Transnational Social Practice from Below: The Experiences of a Chinese Leneage
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Citation for published version (APA):

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Chapter Seven

Middlemen and their Role in Transnational Social Space

Since transnational social practices have spread over broad regions, a group of special agents are needed to act as intermediaries to link migrants to the community of hometown region, migrants to the local governments, migrants to other migrants, and so forth, to carry out the border-crossing projects, to negotiate and to solve disputes. These agents are called "middlemen".

In international academic usage with regard to Asia, the terminology "middlemen" often refers to groups of people or individuals who worked as compradors (in the case of China) or business brokers (in the broad sense) for Western businessmen or enterprises in their business activities during the colonial period. At the present time, the term 'middlemen' generally implies professional service brokers. It can be assumed that middlemen are a kind of medium that exerts considerable influence on users, suppliers and recipients in various forms depending on the field of service in which they are involved. However, the middlemen in this study do not fit into the above two categories. Generally speaking, they play their role in a social and cultural sense rather than in an economic sense.

In my discussion of the function of middlemen, at this point I would like to bring J.A. Barnes’s concept of "mesh" in network study. It is postulated that the network mesh is of greater density in modern society, as people in it do not have as many friends and acquaintances in common as in the small-scale and traditional societies. "If they were to trace any linkage to each other at all, apart from their direct
relationship, it would perhaps have to be by way of a great many others—which would probably mean that they would be unaware of the possibility” (Hannerz 1980:164).

The border crossing networks of overseas Chinese communities and the community of hometown display complex characteristics. Ineluctably, shaped by type of migration and settlement reinforced by their status as a minority, Southeast Asian Chinese communities are based on tradition. Here tradition means that the communities are basically constructed along four lines, which are: consanguineous origin, regional descent, dialect and occupation. The communities in the setting of the hometown county also still possess the nature of old-style, small-scale community since they are still almost invariably based on agriculture. Correspondingly, individual relations between these communities are more direct than indirect. There can be no denying that when the relationships between individuals have to be built in a trans-territorial space, the distance is much greater. Transnational activities demand transnational networks which can turn an indirect relationship, belonging to a looser network mesh, into direct one and bring the ties between individuals within reach and manageable. Middlemen thus are needed in this network structure to build up links between the actors and it is their operations which cause the network mesh to become tighter.

This chapter presents four cases respectively representing four categories of middlemen, chosen with reference to their personal background: locals of some renowned, government officials at various levels and elites of the lineage. Some of them, however, may act in dual or plural capacities, according to the precise requirements of the situation. Although they differ from each other in terms of social position, scope of service, and area of influence, they share two points in common—first, they are familiar with the societies of both the sending and receiving place so
they know the regulations which set the field of play. Second, they have already established extended networks, of which the most important is the connection with the local governments.

Like other transnational subjects, a middleman has been situated in the social structure of the border-crossing space. To put it another way, the social and cultural resources these middlemen rely on and mobilize are mainly their ties with blood relations and the regional and common dialect linkage. Since such a social space has been historically constructed, the middlemen can trace their roots far back and as consequently their roots run deep in this space. They themselves indeed come from a trans-territorial migration background and have acquired sufficient understanding of how things work in this social space. Such a particular historical background has provided them with the essential prerequisites to fulfil their role as middleman.

Instead of giving a general discussion of Chinese guanxi (the network of particularistic ties) orientation, there are two points on which I should like to concentrate. What kind of network has the actor constructed? Is it based on kinship, place of origin or a relationship of long-term reciprocity? Secondly, how does an actor operate his network and reach his goal? Viewed in combination with these two major questions, the cases presented below are intended to provide answers to the questions such as: What kind of background has enabled the actors to be middlemen? What motivates them to act voluntarily as middlemen and how does their influence affect Chinese trans-space activities under study?
1. Piyun Lian: a Distinguished Personage Living in Macao

Generally speaking, the influence a distinguished personage can exert on the community is the direct outcome of that person's career and activities. Family background could also help to build up his reputation in the local community. Piyun Lian is an example of the leftist patriotic intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century. They had witnessed enormous turmoil and distress in China and had actively participated in the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal movement that surged back and forth over China for half a century. Most of them believed in the theory that education could rescue the country. Piyun Lian has devoted most of his life-time to the undertaking of constructing modern education in Chinese society: both in the Southeast Asian Chinese communities in Kuala Lumpur and in Medan, Indonesia, as well as in Yongchun and south Fujian in China. His story discloses his rich experience as a migrant and a representative of overseas Chinese nationalists. His lasting contribution to Chinese education has brought him fame and a well-deserved reputation in the border-crossing social space. In turn, his social capital makes him appealing to the first generation migrant community as they have had common points in history and experience. In order to understand the functions and motives of Piyun Lian, it is necessary to recount his personal history first.

Piyun Lian was born in 1907, into a family that boasted a long line of merchants in Wuding village in Yongchun. His father, Shu Lian, was a scholar in the traditional school before he started his business as a merchant. Shu Lian passed the imperial examination at county level in 1899, two years into the movement of Constitutional Reform and the Modernization Policy pursued by the late Qing administration. As advocated by reformers, a new type of modern school gradually appeared throughout China. Shu Lian was given the opportunity to study at the Fujian College of Law and Politics in Fuzhou and was determined to become a disseminator of Western learning (a late Qing period term for the Western natural and social sciences). He, however, could only pursue his teaching career for two years in Yongchun because his father's store went bankrupt and his family found itself in dire financial straits. As he was the
eldest son of the family, Shu Lian gave up teaching and switched to running his family business. Helped by one of his classmates who had settled in the Philippines, he managed to put together the capital he needed to restart the family business establishment. He turned out to be a successful merchant – and not only in Yongchun itself. He also gradually expanded his business network to the main cities in Fujian province like Quanzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou and even to Shanghai. The scope of the business covered the selling of cotton yarn, fertilizer, flour, fruit, silk and articles for daily use. His wholesale store was one of the biggest in Yongchun. Having enjoyed a modern education, he did not limit himself to engaging in trade of traditional type alone but ventured into investing in the modern industrial field like textiles and factories for the manufacture of electric light bulbs. Shu Lian's success in his business career then secured the reputation and position of the Lian family in the local community. The more important influence which Shu Lian exerted on his son, Piyun Lian, however, was his inculcation of being concerned about the affairs of society and about education in particular.

Unlike other business-minded entrepreneurs, though Shu Lian possessed a sharp business sense, he retained some traits of an orthodox Confucian scholar acquired in his early years. He and his family led a simple and frugal life and felt responsible and took part actively as participants in and organizers of charities in the local community. For instance, he bore all the exorbitant taxes and levies imposed on his whole village: about 500 lian (a lian is equal to 50 gm of silver) each year. He also paid a sum of 3,000 lian of silver in overdue surcharges that his village owed the yamen (government office in feudal China). Shu Lian also insisted on his family members adopting a modest demeanour. He exhorted his sons time and again - when it came to co-operating with others for business, for every $100 of profit made, one should let another gain 51 of it and leave yourself the balance of 49.

Piyun Lian remembers an incident from his youth. When he was studying at the county seat while he was a teenager, he could only return home to his mountain village once a week because of the distance. The food he brought from his home to school was coarse edible grain and some vegetables, but he was also given plenty of money. His father repeatedly told him he should use the money sparingly on himself, but if his classmates encountered difficulties, he should extend a helping hand. Although Shu Lian could not achieve his long-cherished dream of being a disseminator of modern thinking, he never relinquished the idea of setting up schools
to improve the educational standard of his fellows. He built a primary school in his village and kept contributing a fixed portion from his income to the Number One High School of Yongchun. Shu Lian was well known locally for he always unhesitatingly offered assistance to any young men who wanted to pursue a higher education outside the county but lacked the financial sources to do so.

In his advocating of education, Shu Lian looked upon Tan Kah Kee as his model. He sent the fourteen-year-old Piyun away from home to the *Jimei School* set up by Tan Kah Kee off the island of Xiamen. He did not want his son to inherit his business, instead he wished that Piyun would become an educationalist. This was a very clear message the youthful Piyun got from his father. Piyu recalled what his father told him:

> You should study hard, but the purpose of your study is not only for yourself. You also need to make friends with a good teacher and be helpful to friends in order to run a school in the future. We cannot do as much as Tan Kah Kee did, but by making an effort, after a few years, we could at least run a middle school.

Although his father died rather early, in his forties, his will and enthusiasm for promoting education had exerted an indelible impact on Piyun. From his youth, Piyun plunged into various kinds of social activities with patriotic fervour. In his third year of studying at Jimei Middle School, Piyun was expelled because of his participation in student political movements. In 1923, he went to Wuchang Teacher’s Training College to study English and the following year transferred to Shanghai University to fall in with a group of left-wing literati. He was active in anti-British and anti-Japanese student movements inspired by the May 30th Movement. After he got his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1926, he went to Japan for further study.

In 1928, he returned to south Fujian. With other progressive personages, Piyun establish the *Liming* (literally meaning ‘dawn’) High School in Quanzhou district where at that time there was only one other high school run by missionaries. Piyun was chosen to be the headmaster of the school. Starting from scratch, Piyun Lian contributed the whole sum of 6000 Shanghai silver yuan, which had been brought together by his family for fees so that he would be able to continue his studies in Germany. Supported by like-minded locals who wished to bring about the national awakening known as the May Fourth Movement for Progress, Piyun introduced democratic, progressive and scientific thinking into the school. The intellectual milieu that developed out of the May Fourth Movement was known as the New
Culture Movement. This Movement advocated social and political theories ranging from complete Westernization of China to socialism. In many respects, the establishment of Liming School ushered a new atmosphere into Quanzhou where feudal ideological influence still ran strong. The school served as a vehicle through which fresh ideas were put into practice. As a result, Liming School exerted an unprecedented impact on the general mood of the local culture and in educational circles.

At the beginning of 1935, Piyun went to Malaysia because of the closing down of Liming School. He was invited there by the former Dean of Study of Liming school, who had moved to Malaysia and assumed the post of headmaster of Zuncong Middle School in Kuala Lumpur. Piyun took charge of establishing a high school to complement the Zuncong Middle School. At the same time he concurrently held the post of editor-in-chief of one of the local Chinese newspapers. He called on overseas Chinese to unite and remain patriotic and also urged that they promote Chinese culture. In addition, his call to the public and a well-publicized stance against Chiang Kai-shek and Wang Jiwei, who seemed less than desirably close to Japan, brought him to the notice of the Malaysian police.

Half a year later, pressure from the Malaysian authorities forced him to seek shelter in Medan, Indonesia. There, his enthusiasm undiminished, he was appointed headmaster of the Shudong Middle School. The great wave of nationalism in support of China which welled up among the youthful students again incurred the displeasure of the Dutch colonial government. Piyun Lian had to leave Indonesia and he returned to the Zuncon School in Kuala Lumpur.

In 1939, together with other Malaysian Chinese leaders, he founded the Chinese Middle School and was its first headmaster. In the second year, some of his students and teachers, who had tried to propagate their progressive ideas as they distributed leaflets against Japan in the name of an underground communist organization, were arrested by the British political department. The authorities forced Piyun Lian to tender in his resignation, threatening that otherwise they would close the school. To save the school, Piyun Lian left. The time when Piyun lost his job coincided with a delegation of overseas Chinese of Southern China origin going to China to convey 'greetings and appreciation' to the motherland – organized by Tan Kah Kee. The later arranged for Piyun to go back to China with this group.
After two years in China, in 1941, Piyun returned to Malaysia as he was worried about his family there and the progress of the *Chinese Middle School*. Not long after, the Johor Political Department arrested him on suspicion of being a communist. Rescued by Tan Kah Kee, he was eventually released following the bombing of Pearl Harbour and the subsequent upsurge in anti-Japanese sentiments after America decided to join other Ally countries in World War II.

Circa 1943, at the invitation of friends, Piyun Lian returned to Fujian to be the headmaster of two colleges offering professional training. In 1947, he was appointed to be the Head of the Education Department of Fujian Province. During his term of office, he devoted himself to developing the education of people living in the mountainous areas. He established an academic organization called the *South Chinese Study Association* for studying Southeast Asian Chinese issues. As he encouraged anti-Kuomintang activities, the Head of the Secret Service of Kuomintang issued an order to have him killed. Helped by friends and students, he escaped from Xiamen to Hong Kong in August 1949.

When the KMT regime withdrew from the mainland to Taiwan in 1949, Piyun's cousin had to shift the family business from Taiwan to Southeast Asia. Piyun therefore went to Singapore, and then transferred to Jakarta, Indonesia, to help operate the family enterprise. While he was appointed general manager of the company, he devoted much of his time to cultural and educational affairs. He voluntarily taught Chinese history and classic literature behind closed doors in his home. At that time, privately owned Chinese newspapers were forced to close. To keep their hearth fires burning, Piyun became the editor in chief of the Chinese version of *Torch*, the official newspaper of Indonesia Nationalist Party (PNI). This strategy was copied by other Chinese newspapers and magazines which wished to avoid closure. As a result, Chinese newspapers survived till 1965 when a new anti-Chinese movement resulted in the seizure of all Chinese printed matters in Indonesia. Through the Chinese version of *Torch*, he subtly expressed his inclination towards China and disseminated news on the progress of socialist China. After the newspaper was closed down by the Indonesian military, Piyun Lian returned to China at the beginning of 1966.

In May 1966, he took his family to Beijing with the intention of settling down there. Liao Chengzhi, a national leader who was in charge of the nationwide affairs of overseas Chinese, however, suggested to Piyun Lian to consider taking up residence in Macao. The main task of Piyun Lian there would be to look after the
wellbeing of overseas Chinese political refugees seeking asylum in Macao. In 1965 and 1966, to escape persecution, many Chinese living in Indonesia fled the country. Those who had sufficient wealth and business contacts headed for Singapore. The rest mostly turned to Mainland China. Yet it still was hard for many of them to find a proper place to settle down. It was difficult to gain entry to Hong Kong as the British were wary of any sudden influx of people into the already overcrowded territories. Macao was comparatively easier to get into and the refugees could readily adapt to the free enterprise economy set up there. The sooner the refugees could take care of themselves, the less drain it would be on the Chinese government. Piyun accepted this task and relocated his family to Macao in September 1966. After one year of planning, structuring and testing, in April 1968, the Macao General Organization of Returned Chinese was formally registered and Piyun Lian was elected its chairman.

Apart from social work, Piyun remained active in promoting Chinese culture. In 1974, he established the Chinese calligraphy publishing house in Hong Kong which it published a bimonthly newsletter to promote Chinese calligraphy.

Although he lives outside China, his interaction with south Fujian, his hometown region has never been halted. He has been enthusiastically involved in the development of education of that area. When the Liming High School which he had founded in Quanzhou half a century ago expanded and was upgraded to a college in the 1980s, he was invited to be the president of the college, a post which he held until 1989.

In recognition to his unfailing services to Chinese cultural and educational undertakings, both in overseas and hometown areas, Piyun Lian was appointed a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (C.P.P.C.C) and also a member of same organization of Fujian Province. This is the highest honour and the ultimate accolade of political recognition.

Due to his impeccable reputation, wide network of connections and unquestioned loyalty, and no less important, the geographical position of Hong Kong and Macao, Piyun Lian, using the terminology of Yongchun County officials who were in charge of the affairs with regard to Youngchun migration overseas, is regarded as a key who could open up the lock of the door previously closed on migrants overseas. When the
county started to tap the overseas resources in 1980s, the county officials paid a special visit to Piyun Lian. These officials told Lian that the county was eager to improve its cultural facilities and they intended to establish a cultural center in the town seat. To fund this venture, they had to find funds from outside, as the state budget did not provide for such developments even though such a structure was sorely needed by the locals to improve the quality of their lives. In response to this appeal, Piyun Lian made a special trip to Kuala Lumpur to visit Di Zheng.

Focusing on what Piyun Lian did when he lived in Kuala Lumpur in the 1930s and 1940s, we can understand better why Piyun was a suitable candidate to undertake the task of being a middleman. While he was in Kuala Lumpur, Piyun Lian was an active figure in Hokkien educational circles. The central place at which businessmen of Hokkien origin used to gather was the building of Rubber Association of Kuala Lumpur. Chinese businessmen frequently came to exchange information about rubber quotations, pick up the latest gossip, and relax playing mahjong. Indeed, the Rubber Association could be considered as a major club for successful businessmen and noted public figures of Hokkien origin in Kuala Lumpur throughout the best part of the twentieth century. Even now, with the down-trend rubber has suffered in the last two decades, the Rubber Association remains the hub of social activities for the Chinese business community.  

Piyun Lian recalled that he often spent his weekends there and it was through the Rubber Association that he met and established long-term friendship with some of the prominent Chinese figures in Malaysian business annals. One outstanding gesture that gained Piyun Lian a position of trust among Yongchun migrants in Malaysia was his founding of the Chinese Middle School in Kuala Lumpur in 1939. This school, after half a century of development, has today become one of the most popular Chinese schools among the Malaysian Chinese community and it counts among its old boys and old girls many top successful entrepreneurs, professionals and people.
with high social standing of Hokkien descent. The open declaration of their close friendship by Di Zheng, himself a highly respected figure in Malaysia, also lends credence to Piyun Lian.

So when Piyun Lian flew over to visit Di Zheng in Kuala Lumpur, without much hesitation, Di Zheng agreed to make an endowment to two projects: HK$1.6 million to the county for setting up a cultural centre and another sum of RMB200,000 for building an assembly hall for the Peng Xiong School.

It is clear that the foundation of the relationship between Piyun Lian and Di Zheng had been laid historically. Besides, Piyun Lian’s image as a patriotic educationalist also won him the trust of Di Zheng.

This matter reappeared in the case of Wenyao Zheng. Piyun Lian was one of the channels for communication utilized by both Yongchun officials and by Wenyao himself. When Wenyao wanted to make his biggest donation project, he made a trip to Hong Kong and the person he wanted to contact and consult with was Piyun Lian. Piyun Lian knows Wenyao well because his family resided at Segamat for a long period when it was Wenyao’s business base. In addition, Piyun’s involvement in the arena of education both at home and abroad also qualified him in the eyes of Wenyao to be the best person to make sound suggestions about Wenyao’s ambitious educational projects. The advice and opinions of Piyun Lian were sought by both the donor and recipient back and forth over many years. And the paving of a path has led to the proper rounding off of these donation projects.

There are several prominent figures of Yongchun origin in Hong Kong who assumed parallel mantles to that of Piyun Lian. Although they have different personal backgrounds, a few points in common can be observed among them: one is that they are unfailingly patriotic or say that they still strongly identify with Yongchun on the basis of their personal experience. Their enthusiasm to throw themselves into border-crossing activities which are designed to improve the home region is one of their major motivations. The second is that has been clearly revealed in Piyun Lian’s history, the public praise they have built up not only brings them access to both
migrant communities and hometown communities, but more importantly endows them with the aura of having the ability to mobilize migrants.

2. **Jianxiong Qiu: A Local Official**

In China, officials always are superior to ordinary people. The career of being an official enables the person to be familiar with or have insight into the mechanisms and the operations of official circles and also enables him or her to associate with various kinds of social power as well as mixing with distinguished personages in various circles. All these provide the person concerned with potential social capital to play a role as middleman. Jianxiong Qiu is such an example.

Jianxiong Qiu is a migrant in reverse. He was born and grew up in Malaysia. His father served as an ordinary clerk in a company all his life. Being a person of scanty means, Qiu put in very determined efforts into his studies and he won the highest scholarship - offered by the Yongchun Association of Kuala Lumpur - that paid for his education. There is no doubt that his identity with Yongchun community was bred into him in his youth.

When he was at secondary school, introduced by one of his teachers, who was a leader of the Malay Communist Party in charge of student’s organization of the whole of Peninsular Malaya, Qiu became a member of the Party. Later he became the top leader of the student movement in Kuala Lumpur. After graduating from high school in the early 1950s, he went to Singapore to study at the Nanyang University of Singapore. Word came to him via a conduit – the message was hidden in a tube of toothpaste – that the government of Malaya was after him and about to issue a warrant for his arrest. Before 1963, Singapore was part of Malaya and was subjected to its laws and ordinances. Qiu left Singapore on the same night he received the message. There were only two options open to him, either join the forces of the Communist Party to fight in a guerilla warfare in the mountainous forest area in Malaya or go to China. Qiu chose the latter.
In China, he studied Chinese literature at the Fujian Teacher’s Training College and graduated at the beginning of the 1960s. Qiu was firstly assigned to the Export and Import Office run under the auspices of the bureau of Foreign Trade in Sanming district of Fujian province. Later he became a secretary to one of the deputy-governors of Fujian province. When the deputy-governor was transferred to Hong Kong as the Chairman of the Board of Huaming Corporation in early 1980s, Qiu was selected to go to Hong Kong with his boss.

*Huaming* (literately means Fujian of China) Corporation is the formal representative institution of Fujian province which also acts as its trading arm. Like the Hong Kong branch of Xinghua She (the Chinese News Agency), which is in fact a political branch of Chinese Central State, *Huaming* is the branch office of the Fujian Provincial Government in Hong Kong. Hence engaging in politics was the fundamental concern of *Huaming*. Politically, it targets Chinese of Fujian origin in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. According to Qiu, what is commonly known as the ‘Nanyang Bang’ (a prominent group of Chinese businessmen in Southeast Asia) basically consists of entrepreneurs of Hokkien origin. Without the support of the Hokkien migrants in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan, Fujian province itself would not be what it is today. The political agenda of *Huaming* is to make and maintain contacts, gather information and provide intermediary and advisory services. Outstandingly suitable because of his background and experience, Qiu became assistant to the Chairman of the Board-cum-Head of Office of the corporation.

Qiu worked in *Huaming* for seven years until the Chairman of the Board was transferred to another position. Then he worked as a secretary of Wong Kerlee, a Hong Kong representative of the Standing Committee of C.P.P.C.C, for ten years up to the writing of this thesis. Wong, the Chairman of Tai Cheng International (Holdings) Limited, is also a well-known figure in the business circles in Hong Kong with leanings towards Beijing even during the British years. He asked Beijing’s approval. The son of Wong, Philip Y. Wong, a deputy of the National People’s
Congress, is considered the most trusted among the members of the Legislative Council of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (H.K.S.A.R.) by the central government. Qiu also works for him as the director of his office.

Qiu's earlier experience working at the Huaming Cooperation and then later for the Wongs, father and son, has brought him a broad network of connections in the Hokkien circles across the South China Sea, between Fujian province and Southeast Asia. He has indeed been a crucial middleman in Jingxing Zheng’s case (presented in Chapter 5). Without his intervention at a deep level in the political networks of various Fujian authorities, the trouble caused by the corrupt official who embezzled Jingxing Zheng’s investment would not have been solved satisfactorily.

Personally, Qiu has known Jingxing Zheng and his father Di Zheng for a long time. Having shown himself to be an excellent student when he studied in Kuala Lumpur, Qiu went on to win the highest scholarship awarded by the Yongchun Association, S$2000 annually, which was in those days more than sufficient to cover his tuition fee and living expenses. Ever since then, Qiu has had a soft spot for Di Zheng who was the Chairman of the Yongchun Association. Qiu narrated:

My father was not a member of the Yongchun Association, not because he did not qualify as a clan member, but because he did not have money to pay the membership fee. You could well ask, ‘Then how could you get the highest scholarship?’ It was Di Zheng who noted my scholastic achievements and recommended me. Di Zheng argued that as long as one was the offspring of a Yongchun migrant, one was entitled to the right to claim the scholarship. After leaving Malaysia for four decades, when I eventually got permission from the Malaysian government to return to the land of my birth for my father’s funeral in 1992, I went to see Di Zheng. After such a long absence, his first words were to ask me if I had received all the scholarship sums due to me from the Yongchun Association in my student time.

The mutual sympathy each feels for the other is palpable and may also be bolstered by the fact that Qiu is a distant relative of Di Zheng’s family. His maternal grandmother lived with the Zhengs family till her death. And the third reason is that Qiu works for
the Wong family. Zheng and Wong are old family friends. The senior Zheng and the senior Wong have a deep mutual trust for each other. Both of them are on the Board of Directors of the Overseas Trust Bank of Hong Kong. On the basis of these reasons, Qiu has inadvertently become involved in the investment of the Zheng family in Fujian province. Qiu is currently the General Manager of both Wanma Co. Ltd. of Hong Kong and Wanma Group Co. Ltd in Fuzhou. In the early stages of the Zheng investment in Fujian in the mid-1990s, Jingxing entrusted Wang with being in charge of the Zheng enterprises (refer to Chapter 5). As Jingxing Zheng was fully occupied with his Malaysian business, he was not able to divert his attention to Mainland China and left matters completely in the hands of Wang. Later, when Wang was found to be corrupt and self-serving which led to huge losses for the Wanma Group of companies, sending it heavily into debt, Qiu was asked to mediate in this affair and to help to solve problems. Qiu recalled how he started to be involved in this affair:

After my busy schedule caused by the return of Hong Kong to China, I went to Fuzhou to run a check on the accounts of the Wanma Group. I found out that in the registration of Wanma Group submitted to the provincial authority, Wang has nominated himself the Chairman while he named Jingxing Zheng merely as an ordinary director. More crucially, there was a condition added to the Memorandum of Agreement saying that were any change to be made to the position of the Chairman, it should have the unanimous approval of the Board of Trustees. And of course, the appointees to the Board were under the Wang's thumb.

Under the circumstances, Jingxing Zheng who is the principal investor and owner of these enterprises did not have a leg to stand on and had no right to make any decisions with which the Chairman did not concur. Later, Qiu discovered other problems as well; for instance, the signatures on some bank documents supposedly to have been signed by Jingxing had been faked.

Qiu felt that he was partially responsible for what had happened to the Wanma Group; letting Wang gain control of it and it consequently suffering a serious loss of 40 million RMB yuan because he had been too busy to be properly involved in the management of the head office in Hong Kong. Had he been less occupied and more alert, Wang could not have availed himself of the loopholes he had found. Qiu decided to do his best to solve the problem because he believed that he was the right person to deal with Wang - he knows the local conditions in Fujian and is thoroughly acquainted with the pattern of operations in the political network.

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Qiu commented that Jingxing Zheng has a Malaysian nationality but a Chinese heart. Unlike his father, who experienced hardship, turmoil and chaos caused by civil wars that wrecked China during the time of the early twentieth-century generation, Jingxing enjoyed a good education at Chinese schools in Malaysia and Singapore. This imbued him with an abiding bond with his ancestral homeland. Jingxing kept himself informed of developments in China through Chinese newspapers published in Malaysia. Qiu has personally witnessed occasions when negative remarks or comments about China were passed and it was often the lone voice of Jingxing which spoke up, at times quite aggressively, for China. When Jingxing sent his sons to study electronics engineering in Japan because of his partnership with Japanese investors, he confided to Qiu that he hoped that the connection between the family and China would not break down in the next generation and that his sons could do something for the vigorous development of China. To achieve this, Jingxing asked Qiu to take his sons to visit Hong Kong, Guangdong and Fujian. To prepare them for the harsh realities, Jingxing requested Qiu to arrange for his sons to stay in hotels frequented by the Chinese themselves. He even stipulated a budget, "Under one thousand per night," Jingxing said. Qiu said it was a hard task because it was not easy to find proper accommodation for this limited budget in Hong Kong.

Now, Jingxing’s sincere efforts to assist the economic development of China and his trust in a Chinese communist party official was being abused through Wang’s abuses. With righteous indignation, Qiu said:

With Wanna facing foreclosure, how could Jingxing account for this failure to his family, to the Yongchun community in Kuala Lumpur and to his long-term Japanese business partner?

Qiu assured Jingxing Zheng that this matter should be and could be resolved. It would need a lot of mediation and calling in of old favours, but he confidently drew
up a plan of action. The first step was to regain legal control over the Wanma Group of Companies by transferring its ownership from Wang back to Jingxing Zheng.

In drawing up his plan of action, Qiu took into consideration the fact that Wang is a very arrogant man. He talks about himself as a high-ranking official of the Chinese Party as he had once held the position of the Secretary of Party Committee at the prefecture level and had governed several million people. Besides, his wife has a strong army background and Qiu was pretty sure that behind Wang lies a closely knit network of officials.

Supplemented by information from various sides in Fuzhou, Wang’s story goes like this. Wang’s life story is not just an ordinary one. He has experienced a few ups and downs in his career. In the late 1980s, he violated the laws and abused his power when he held the position of the Secretary of the Party Committee at a prefecture. Xiannan, Fujian Secretary of the Party Committee for a time, wrote a series of commentary essays criticizing Wang. These brought about his downfall as the articles were published on the front page of the Fujian Daily. Hence Wang was asked to resign from his position. Later, after things cooled down, Wang managed to obtain a new posting as the Head of Department for aquatic products of Fujian province.

One can see here how the political networks once firmly knit could function as umbrella. One of the high-ranking officials who backed Wang was Chen, the governor of Fujian province, who himself had also made his play from the same field of aquatic products. Chen had once been the president of the College for Aquatic Products when Wang had served there. Moreover, the current governor and deputy-governor had once been Wang’s subordinates. Supported by these high-ranking officials, Wang felt that he was above the law.

Considering the seriousness of this situation, Qiu carefully explained the hooks and eyes to Jingxing Zheng. If Zheng were to sue Wang in a court of law, Wang could use his influence to drag the case out. By the time the case were heard, there would be nothing left worth saving in Wanma, not to mention the hefty costs of such a lawsuit.

After many detailed discussions, Zheng and Qiu decided to take several steps to solve the problem. Foremost was how to wrest back the controlling power over Wanma Group and stop Wang from bleeding its enterprises. Qiu took up the matter himself. This was what he did.
Qiu used the strategy known as "to loosen one's grip of military power after drinking" (a Chinese literary quotation). He went to Fuzhou and threw a dinner inviting the top management staff and people who had connections with the Wanma Group; covertly or otherwise. Before dinner, Qiu gave a general speech at the headquarter of the Group, studious omitting any reference to his major goal. When the dinner was drawing to its close, he declared that according to the decree of the investor, Wanma in Hong Kong, it was decided that Lu (Wang's mistress) be relieved of the post of Chairman of Fujian Allied Frozen Company Limited, the core enterprise of the group. The reason cited was that this enterprise was losing heavily and Jingxing Zheng wanted to personally be responsible for it.

Before making this decision, Jingxing and Qiu had considered that if they adopted the normal means of writing a letter of dismissal, the opponent would take quick counter measures by breaking down the enterprise before the mandatory 'takeover' period is over. The other possibility could be that Wang and supporters would dig in their heels and resist.

Jingxing arranged for a trustworthy person to be the executive chairman to carry on the day-to-day management, but has retained the title of Chairman ever since to keep control over major aspects of Wanma Group, like finance, management and marketing.

The second step, to use Qiu's words, was to take recourse to the ancient yet still applicable strategy known as "the attacking army has reached the city gates". After the dismissal of Lu, Qiu declared that Wang and Lu would be stripped of all their official positions and titles in Wanma Group, whether for practical or for formal purposes only. Before making this announcement, Qiu had made contact with and talked to the relevant leaders of Fujian province and had quietly instigated legal proceedings. When he went to see Wang, Qiu took along his lawyer and asked Wang to hand over all official seals and documents. Wang resolutely resisted and claimed that he wanted to talk to Jingxing himself. Qiu related the following details of his clash with Wang:

I told Wang that I have brought the 'imperial sword' (a symbol of the highest authority investing the bearer with discretionary powers from the 'emperor') with me. I am giving you one night to think this through and you must give me a reply tomorrow. I pointed out to him that he is a high-ranking official. If he
did not handle the matter well, he would lose his status and reputation. Further more, how could he justify the role of Lu in this matter to his wife?

I indicated to Wang that I would not compromise. This is a tactic. In China, to act in official circles, you have to be tactful whenever you make a step. It was necessary to take an uncompromising stance towards him as he is very conceited and arrogant and looks down upon Jingxing Zheng, regarding him as a country bumpkin.

The next morning, Wang came to the hotel where Qiu was staying to see him. Qiu kept him waiting downstairs for half an hour. When Qiu showed up, he asked Wang to speak briefly because "I have a meeting to attend and cannot spare you much time." Wang claimed that he had a sleepless night and after thinking things over, he would give up all the power he had accrued.

Qiu held a general meeting that same day and announced that all the accounts were sealed and listed the names of those who would be suspended from duty to await further orders after due investigation. This action took only one day. To be successful, this strategy calls for lightning speed when seizing power.

Qiu timed the third step to take place in January 2000, during the interim period of the two major provincial political conferences that of the Fujian People's Political Consultative Conference and that of the Fujian People's Congress. The purpose of these two conferences was to elect leaders to serve at the provincial level. It is a time at which officials seeking re-appointment are particularly sensitive to the pressure of public opinion. The current governor, who was once a subordinate of Wang, had not yet been re-elected for another term. Qiu made an appointment with Wang at dinnertime in the dining room of the hotel where the delegates of both conferences were staying. Over dinner, Qiu asked Wang to hand over the titles and land grants of villas he bought with Wannia money. Wang did not deny the charges, he just refused to hand the documents over on the grounds that Jingxing owed him money so he had a right to keep the properties. Qiu was furious and pounded the table vigorously with his mobile phone. Qiu recalled:

I shouted at him. 'How dare you claim that? You are mad! I despise a corrupt official like you. You robbed money from Chinese overseas who are trying to
help our homeland.' I was speaking very loudly. There were fifty to sixty people in the dining-room and there were also foreign visitors present, including delegates from Hong Kong and Macao. I cried out, 'Everybody take a look at this man: this is a corrupt Chinese official, Wang Wenglian! Security guards, arrest this person!' Wang said that we should go to police station together. I retorted even more fiercely, 'What awaits the likes of you is not the police station but prison.' I had to speak ferociously and in public, otherwise he would never have disgorged his ill-gotten gains. I guessed Wang never had such thorough dressing-down in his whole life. He left gloomily.

Qiu explained that he acted in that way on purpose: he wanted to show those officials behind Wang that anyone who intended to protect him should think twice as Qiu was capable of going public. During this sensitive period, anything out of the ordinary happening in the hotel is immediately reported back to the provincial authority. Qiu needed to send this message to the aspirant governor-to-be. He would be one of the first to know what had happened that same evening because the security force would have made due reports.

The next morning, Qiu had a breakfast with the gubernatorial candidate, the provincial secretary general and others. Qiu said he did not bring up last night’s episode but, after the meal, he gave the secretary of the governor a letter containing the complete data on Wang’s case.

Wang, however still adopted delaying tactics. Up to early March 2000, when this latest interview was conducted with Qiu, Wang had still not given up the titles to his villas. Qiu told me that he would be going to Beijing soon to attend the same two conferences at national level. He had set Wang a deadline to give back the property before the opening of these two conferences.

Now Jingxing Zheng personally takes care of his enterprises in China. And Qiu’s services will only be called upon when his expertise is needed.

The culture of Chinese officialdom is deep-rooted and intricate. To handle problems like those encountered in this case, one indubitably requires sufficient knowledge about and experience of the local political circumstances and, to win the battle, needs the backing of a powerful political patron. Qiu has been provided with these
two critical conditions. He has been involved in the political circles of Fujian for several decades, hence he is well-acquainted with the code of the operations in this circle. And Qiu's position in Hong Kong and his association with the Wongs, father and son, who are in close alliance with the Central State of Beijing in Hong Kong, protect him from retaliation.

Qiu has obtained his social status both at the county and at the provincial level of the locality. Like Jingxing Zheng, Qiu has been invited to serve as an advisor by the Yongchun Union of Returned Overseas Chinese. This is a sort of honorary position which the local authority confers upon its overseas members who have made outstanding contributions to their hometown. It is a great help that Qiu has been deeply involved in political affairs of Fujian province and that he frequently attends various kind of conferences held by the government of Fujian province.

3. Jishi Zheng: a Member of the Lineage Elite

In Chinese overseas social networks, the ties of family or clan are always one of the key components. Consequently, the middleman's role undertaken by clansmen or the elite of the lineage is irreplaceable, as the following case will show.

In Wenyao's activities, Jishi Zheng was a noticeable figure. In the process of realizing those continuous donation projects, from brewing to planning, from negotiations to supervision, Jishi has played an essential role. Jishi described himself as shuttlecock frequently moving back and forth in this transnational space; from Melaka to Yongchun, and vice versa. Hong Kong was also a regular stopover, serving the same purpose as it did for other middlemen at that time.

My attention in this case will focus on a particular question. What kind of relationship was laid down through the time between the two clansmen, and what
element motivated Jingshi to serve as an eternal middleman to carry out all Wenyao's border-crossing projects and for his sense of mission to last even after Wenyao passed away? The following narrative is an attempt to answer the question.

Jishi Zheng, a retired bank clerk, is already in his early seventies. He was born in Yongchun and lived there until he graduated from the Number One High School of the county. His grandfather was Yijing Zheng, one of the richest plantation owners in Zheng lineage in the early twentieth century. That was why Jishi could afford to go to high school, a rare privilege among his clansmen. His grandfather had eleven children, seven were his own and four were adopted and the father of Jishi was one of the latter. Therefore, when young Jishi migrated to the Malay Peninsula, he had to work like other migrants.

Jishi started his working career on a rubber plantation after he arrived at Segamat, Malaya, in 1947. He often went to a local rubber-trading house run by a lineage uncle, which also served as a postal address for Yongchun migrants. Jishi met Wenyao there for the first time when Wenyao was working for this uncle. Wenyao greeted Jishi as qinren “my lineage fellow” when they were introduced to each other. But at that time, their relationship was merely kept at the level of an acquaintanceship between clan fellows living in the same foreign land.

In the late 1950s, Wenyao moved to Malacca and established his Haiyuan Company. He opened his account with the Overseas Chinese Bank of Malacca. Coincidentally, Jishi had also moved to the same city and worked as a clerk in the bank. They greeted each other whenever they met at the bank. But the acquaintanceship still did not develop into a friendship until 1977. The incident that brought them closer together was a vacancy for the position of Chairman in the Yongchun Association of Malacca. Wenyao wanted to stand for election and, having heard that Jishi was against the outgoing chairman, he wanted to sound Jishi out for some advice. Wenyao invited Jishi at his home to discuss his candidacy privately. Jishi unreservedly offered his opinion on the situation - the chance of success would not be great, as the current chairman had already chosen his successor and had done much to pave the way for his man. However, there was no harm in Wenyao giving it a try, as the exercise would still bring him exposure in the Yongchun community at large. The outcome was as predicted by Jishi but a trust had been established between
the two men and they remained firm friends and supporters of each other throughout their careers.

Wenyao admired Jishi because the latter was an educated man. They often had long chats together. Jishi recalled that:

Part of our time together was not spent just chatting as Wenyao often asked for instructions on how to write a word mentioned in our conversations and I always wrote it down for him. One time, when I arrived at Wenyao's home, several friends were sitting together talking about preparing a tablet to be used in our ancestral worship hall back in our hometown. There was a word that was used only in the olden days and nobody present was sure of how to write it - even the head of a primary school who was among them. So when I went into the sitting room, they sought my assistance and I showed them. Later, Wenyao said to me how wonderful it must be to have an education as I had.

It was because the respect and trust Wenyao fostered for Jishi that, when Wenyao first gave vent to his glimmerings of an idea to consider making donation to the No.1 High School in the hometown, he naturally consulted with Jishi. Jishi confirmed that the School offered the highest level of education available in their hometown, so it was well worthy of expansion. Wenyao thereupon decided to respond to the assembly hall project. From then onwards, the issue of donation became the major concern of their communications. Jishi functioned as Wenyao's agent, going to the hometown to investigate, acting as feedback between Wenyao and the Yongchun side, negotiating with the Yongchun government on behalf of Wenyao, and implementing the concrete donation projects. Moreover, this bond which was soundly based on lineage fellowship did not end after the death of Wenyao but continued as Jishi helped Wenyao's heirs handle the donation funds bequeathed by Wenyao. In short, had there been no participation by Jishi, Wenyao's transnational practices would never have become a reality.
Now naturally the question rises at this point: what drives Jishi, what is his enduring motivation for committing himself to act as Wenyao’s middleman? Jishi explained that his enthusiasm comes from his feelings of deep gratitude towards Wenyao. The latter not only influenced him by his unremitting ambition and enduring dreams, but also moved the former him by his demonstration of sincere friendship.

When Wenyao found out that Jishi had a problem in one of his kidneys caused by kidney stones, he brought Jishi to see a specialist who recommended that the latter should have a kidney transplant because the kidney had deteriorated. Wenyao talked privately with Jishi’s daughter, asking her to donate one of her kidneys to her father and seriously promising that he would take the responsibility for the rest of her life!

Wenyao's care also extended to the rest of Jishi’s family. Jishi related the following stories with emotion.

Wenyao sent a red packet over to me every spring festival with very rich contents (note: money and material items). One time, I heedlessly mentioned that my father would celebrate his ninetieth birthday. Wenyao asked somebody in the hometown on the quiet to purchase seafood (note: Yongchun is a mountain county, so to buy seafood one has to go to the coastal area which is two counties distant) and to prepare a grand banquet for my father on my behalf. I was deeply touched by this gesture.

Another time, one of my sons fell in love with the girl next door. I did not consent to the marriage because I saw that she did not come from a harmonious family. They went to Wenyao secretly to seek his help. Wenyao interceded for them and bought a diamond ring for my son as his engagement ring to the girl. If you didn’t know Wenyao you may not think this was a big deal, but I do. He was always mean to himself. The watch on Wenyao’s wrist cost only M$20 – I knew because it was me who purchased it for him.

To pay a debt of gratitude has always been highly valued in Chinese society. Jishi's full involvement in Wenyao’s transnational practice comes from a sense of repaying the latter. But this is not the whole story. As a middleman, by participating in Wenyao’s transnational projects, Jishi also has had his own reward and has been able to enjoy a feeling of self-contentment in the process. This has been another important
impetus driving him to be enthusiastic about Wenyao’s projects from the beginning to
the end.

In 1982, Jishi visited the hometown for the first time after having left it four
decades ago. He carried with him the plan that Wenyao intended to endow No. 1
School with an assembly hall. Before his arrival, he had transmitted this information
to the Yongchun local government through a clansman. On his way to China, he
received a fitting welcome from the Yongchun community in Hong Kong. The
clansman who delivered the information to the county asked his son, who is the vice-
chairman of Yongchun Association in Hong Kong, to treat Jishi with solicitous
hospitality as the latter was the bearer of an important task. So during Jishi’s stay in
Hong Kong, leaders of Yongchun community, alumni of the No. 1 School and even
prestigious figures like Piyun Lian came to visit him. For the first time, Jishi
experienced the expectations of Yongchun communities.

When he arrived at his hometown, he was accorded a grand reception. He was
surrounded by a group of officials headed by the top leaders of the county. The Head
of the Cultural Bureau himself took pictures for Jishi. And Deyu Zheng, the chairman
of Union of Returned Overseas Chinese, also a senior uncle of the Zheng lineage,
took upon himself the whole responsibility of receiving him and seeing to his needs.
If this proposed project were realized, it would be the second sizeable construction in
the history of Yongchun project contributed by its migrants overseas. For this reason,
the local people regarded Jishi as a crucial emissary.

Jishi’s case shows that a long-standing friendship intertwined with a sort of patron
and client relationship between Wenyao and himself had laid the foundation for Jishi
to devote himself to being an intermediary agent for carrying out Wenyao’s border-
crossing activities. But it is more important that in the course of realizing the projects,
Jishi has gained a sense of the status, respect, and self-esteem both in overseas
Yongchun communities and the hometown region. The following statement he made
can probably be seen as a footnote explaining what is significant to him.
This undertaking has brought me a great honour. I felt myself inferior for the reason that my father is no more than a peasant and I myself am a retired clerk. Whenever I returned to this county, however, I have received esteemed attentions from the government and the local community and been accorded a courteous reception. When the government gave banquets, my father was also invited as an honoured guest, and that would have been unthinkable once.

On the main wall of the living room in his house in Malacca, two vertically hung scrolls capture the eye. One says "deep affections towards hometown" calligraphed by the head of Yongchun County, while the other consists of two sentences: "the one, who makes contribution, brings benefit to society and gains fame" presented as a reward by the No. 1 School of Yongchun. It is clear that Jishi Zheng values the social recognition from his hometown community.

4. Deyu Zheng: A Middleman with Multiple Statuses

In this transnational social space, regardless of whether it is in Yongchun or in Southeast Asia, or in Hong Kong, Deyu Zheng can be counted as a man of some renown. He once occupied a post as a local official for a long period - chairman of Yongchun Union of Returned Overseas Chinese. This position enabled him to set up wide-ranging connections with both the Yongchun authorities and overseas people of Yongchun origin. His rich experience and multitudinous social relations also make him a member of a respectable elite in the Zheng lineage, therefore he was also approached by leading Zheng figures who requested him to become involved in their border-crossing activities and to use his social networks to ensure the proper pursuance of the practices.

Deyu Zheng’s case can be divided into two sections. The first one reveals his enthusiasm and experience working in UROC, which indeed is an intermediary institute of government, set up for linking overseas migrant communities and the local
society. But, even more important is the way he has been viewed and used by the Yongchun government as an agent who would be adept in making connections with overseas communities to fulfill the needs of the local community. The second section unfolds in detail a picture of how he has intervened in Zheng transnational projects and what function he has played.

Deyu Zheng was born and received his middle school education in Yongchun. After graduation, he migrated to the border region between North Malaysia and South Thailand.

His first job was that of a teacher and then in the late 1940s he founded a primary school in Pattani, Thailand, which had grown into a base for communist activities. His left-wing leanings were the guiding principles for the school and agents of the secret service of the Kuomingtang noticed him and reported him to the local authorities. Deyu was facing the possibility of arrest if he stayed on. So, in the early 1950s, he took his whole family back to Yongchun County. That was the time the Communist Party was just coming into power. Numerous cadres were needed for the newly established government body at various levels. With his record, Deyu was considered a promising young candidate suitable for appointment to work among the returned overseas Chinese, as he was educated and had had experience in running underground communist operations. He was even regarded as a person who was more progressive and was imbued with higher political consciousness than the local fellows. This approval ranked him just below the cadres from Northern China who were the backbone of the Party. He was appointed chairman of the Yongchun Union of Returned Overseas Chinese right away and simultaneously became a member of the standing committee of the same organization of Fujian province.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many returned overseas Chinese cherished a strong patriotism and were enthusiastic about making a personal contribution to the construction of new China. One model in particular influenced Deyu Zheng deeply. This is what Deyu recalled.

The old gentleman, Yangzhu You, sold off all his property in Indonesia and brought his whole family back to China in 1954. He then invested all his money in establishing public welfare projects, pride of place being an experimental farm in the mountains in his hometown. His dream was to try out the possibility of planting and
spreading improved breeds of fruits in the county in order to improve the economic conditions and to do something about transforming the backward appearance of the place. The farm was established on Menghu Mountain (literally preying tiger), which is in a remote part of the county. From his village he had to walk for half a day to reach the mountain. Deyu Zheng went there with him several times. He remembers:

One time, while we were on the way, we came across a fellow villager who asked: Uncle, where are you going? And Yangzhu answered: we are going to Menghu Mountain. And the conversation went on with further inquiries like: How old are you? “I am sixty-three years old”, answered Yangzhu You. Surprised, the young fellow commented: “At this age in life, you still want to establish a farm for planting fruit trees?” What the question implied was that Yangzhu You was already in the twilight of his life and he may not even have the chance to see the first fruits of his trees.

The old gentleman devoted himself wholeheartedly to establishing the enterprise. He was incredibly eager to change the face of Yongchun. His efforts did exert an evident influence on the increase in the agricultural productivity of the county – even now forty years later, the orange - one of fine varieties of fruits he introduced - still remains a major means by which the local peasants can improve their standard of living.

Several years after he returned to his hometown, Yangzhu You was promoted deputy-governor of Fujian Province by the provincial government.

The exemplary model of Yangzhu You was purely and simply a portrayal of the idealism which prevailed among the returned overseas Chinese of the 1950s, like Deyu Zheng himself. Deyu stated repeatedly that he was inspired by You’s model and was prepared to do anything for the sake of the development of the hometown region.

The overseas connections these returned overseas Chinese possessed were soon brought into play in the local communities. This was because of the situation in the 1950s and 1960s. The Central Committee of the Party forbade any government body to maintain any correspondence with overseas relations. Rather than being cut off completely, returned Chinese working in the UROC started to function as the major
channel of communication between overseas migrant communities and the hometown region. Deyu recalled that his major job then was to act as a liaison officer – linking up with overseas communities by mail. The regulation was that when an overseas Chinese were confronted with an issue with which they had to deal, he wrote to the UROC. The UROC would then deliver the letter to the relevant department of the government and help to settle the issue. After a decision had been taken, the UROC would be informed and the latter would convey the decisions to the overseas Chinese concerned.

Right at the beginning of the 1960s, the first event which required Deyu to play the role of middleman occurred. During the period of the Great Leap Forward Movement, hosts of people starved to death. In 1961, in a desperate attempt to cope with the disaster, the local government launched a campaign "to save ourselves by producing". The county was in urgent need of capital in order to buy chemical fertilizer from abroad. At the request of the Head of the County, Deyu Zheng made a special trip to Hong Kong where he remained for three months. Deyu recollected how he went about accomplishing this task. He used Hong Kong as a spot from which to contact Yongchun migrant communities in Malaysia and Singapore, because the small number of Yongchun migrants in Hong Kong were new immigrants and had not yet built up a stable financial capacity. As Deyu knew Southeast Asian communities had established a network there since he had been working in the UROC, he wrote to the men of prestige in the Yongchun communities and asked them for help. He duly received a response. For instance, there was the reaction of Chengbai Chen, the chairman of the Singapore Yongchun Association. He was yet another person who felt strongly about his hometown. He came to Hong Kong to meet Deyu and later he mobilized the Yongchun community in Singapore to make an instant contribution for the relief of the hometown. Another way of making an appeal was to catch overseas businessmen among Yongchun migrants who happened to pass through Hong Kong. During his stay there, Deyu was always promptly informed of such arrivals by his community in Hong Kong so he was personally able to meet quite a number of successful migrants.

He accomplished his task with great success. One outstanding return was 1900 tons of chemical fertilizer, a gift which gave Yongchun the wherewithal to recover faster and to become the top producer of grain in the region. Always looking for an advantage, when Deyu and his hometown fellows in Hong Kong found out that basic
foodstuffs such as grain, cooking oil and sugar could be imported tax free, they managed to collect 300 tons of flour, 30 tons of sugar and more than 10 tons of cooking oil; all donated by Younchun migrants living overseas. These relief food supplies collected in Hong Kong were a great help to the hometown people. An example of just how important this was during the famine years: it was common for people to suffer from oedema. By using these collected foods: frying flour with oil and sugar and then soaking into water, people were cured.

In the period of Great Cultural Revolution, Deyu Zheng’s function came to a standstill because any overseas connection was suspect. However, as soon as China reopened its doors, he was again appointed by the Yongchun government to serve as one of the major pylons of the bridge that connects Yongchun with its sons and daughters overseas, especially after he migrated to Hong Kong in the 1980s. Since then, he has been involved in one way or another in practically all the donation campaigns launched by the county. Deyu Zheng recalled that soliciting contributions was a rather embarrassing kind of job because donors could grow tired of being approached once too often,

We were referred to as ‘gentlemen’ beggars and I think that I am among one of the best known. For instance, when Hong, the current Secretary of Party of the County came to Hong Kong to collect donations for the highway project, many Yongchun migrants ignored him. I had a tough follow-up job as I had to mobilize a set of lethargic people to fulfill the target of HK$2 million estimated for this task. When the Yongchun Organization of the C.P.P.C.C. planned to construct an office building, I was also one of the ‘chief beggars’ roped in to look for donors. In a short while, we managed to collect more than one million from them. Then the UROC also made plans to construct its own office building. For this, I accompanied them to solicit contributions even though I was sick at the time. This is why now, whenever I visit these two institutes, I always get warm greetings like, 'Senior Chairman, we are so glad to see you again. You have done the greatest meritorious service for our institute. We could not have done it without you.'

Being a key person in connecting Yongchun and Yongchun migrants overseas, and moreover armed with rich experience both with regard to the situation at home and abroad, Deyu is an authority to whom people naturally turn for advice or even
criticism about the current local authority’s policy and performance. Shaped by his experience, he has a very down-to-earth view and he objects to a particular phenomenon; namely when an overseas guest visits the hometown - various institutes and departments of the local government compete to invite him and the guests are kept constantly entertained at banquets.

In a forum held by the government in Yongchun County at the end of 1999, Deyu made several critical points. Firstly of all, he suggested the government body should have an overall plan and organize its work as if it were playing a game of chess. Arrangements should be made in advance about an explicit division of labour: who and which department should be responsible for receiving overseas guests on behalf of government. The current situation, however, is that every one sticks a finger in the pie. The upshot is that guests who witness such an unedifying competition and chaotic struggle go away with a feeling of being overwhelmed and confused.

Secondly, he pointed out sharply that the way the government extends a red carpet welcome to emigrants is far from satisfactory. For instance, commandeering students to line the street to welcome guests, and subjecting them to unreasonable outdoor conditions on a hot summer’s day, in open-air temperature of 33 degrees Celsius waiting for hours before the motorcade pass through. He told those officials that were this to happen in Hong Kong, there would be a scandal about the mistreatment of children.

Thirdly, the style of entertainment is overly extravagant and unrealistic. In his experience, what emigrants missed most are the traditional local dishes; taro, rice, mushroom soup, and stewed pig’s trotters with taro and the like. They would enjoy these with great gusto, not simply because of the delicacies alone, but because of the memories they bring back. Serving up expensive and exotic dishes like soft-shelled turtle, frog’s legs and the like, after they have been satisfied with the hometown dishes and are about to leave the dinner table, really irks them instead of impressing them.

Deyu alarmed the authority by saying that after the fabulously laid out, rich banquet, many of the overseas guests mentioned to him that this sort of treatment was an overkill as they personally felt that their meagre contributions did not deserve such
special attention. When word of such luxuries spreads to others when they went back to their countries, it is a great hindrance to their future work.

Often, the criticisms and recommendations of Deyu have the desired effect, but sometimes they fall on deaf ears as current leaders who are eager to curry the favour of Yongchun migrants overseas continue such practices in the hope of achieving their own agenda.

Talking about being an agent serving the Yongchun government, Deyu expressed his middleman role even more strikingly in the Zheng lineage case. He has been involved in almost all the cases of the three principal Zheng figures presented in Part 2.

In 1983, Deyu Zheng visited Hong Kong with the head of Education Department of Fujian Province and the deputy-chairman of the Fujian UROC. They invited Wenyao Zheng and Di Zheng to come over from Malaysia. In the meeting with Wenyao, they discussed the possibility of building a college, while in discussions with Di Zheng, they settled the project involving Di Zheng's donation to establish a cultural centre in Yongchun. This meeting formed the prologue of Deyu's participation in Wenyao Zheng and Di Zheng's transnational activities.

During the one and only time Wenyao visited Yongchun in 1995, in advance Wenyao asked Deyu, who resided then in Hong Kong, to make a trip to the hometown as well. According to Deyu, this was what happened:

The Head and the Secretary of the Party of our county intended to entertain him at a banquet, but Wenyao refused all invitations. I managed to reach Yongchun two days before Wenyao left. When I got to Quanzhou, I called in advance and told him that I would rush back to Yongchun that night and would be honoured to have him as my guest for dinner. He asked where. "My home," I replied. Wenyao wanted to know who else would be present. I explained that I have also invited the Secretary of the Party and the Executive head of the County. Wenyao accepted my invitation. In the informal atmosphere of a cozy dinner, the two leaders were able to raise the issue of donation for building a college, a donation project interesting Wenyao as he had intimated during his previous visit to Hong Kong. The county leaders suggested that Wenyao might consider spending ten million yuan to expand the existing Teacher's Training School into a college. Before Wenyao replied, he asked me to step into the bedroom and discussed the matter with me there while the other two continued eating dinner. Wenyao asked me whether or not it was worth spending ten million yuan to build a
Teacher's Training College? And my reply was that it depends on the scale of this project. He said he would think about it after he returned to Malaysia.

Although on that night itself, Wenyao did not give any answer, the story is an indication of how a middleman is able to reach out where other channels failed. Wenyao gave Deyu his fullest confidence. He talked about what he intended to do without any reservations. Deyu Zheng reminisced:

Wenyao told me that he planned to transfer his stocks in the Huifeng Bank in Hong Kong into the account of the Mrs. Xingshu Foundation. This amounted to about HK$10 million. Furthermore, that he would evict all those who inhabited his land in Malacca and then sell it and the proceedings would go to the foundation as well. Wenyao was ambitious. He said that since he intended to reward excellent students, he would rather do his best to reward those who got a doctorate from abroad and would be willing to make a solid contribution to the society. I heard that the going price of the said land was MS$300 million. The 1% deposit he received was already 3 million. Later, due to a nationwide financial crisis, the deal fell through.

Even after Wenyao passed away, Deyu was still asked to mediate in the relevant affairs. A year after the death of Wenyao, the surviving members of his family went back to Yongchun County and declared themselves willing to transfer the sum of HK$15 million to the local authority as promised by Wenyao. Deyu recalled the gist of his conversation with Jishi Zheng:

Jishi asked me to be present during the meeting between Wenyao's family and the local authority. Since I had been involved in it from the inception and know the ins and outs, I was expected to be there to ensure that the will of Wenyao was executed according to his wishes. It was a tricky situation, as the nephews of Wenyao wanted to raise some obstacles to buy time and create opportunities to get at the money - they insisted the sum be released in installments so that they could keep it in the bank as long as possible to earn the 1% interest from the principal sum for themselves. With my impartial background role in the donation project, Jishi expected that I could speak were I to find discrepancies and the others would accept what I had to say.

During the meeting, Deyu Zheng advised Wenyao's wife that Wenyao trusted the two current leaders: the Head and the Secretary of the Party of Yongchun County. They had formed a special committee to take care of this donation project. He assured her that she should not worry about either their competence or their reliability just because there were a few rotten apples in the government. In fact, in view of the escalating prices of building material at that time transferring the entire sum to the
committee would expedite the completion of the project. The due completion of the college would be the best tribute and honour to Wenyao. The advice and exhortation of Deyu Zheng must have had some effect because the widow and nephews of Wenyao finally turned over the full sum of HK$15 million to the committee.

Let us now turn to see Deyu Zheng’s function in the case of Di Zheng. Though they did not meet till 1983 in Hong Kong, they already got to know each other through correspondence and the newsletter. Deyu has this to say about Di Zheng:

Di Zheng called me `third generation senior uncle’, the most respectful term of address for a senior member in a clan. At the meeting, I spoke generally of what is currently happening in our hometown but I made no attempt to solicit any donation from Di Zheng. I just mentioned that cultural undertakings in Yongchun county need to be perpetuated or the younger generation would forget the past. To keep history alive and meaningful, we needed some basic facilities: like a library and meeting place in the county town. I also mentioned that the Zheng lineage school, the Peng Siong School, lacked an assembly hall.

In Deyu's eyes, Di Zheng is not an ordinary merchant. He is intelligent and has a mind of his own, consequently he is not easily led by others. In the talk, he did not specify where he stood but later he asked Deyu to draw up a plan and an estimated budget. Finally, Di Zheng contributed RMB 200, 000 towards the building of a new hall for Peng Siong School.

Because of the dual status Deyu Zheng possesses: a trusted official and a senior lineage member, he is considered to be the right and proper person to mediate in and settle the disputes which emerge in various parts of this transnational lineage. It was because of Deyu 's intervention, that the disturbance of Jujing Hall could eventually be settled.

When the conflict around the Jujing Hall (the Xingzhong Zheng case) reached a peak among members of the Zheng lineage, in 1999 and 2000, Deyu proceeded to intervene in the affair. Deyu perfectly fits the bill for acting as the middleman in this case because: firstly, his seniority in the clan hierarchy is even above of Xingzhong Zheng and he can speak as an elder. Secondly, he is not a newcomer to clan affairs;
for a long time he was the head of the Zheng Lineage Organization (in the form of the Board of Trustees of the lineage school) on the hometown side. Thirdly, he is a respected and well known in the Yongchun transnational communities.

Deyu Zheng started his mediation from Malaysia. While his trip was purportedly to attend the anniversary celebrations of the Yongchun Association of Kuala Lumpur, his focus was to intervene in the dispute in the Zheng lineage. He made a special trip to Ipoh to visit Xingzhong Zheng. This is what Deyu had to say about the matter:

My brother who lives in Pinland accompanied me to Ipoh, and on the way north, he confided that the complexity of this conflict would take a huge effort to resolve and I should be psychologically prepared. However, I felt otherwise as I believed the good relationship and understanding I have with Xingzhong would help him see issues in a different light and as he trusted me, he would tell me what is in his heart. Our friendship had started way back when we met each in Yongchun in 1986. Our meeting consolidated our relationship as Xingzhong came to sort out matters relating to the old Jujing Hall. At that time, the old Jujing Hall was a huge mansion he had inherited from his father. Xingzhong wanted to reclaim the mansion which had been divided up into several sections and was occupied by his distant relatives who were not willing to move out. Moreover, his uncle claimed that he was also one of the owners. It was I who accompanied him to the court of Quanzhou District. Before we went there, I laid the groundwork for this case by drawing upon my network. The contact I called upon was the deputy-head of the district court, with whom I have a good relationship. To recap a little – this deputy-head once took refuge in Yongchun during the period of the Great Cultural Revolution and we stayed together and supported each other. From this shared experience of hardship, sprang a lasting friendship and we could communicate very well. So I went to see him and provided evidence that showed Xingzhong and his brothers were the designated heirs and therefore the true owners of Jujing Hall. So things went smoothly. Xingzhong and I made our appearance in court in the morning, and on that same afternoon, judgment was passed in favour of Xingzhong and his brothers. Therefore Xingzhong has a good opinion of my capabilities and sincerity.

As was expected, when Xingzhong met Deyu in Ipoh, he was happy and said that, "It is very good that you were the one to come. Now I can unburden myself." Deyu Zheng understood what Xingzong had done was reasonable, but yet there were some points that were not tenable.

Deyu Zheng asked Xingzong Zheng the reason why the title deed of the Jujing Hall was still held in the name of Xingzhong, even though he had donated it to the
Yongchun Association of Malaysia. Xingzhong explained the circumstances under which this happened:

When the new building was completed and the Board of Trustees wanted to register the property under the name of the lineage school, due to some legal technicalities, this could not be arranged. So while waiting for things to be sorted out, the property was retained under my name. It was the board’s decision, not mine.

After an explanation of the whole matter, Xingzong felt better and Deyu Zheng chose the moment when Xingzong was calm and receptive, to present some sensitive points. Deyu updated him on the general public opinion.

It concerns the building your brother and you have already donated to the Association of Malaysia and which the Association transferred to the Board of Trustees of the lineage school in Yongchun. Your donation has been made public so if you retract it now, people who do not know you well will just see the action and interpret it the wrong way. Let us say that you are not bothered by public opinion, what about your own conscience? You gave the donation in memory of your father. Don’t you think that to take it back would dishonour his memory and good work?

Xingzong remained silent. He seemed having accepted what Deyu Zheng had said. However, he explained why he declared his intention to sell the building.

Others started this rumour - saying that my business had gone bankrupt so that I needed to sell the property. I just played along because I enjoyed seeing MQ Zheng and others squirm. The Foundation is their rice bowl and they feel threatened.

Deyu understood Xingzong well and believed that the latter explanation was no more than the truth. As a former senior official who had had a rich and varied experience in terms of dealing with the issue of overseas Chinese affair, Deyu Zheng was aware of how the insensitive attitude of those in Yongchun who had never left their hometown could hurt an emigrant’s pride. After he returned to Yongchun, Deyu had a lengthy discussion with the Board. Deyu pointed out that all this had come about because of miscommunication and feelings of personal pride being slighted. If the Board were to apply logic, fairness and respect, this issue could be resolved, as he firmly believed that Xingzhong had no intention of selling the Jujing Hall. Deyu enumerated several reasons that motivated Xingzhong to support donation projects in the past. He asked MQ make the first move and apologize to Xingzhong because this personal conflict was affecting the operations of Yingding Foundation – MQ had neither greeted nor visited Xingzhong during the latter’s last trip in Yongchun, not to mention his
disrespectful manner in previous meetings when he once banged the table. If a more respectful attitude was to be adopted, the atmosphere could be more cordial. The Board was convinced and MQ was requested to do as Deyu advised.

In October 1999, Deyu went back to Yongchun from Hong Kong for the purpose of mediating further with the other parties in the conflict about the Jujing Hall. This coincided with the home visit of Xingzhong to Yongchun. The interviewer received news of this and interviewed Xingzhong by phone to find out the outcome and later also interviewed Deyu in Hong Kong who had this to say:

This trip to Yongchun was undertaken for the sole purpose of settling the dispute of the Jujing building once and for all. I solicited the opinions and wishes of the relevant parties involved prior to any meetings. I held a lengthy meeting with the Board of Trustees of the Peng Xiong School and took the time to explain my ideas of how to solve the problems to them and to inform them of what terms and conditions I would raise with Xingzhong. Then I listened to their feedback and desires. I also had a phone conversation with a senior clansman of the group of Dayu village origin. He said that they (the Dayu group) only wanted to ensure that the ownership of Jujing Hall would remain in the hands of the lineage association. They were not concerned about how much money is generated from the building nor about how much of it went towards covering the expenses of Xingzhong whenever he is in Yongchun. I felt more confident about being able to solve the problem since it was the dissatisfaction of this group that was causing disunity.

Having covered all corners, Deyu had a pretty good idea on how to come up with a proposal that would satisfy all sides. Before he held the meeting with Xingzhong and the board, he had drawn up an outline in his mind. In the meeting, firstly, Deyu Zheng affirmed the remarkable contribution Xingzhong and his father Yiding had made and the significance of this to the local community in Yongchun. The second point was the issue of who should be in charge of the management of the Jujing Hall. Initially Xingzhong insisted that Zonglian Zheng, his closest friend and clansman from Kuala Lumpur, should be placed in charge of the business operations of the Yiding Foundation when he left. However, unequivocal evidence were furnished to show that Zonglian had tried to set new instructions of his own to suit his convenience that were not in line with what had been agreed upon by Xingzhong and the Board.

The Board requested Xingzhong protect the good name of the Foundation by not appointing Zonglian. Deyu threw in all his powers of persuasion with a fair dose of common sense and reasoning and eventually persuaded Xingzhong to give up the idea of transferring his authority to Zonglian when he is not in Yongchun. Then the
discussion came to the crucial issue, which was who should have the financial power over the Yiding Foundation. Deyu related.

I pointed out that since the building had been donated by Xingzhong, so generally speaking, under reasonable conditions, he should be entitled to enjoy some fruits of his donation. The attached condition is that Xingzhong should make claims only for expenses during his stay in Yonchun. When he is not around, the management of the finance would be left in the hands of the Board. An additional condition limits this privilege to Xingzhong only and it will not extended to his heirs.

Then the question of how much would be a reasonable budget for Xingzhong was raised. Finally, it was agreed by all parties that 30% of the income would be acceptable.

Within half a day, the whole matter was settled and an agreement was written and Deyu proofread it to ensure that what had been discussed had really been put into writing. Seeing that everything was in order, Deyu faxed it to Jingxing Zheng, the chairman of Zheng Lineage Association of Malaysia right away. The latter too was content with the result. Jingxing Zheng told Deyu on the phone, ‘I appreciate your input that made this article (he meant the agreement) beautiful. You are very thoughtful and have helped us settle this issue to the satisfaction of all parties.’

As a middleman, being familiar with inner group relations, he should also possess a extended social network. Having access to government bodies is especially an advantage to help to run the ongoing undertaking smoothly. Deyu maintains an efficient network with the Yongchun bureaucratic system, one which was embedded during his long-term tenure in office.

When the agreement was reached, Deyu asked Xingzhong to transfer the title deed of the building to the Board. As Xingzhong was about to leave the county for Malaysia, he suggested that the legal formalities be completed on his next visit. Deyu was afraid ‘that a long night is fraught with dreams’, literally meaning - a long delay may give rise to a change of mind. Deyu urged the Chairman of the Board to give this matter his full attention and expedite the transfer. Besides working on the Chairman, Deyu also wrote a report to the Head and Secretary of Party of Yongchun County respectively asking them both to use their influence to push for a quicker processing of the transfer. When the official who handled this affair was still taking
his break, Deyu went straight to the Secretary of the Party to present this case. So with added pressure from the top, those working on the transfer hastened the processing time. Deyu left for Hong Kong after he had witnessed Xingzhong and the Board signing the contract and final papers. Xingzhong left for Malaysia five days later after signing all the relevant documents that transferred the title deed for land, deed for building and passing on the authority to the appointed Board to run the Foundation in his absence. Since Deyu left before Xingzong, he went to take leave of Xingzong and recounted:

All parties concerned were satisfied with the settlement. When I went to say farewell to Xingzhong, he said to me, 'Senior Uncle, you stood by me. I truly appreciate your friendship.' I felt that this was because I presented the facts and reasoned things with him from the beginning to the end. Even though Xingzhong was not fully convinced in terms what was said about Zonglian Zheng, his follower, he still agreed with me.

In the latest interview by phone with Xingzhong before he left Yongchun, I was told by him that he was pleased with the outcome of the intermediary services Deyu had performed. Furthermore, he felt confident about the undertakings of the Foundation he has established. Helped by Deyu, Xingzhong introduced reforms into the Board of Trustees of the Foundation and those who were too old to hold active positions have passed on their duties to younger more capable leaders. Xingzhong said,

These departing elders questioned why they should retire as they hadn't done anything wrong; besides they are well versed in the history of our clan which the younger ones are not. The problem is that they are too old and fixed in their ways to work efficiently. I explained this to Deyu and he agreed. The present board consists of nine Zheng lineage members; mostly former or current officials. The replacements for two old chaps are two heads from Taodong and Dayu villages respectively. The introduction of new blood and a wider representation will help the Foundation play an active role to initiate changes.

The dispute around the Jujing Hall has been completely settled. Not long after, when Jingxing Zheng, the chairman of Zheng Association of Malaysia, visited the hometown, he met the Board of Trustees of the school (the clan organization on hometown side) for the first time in a long while. In the meeting he stressed that a harmonious family makes everything thrive.
5. Conclusion

The cases presented in this chapter reveal the role of middlemen in overseas Chinese transnational practice. As the social space under study covers a very broad region, and as the transnational actors were either Southeast Asia born or had left the hometown a long time ago, in particular after the linkages were virtually disconnected for almost three decades, their direct relations with hometown region became pretty tenuous. For this reason they need middlemen who make the network mesh smaller and turn indirect relations into one of more direct and stronger ties.

The revelation of the personal background, history and social position of a middleman aims to demonstrate which place such a figure occupies in the network, which determines what kind of function he can perform. Owing to his high reputation in the overseas Yongchun communities and hometown community, Piyun Lian was approached and asked by the local government to be a persuasive spokesperson on its behalf. While Deyu Zheng played the same role as an agent for the Yongchun government on one hand, he was also deemed to a suitable mediator to intervene in the dispute embroiling the transnational Zheng lineage. Jianxiong Qiu and Jishi Zheng, however, both represent the overseas Chinese point of view. Qiu used his knowledge of the local politics, official networks and his social capital from his Hong Kong background to solve the crucial problem which emerged in a transnational investment. Jishi Zheng has been involved all-round in donor projects: from delivering messages to make negotiations, from planning to supervising the projects.

The emergence of middlemen in migrant border-crossing practice brings new features into play. In the early form of trans-territorial networks built up by migrant pioneers in the first half-twentieth century, south Fujian in China and Malaya were the major geographical settings. In the current regional crossing network, however, Hong
Kong and Maco have become key nodes. This indicates an expansion in the transnational social space.

Finally, the above cases show that the rise of middlemen and their activities, to a certain extent, has strengthened the power of governments to intervene in the transnational space.

1 In January 1932, after their endeavour to defend Shanghai against the Japanese invasion, the Chinese 19th Route Army was transferred to Fujian province. Dissatisfied with Chiang Kai-shek's appeasement policy and their deployment in a province barely able to sustain its local warlord armies, an increasingly rebellious mood developed among the leaders of the 19th Route Army. Among them were Cai Tingkai, Chen Mingshu and Jiang Guangnai (Litten, 1988) who were moved to throw in their lot with the communists. Piyun was invited by Jiang Guangnai to be the head of two counties: Huian and Yongtai. In early 1934, when the 19th Route Army's rebellion of "Alliance with the Communists against Chiang Kai-shek" failed, Piyun had to leave his official post and the Liming School was sealed up.

2 Zuncong literally means 'respecting Confucianism'. This school has been one of the most famous Chinese schools in Kuala Lumpur.

3 The Chinese High School, supported financially by Fujian businessmen, is now regarded as the best Chinese School in Kuala Lumpur. The Zuncon School was initiated by the Guangdong group, but later the Fujian group took over and has continued to run it up to the present.

4 During the time I conducted my fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur in 1999, I visited the association several times. I saw that a fair number of people spent their days there, though many of them do no longer engaged in rubber business. Every weekday evening, two or three big round dinner tables are full of businessmen who are enjoying their Yongchun dishes cooked by the association's kitchen.