun. As soon as they arrived, Jishi Zheng called upon Jingshui Zheng to come once more to Xiamen airport to meet him privately before the family members of Wenyao would meet with the leaders of the county the next day.

Jingshui Zheng recalls this meeting vividly:

I went to see Jishi Zheng quite early the next day and he explained the state of affairs. Prior to his departure for Yongchun, the eldest son told Jishi Zheng that he and his brother
and third sister supported retaining Jishi Zheng as the representative of Wenyao to arrange for the release of the HK$10 million to commence the college donation project that his father had publicly committed himself to. The other faction headed by Wu and the brother and nephews of Wenyao dared not oppose the plan openly. But they advised that the principal sum should not be given over and instead should be released little by little according to the progress of the project. The reason to do so, they argued, was the corruption in the government. As heir the eldest son may have the authority, but he has to listen to his stepmother, Wu, as she is supposed to be the representative of the parental authority in this family. I got a pretty good idea of the situation. Then, before we went to meeting, the son of Wenyao hinted that I show him to the washroom. He confirmed what Jishi Zheng had told me. I suggested that he take a clear-cut stand in the meeting.

In the meeting, as the matriarchal head of the family, Wu spoke first. She expressed her stand on how to handle the fund stating that she has the support of her adopted son, the brother and other nephew of Wenyao. Then the eldest son of Wenyao spoke of the desire of his brother, sisters, his wife and himself – they wish to endow the full sum in one payment backed up by practical reasons for doing so. Needless to say, the county would have preferred to have the endowment in a lump sum and therefore it threw its support in with the eldest son. Out-voted and with no room to manoeuvre, the stepmother gave in. But she made a condition, demanding the land title to the land for Wenyao’s gravesite. The county government did not hesitate to promise to hand over the title to the land to her and did so a few days after.

Another requirement imposed by the nephews of Wenyao was to have three shops in the two rows of shop houses the government has planned to line the access road into the college reserved for them. Wu also used the letterhead and seal of the Foundation to apply to the Governor of Fujian Province for permission for the nephews for them to migrate to Hong Kong. In all these dealings, Jishi Zheng resolutely opposed their demand claiming that there were only three demands made by Wenyao. Since then the faction led by Wu drew a battle plan to exclude Jishi Zheng from being appointed as one of the consultants to the Foundation and in turn accused him of supporting the ambition of his own nephew through involvement in the donation projects of Wenyao.

The handing over of the 10 million was witnessed by officials representing the five government units of Yongchun County, the bank and members of the public in a grand ceremony at the Party Committee Building where the governor declared that the bronze statue of Wenyao Zheng would grace the college square.

The dream of Wenyao Zheng has come true as his grave on the top of Wolong Hill looks down upon the functioning teacher-training college and his bronze statue stands
in the square of the college that is the institute of highest learning locally. Although he will never get to know the students who graduated from the college as teachers personally, his legacy lives through the deeds of these students who will move on to educate others. If Wenyao Zheng had lived long enough he might have repeated his earlier words: "It is worth spending tens of millions for this."

6. Conclusion

Wenyao Zheng’s case is significant in the sense it represents a type of linkage tie Chinese migrants maintain with China. According to some scholars this kind of tie should no longer exist since the present-day tendency focuses on the opportunities offered by Chinese market economy. That is to say Chinese overseas come to China driven by the rational interest of profit-seeking. This case shows that assumption is not correct, although Wenyao may be a spectacular and exceptional example. His case shows the continuing importance of historical models for guiding people’s behaviour. Tan Kah Kee, one of the “public figures” in this social space, was of crucial importance to Wenyao as well as to those who interpreted his behaviour in the local community. The centrality of education in his philanthropy again follows a cultural logic well-entrenched in local community.

However, this is not to conclude that, since Wenyao follows an earlier model, his practice should also be regarded as an embodiment of his love of his motherland and hometown like that generated in Tan Kah Kee’s case. Here cultural logic can be used as an angle to explain the phenomena.

Wenyao’s pursuit seems to have been for sentimental reasons and has nothing to do with a profit-seeking purpose. But if we do not narrow rational choice merely to economic sense, we can see that his choice is still based on the principle of market, in the sense of maximizing of resource utilization.
For instance, his donations came partly from the purpose of commemorating his parents. In Malaysia, it was hard to bring about this aim. He once contributed an overhead bridge in Malacca to commemorate his mother. The agreement was reached between him and the municipal authority, but later a local congressman protested against the idea and no more than a scarcely discernible small, darkish plate hanging way up in the corner materialized in the end. But when he invested in the hometown for the same purpose, the responses from the local government and from society greatly satisfied his need for recognition. The way in which his hometown repaid him for his donation behaviour shows apparently much more appreciation than the place in which he resided.

This principle of maximizing of resource utilization can also explain to a certain extent the ambivalence in Wenyao Zheng’s transnational practice. He did make a great contribution to benefit the local society with advanced educational facilities. But he did not simply hand over the endowment to the county government. Indeed, he went about this in true entrepreneurial fashion, as indeed was his attitude to other supervision of his donation projects as well. He kept his money in a Singapore bank instead of depositing in a Yongchun bank as suggested by Yongchun officials. He first consulted with the Yongchun immigrant community in Hong Kong about the direction and operation of his donation projects instead of discussing them directly with the people in Yongchun itself. He bargained hard with the local government about every condition and every term in his projects via his middleman. He insisted on holding the power of decision firmly in his hands and on making sure that the mechanism in the hometown region could guarantee that his contributions would endure. All these reflect the actor’s rational economic considerations and the entrepreneurial feature of maximizing resource utilization.
In the realizing of Wenyao’s projects, the role of the local government has been decisive. First, the government responded promptly and flexibly in its eagerness to satisfy Wenyao’s requirements. For instance, to remit the annual grain tax duty which is incumbent on his native village to pay. Secondly, the government mobilized its authoritative and allocative resources to co-operate with Wenyao Zheng’s investments in order to benefit best both the local community and the donor. To provide an ideal space and circumstances for the Teacher’s Training College established by Wenyao, the government made a strategic re-arrangement of the distribution of the schools over the county. Thirdly, the government has institutionalized its policies and regulations to standardize the conditions for the lasting operation of the donation projects. This has been illustrated in the setting up of various committees for running donation projects. All these reflect the strong intention of the local government to re-incorporate its overseas migrants’ resource into the process of the modernization of the locality.

The features of Wenyao Zheng’s network also reflect the cultural logic behind his practice. His network concentrated on the regional tie with the hometown county, mainly carried out through his close confidant. This embodies one orientation of overseas Chinese identity, namely, provincialism. It has, as illustrated in this chapter, been cultivated by personal and collective history.

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1. The Rationalist is one of the most influential schools in economics, sociology and in political science. In anthropology, the representatives are Barnes, Bailey, Boissevain and others.
2. For almost a century, Chinese scholars understood and explained the behaviour of overseas Chinese making contribution to their hometown an expression of loving one’s hometown and motherland.
3. There are numbers of Malaysian Chinese Yongchun origin who are billionaires, like Yanlian Li, Shengjing Li, Jingxing Zheng, Fuchen Zheng and others.
4. The data on WY Zheng’s personal history and business history come from interviewing his close long-term friend, his relative, his son and daughter-in-law and his clansmen, especially from his close friend who spent intensive time with WY for more than two decades.
When a rubber tree is cut and latex is collected, a thin layer of dried latex formed over the wound on the tree, or when liquid latex is poured out from a bowl, a layer of dried latex is left. This sort of dried latex can be used to make latex clothing.

When the major railway was built through Pahang, the Lunglob could request a feeder railway to his plantations, showing the power of this estate.

Generally speaking, there are two forms of raw latex. One is pure liquid collected by those international estates. The liquid latex is processed to be smoked pieces and then packed for exporting. Another form is filiform dried latex which could be processed as rubber clothing. At that time, Chinese usually could only engage in the latter business as they were not able to set up smoking houses for processing liquid rubber.

A few years ago, a company wanted to purchase Xinghai for M$10 million and paid 10% earnest money as deposit. Although this deal did not go through because of the Southeastern Asian economic crisis, it does give an indicator of its value.

In retrospect, one can see why there is a "Zhongshan Road" or "Zhongshan Memorial Hall" or "Zhongsan Hospital" in practically every city in China.

Many individuals feel that they win high respect when they are involved in donation projects. This motivates them to be a kind of middlemen in the construction of trans-locality connection. This issue will be discussed in the fifth chapter.

Xiamen is a major city, and a port in the south Fujian region. There is an international airport at the city. Usually when overseas Chinese of South Fujian origin pay their visit to their hometown, they arrive at Xiamen airport and then change to various kind of road transport vehicles to go on to their counties, either on coast or in the mountainous areas. Yongchun is about 130 kilometres from Xiamen.

See "Collection of Fujian Education History", compiled and edited by the office of Fujian education history and the institute of Fujian educational science research, 1992.