

Towards an Actor-Centred Approach to Studying Overseas Remittances, Rural Development, and Livelihoods:

An Ethnographic Case Study
in Guangdong Province, South China

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Abstract

Through the lens of a Cantonese remittance village, the thesis aims to critically examine rural livelihood dynamics reconfigured through overseas emigration and remittances, and their relationships with agrarian land, labour, and production in the historical sending region of overseas Chinese (*qiaoxiang*). Drawing on the concept of ‘remittance village’ coined by Ramesh Sunam, the thesis emphasises diaspora-homeland ties as a key driver of contemporary socioeconomic development in many parts of *qiaoxiang*, which are transforming rural economic, political, and social textures. In contrast to the structural, top-down methodological approach dominating the existing remittance scholarship both in China and globally, the thesis develops an actor-centred livelihoods framework to guide fieldwork data collection and analysis and to shed light on the conflictual and relational aspects of overseas remittances. Based on two-month in-depth fieldwork in rural *qiaoxiang*, the thesis finds that overseas remittances play an important role in strengthening the village collective economy and driving agricultural transition from subsistence grain crop to commercial cash crop cultivation. However, overseas remittances contribute to divergent livelihood pathways among rural inhabitants, facilitating asset accumulation and livelihood improvement for rural elites, while exacerbating livelihood precarity and economic insecurity for marginal actors, thereby reproducing and reinforcing local socioeconomic stratification.

Keywords: overseas Chinese remittances, rural development, livelihoods approach, actor-centred perspective, fieldwork, inequality.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview of the Research Topic

In the People's Republic of China, after almost three decades of restricted labour mobility during the Mao era, the reform and opening-up policy (*gaige kaifang*) since the late 1970s and the 'going out' policy (*zou chuqu*) since the early 2000s have paved the way for a mobility boom in the new millennium both domestically and globally (Haugen & Speelman, 2022). Millions of internal migrants have moved from the rural interior to the coastal zones and contributed to the country's rapid export-driven industrialisation, and millions of international migrants have moved abroad for work, study, and family reunification (*ibid.*). This unprecedented movement of people and the concomitant flows of material resources have transformed contemporary China's economy and society, and contributed to multifaceted impacts on the lives of individual migrants, their left-behind families, and the wider communities at both the origins and destinations.

Both in China and globally, scholarly attention has been concentrated on understanding the economic effects of migrant remittances on families and communities from which migrants hail. This strand of remittance research relies on quantitative methods and is useful to understand the macro-structural relationship between migrant remittances and various economic and social indicators of the left-behind household members (Akay et al., 2016; Hua & Yin, 2017; Snyder & Chern, 2009; Tang, 2017; Zhu et al., 2012). However, quantitative studies embedded within structuralist migration theory overlook the agentive and intersectional aspects of migration where migrants and other relevant social actors exert control over their socioeconomic circumstances and devise strategies to pursue their own projects despite unfavourable structural conditions and power differentials (Bakewell et al., 2012). Hence, quantitative studies are inadequate to provide critical theoretical perspectives to unpack the contradictions and challenges brought by migration and remittances.

In contrast with the structural, top-down perspective represented by quantitative studies on remittances, there has been an alternative strand of critical scholarship examining migrant remittances and rural livelihoods from an actor-centred perspective in both the Chinese and other Asian contexts. This strand of scholarship utilises grounded, anthropological methods and develops actor-centred theoretical frameworks to critically examine interrelated realms of migration, including individual migrants, those staying behind, migrants' places of origin, and

the material aspects of migration, while emphasising various forms of agency exercised by diverse social actors (Fan, 2015; Jacka, 2014; Kaufmann, 2021; McKay, 2005; Murphy, 2002; Peluso & Purwanto, 2018; Sunam, 2020). These studies illustrate how social networks, gender relations, and household structure and management influence migration decisions, and how migrant remittances reconstitute and reinforce gender/generational ideologies and norms and shape socio-material and socio-technical changes in rural societies, thereby complementing standard quantitative analyses through ethnographic insights. However, in the Chinese context, remittance scholarship adopting an actor-centred approach focuses mainly on rural-urban migration, while critical scholarship on transnational labour migration, remittances, and rural development remains limited (see e.g., Driessen, 2019; Loubere et al., 2019).

By comparison, there has been a rich body of diaspora studies concentrated in the historical sending region of overseas Chinese (*qiaoxiang*) in South China. Rather than examining temporary labour migration for work, this strand of research focuses on the transnational connections between Chinese diasporas and their ancestral hometowns and how such connections facilitate material resource flows and bring socioeconomic transformations to *qiaoxiang* in the post-reform era (Douw et al., 1999; Shu, 2022; Yow, 2013). Several anthropological studies utilise multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork and illustrate how diaspora linkages create a moral economy and contribute to village reconstruction, lineage revival and educational modernisation in *qiaoxiang* (Kuah, 2000; Tremon, 2022; Zhou & Li, 2018). However, these qualitative studies focus mainly on the motives behind diasporas' remitting behaviour and the underlying mechanisms for achieving their remitting objectives, while research focusing on rural livelihoods in emigrant hometowns draws on mainly household survey data and remains largely quantitative in nature (Johnson & Woon, 1997a; Woon, 1990).

1.2 Research Aim and Research Questions

To render visible the agency of diverse social actors, their livelihood chances and pathways, and their complex interactions and negotiations, the aim of the thesis is to develop an actor-centred analytical framework to guide qualitative fieldwork data collection and analysis in the study of overseas remittances, rural development, and livelihoods in the *qiaoxiang* context. To fill the literature gap and overcome the dichotomy between internal and international migration, the thesis proposes to draw on the critical scholarship on internal/transnational migrant remittances and rural livelihoods in both the Chinese and other Asian contexts, in order to shed

light on the complex, contradictory and relational aspects of overseas remittances in the *qiaoxiang* context. Hence, the thesis asks the overarching research question, ‘What is the role of overseas remittances in local processes of socioeconomic development and the livelihoods of diverse actors in rural *qiaoxiang*?’ To respond to the overarching question from the perspectives of both local cadres and rural inhabitants, the thesis asks two sub-questions: 1) What is the role of the local state in mobilising overseas remittances for rural development projects?, and 2) How do rural development projects supported by overseas remittances influence villagers’ livelihoods?. Since my research questions are designed to disentangle social relations between the local state and rural inhabitants, and between rural elites and marginal actors, my thesis focuses not only on family-maintenance remittances but also on ‘remittances for collective consumption’ (Zhou & Li, 2018) that contribute directly to rural development at the community level.

By answering this set of questions, the objective of the thesis is to contribute to the current remittance scholarship both theoretically and empirically. On a theoretical level, the thesis adopts the ‘sustainable livelihoods approach’ (Scoones, 1998) combined with an actor-oriented perspective (Long, 1997, 2001) in the *qiaoxiang* context to critically examine rural livelihood dynamics reconfigured through overseas emigration and remittances, and their relationships with agrarian land, labour and production. The thesis draws on the concept of ‘remittance village’ coined by Ramesh Sunam (2020) to conceptualise the empirical case within a village community in rural *qiaoxiang*. On a practical, ethnographic level, the thesis adapts and operationalises the livelihoods approach through in-depth fieldwork in the *qiaoxiang* context to address some of the inherent weaknesses of the approach and enhance the analytical capacity of the approach that could be applied to other research contexts.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

Following the introduction chapter, Chapter 2 reviews three strands of remittance scholarship in the Chinese context that inform my research questions and methodology. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework that I adapt to the study of overseas remittances and rural livelihoods based on fieldwork methods in the *qiaoxiang* context. Chapter 4 explains my research methodology, data collection methods, and ethical considerations. Chapter 5 presents my research findings and analysis drawing on data collected through in-depth fieldwork. Chapter 6 answers my research questions and opens broader discussions based on my research findings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Section 2.1 outlines quantitative studies on remittances both globally and in China, and provides critiques of the top-down methodological approach to studying migrant remittances and development. Section 2.2 discusses remittance scholarship adopting an actor-centred approach in the Chinese context. However, this strand of research focuses mainly on rural-urban migration, while critical research on overseas remittances and rural livelihoods remains limited. Section 2.3 outlines diaspora scholarship in the *qiaoxiang* context, and identifies the literature gap where my thesis contributes to theoretical and methodological innovation.

2.1 Remittance Scholarship Adopting Quantitative Methods in the Chinese Context

There has been a vast body of quantitative research in the field of development economics examining the statistical correlation between migrant remittances and households' economic well-being. Based on household-level data, microeconomics studies in general show positive effects of migrant remittances, including reducing household poverty rates (Lokshin et al., 2010; Yang & Martinez, 2006); increasing productive investment in agriculture (Adams, 1998), children's education (measured by educational expenditures, school enrolment rates, private school attendance, and child labour) (Adams & Cuecuecha, 2010; Calero et al., 2009; Cox-Edwards & Ureta, 2003; Salas, 2014), and capital-intensive entrepreneurial activities (Massey & Parrado, 1998; Mesnard, 2004; Woodruff & Zenteno, 2007; Yang, 2008); and serving as counter-cyclical insurance in the wake of negative income shocks (Clark & Wallsten, 2003; Yang & Choi, 2007). In the Chinese context, remittance scholarship is similarly dominated by quantitative research showing positive economic effects of migrant remittances on left-behind families' income and consumption levels (De Brauw & Rozelle, 2008; Demurger & Wang, 2016; Du et al., 2005; Pan et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2003; Zhu et al., 2014); positive compensation effects on left-behind elderly parents' self-reported and mental health (Pan & Dong, 2020; Yi et al., 2019; Zhuo & Liang, 2015) and left-behind children's educational attainment (Hu, 2012; Lu, 2012; Yang & Bansak, 2020); and positive distributional effects that reduce income differentials among rural households (Ha et al., 2009; Li, 1999a; Shen et al., 2010; Zhu & Luo, 2010). Nevertheless, quantitative studies also show negative income distributional effects of migrant remittances among rural and ethnic communities (Howell, 2017; Zhang et al., 2023), and negative education distributional effects between boys and girls that entrench son preference norms in rural China (Lin et al., 2021; Yan & Nie, 2023).

In general, quantitative studies on migration and remittances in the Chinese context focus mainly on rural-urban migration and draw on the ‘new economics of labour migration’ (NELM) theory that understands labour migration as a calculated household strategy to minimise risks and raise household income through economic diversification (Katz & Stark, 1986; Stark & Bloom, 1985). Although quantitative studies are relevant and important to understand the broader structural relationship between migrant remittances and left-behind families’ livelihood outcomes measured by a range of economic and social indicators, this type of research leans heavily on questionnaire data and statistical models and methods based on positivist epistemological assumptions and seeks to quantify social data to uncover an ‘objective truth’ (Sumner & Tribe, 2008). Hence, by treating data in an aggregate manner, quantitative studies relying on structural migration theories overlook the agency and voices of diverse social actors and are insufficient to provide critical insights into the interlinkages between migration and mobility and development processes and change (Bakewell, 2010).

2.2 Remittance Scholarship from an Actor-Centred Perspective in the Chinese Context

In contrast to the structural, top-down methodological approach represented by mainly economics studies on migration and remittances, there has been an alternative strand of interdisciplinary scholarship that critically examines migration and remittances from an actor-centred perspective based on grounded, anthropological methods. Based on seventeen months of in-depth fieldwork in rural Jiangxi Province between 1996 and 1998, Murphy (2002) studied how rural-urban migration and the return flows of resources transformed the Chinese countryside. The author brought together the concepts of ‘values’, ‘goals’, ‘resources’ and ‘social actors’ (p.10) to develop an analytical framework linking the agency and subjectivity of social actors with macro-level socioeconomic transition. In her analysis, the author viewed rural households as ‘petty commodity producers’ (p.23) who pursued labour migration as extensions of their strategies for diversifying livelihoods from agriculture into various income sources, and hence were ‘adaptable’ and ‘resilient’ (p.23) in the face of socioeconomic shifts, rather than ‘backward’ and ‘transitional’ (p.25) according to modernisation and structuralist migration theories. Her analysis showed that labour migration enabled social actors to obtain and deploy remittances to attain their life goals such as improving material well-being, maintaining self-respect, and engaging more fully in village social life (ibid.). However, as remittances were spent on betrothal gifts, dowries, and better-quality housing, they functioned to not only conserve traditional values and social practices internal to rural society but inflate

the real costs associated with house building and marriage by raising social standards of respectability, with some households being forced into debt (ibid.). Hence, the author presented a contradictory picture where migration and remittances facilitated poverty alleviation of some households, while precipitating the return to poverty of others.

Using household biographies and narratives collected through in-depth interviews with 26 households in rural Anhui Province between 1995 and 2012, Fan (2015) conducted a longitudinal analysis to study intergenerational changes in the use of remittances, and uncovered major transformations in the social and spatial organisation of rural households due to migrant work and remittances. The study showed that the pursuit of labour migration and remittances as a means of livelihoods became an intergenerational norm and a way of life within rural households, shifting from sole to couple migration and altering gender and generational roles and productive relations over time (ibid.). Resonating with Murphy's work, the author found that although remittances supported subsistence and consumption, they reinforced patriarchal ideology and patrilocal traditions through expenditure on housing and marriage across generations. How remittances were used also reflected villagers' inability to fully integrate into urban society due to the institutional, economic and social constraints associated with the household registration (*hukou*) system (ibid.). The author cautioned against constructing a strict divide between Chinese rural migrants and transnational labour migrants in other Asian contexts, both of whom were excluded from urban social benefits, were marginalised in the urban labour market, and endured long separation from their families due to resource scarcity and the long distances between home and destination (ibid.).

Drawing on nineteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in rural Hunan and Anhui provinces, alongside proverbs and written qualitative material, Kaufmann (2021) critically examined how rice farmer households made strategic land-use decisions and preserved their paddy fields to retain economic security in light of rural-urban migration pressures and agro-technological change. The author utilised the concept of 'community of practice' (p.28) to conceptualise rural households and their livelihood strategies, and developed an actor-centred framework based on the concepts of 'knowledge system', 'repertoire' and 'agency' (p.35) to analyse how labour migrants and left-behind rice farmers utilised their repertoire of knowledge to cope with their specific socio-material predicaments. While acknowledging the importance of migrant remittances in shaping technological choices by enabling farmers to afford harvesting services and invest in new machinery, the author contrasted with the standard narrative of linear

technological progression that conceived farmers as passive recipients of modern technologies (ibid.). From a repertoire perspective, the author argued that farmers were active agents who consciously weighed up multifaceted socio-technical factors interlinked with migration decisions given their resource endowment and livelihood circumstances, which explained the coexistence of obsolete and mechanised technologies in their agricultural practices (ibid.).

Other migration scholarship utilising anthropological methods focused on the voices and experiences of left-behind populations of the elderly (Sun & Dutta, 2016; Ye et al., 2017; Zhang, 2004; Zhang & Wang, 2022), children (Murphy, 2020, 2022; Xiao, 2014; Zhou, 2022) and women (Fan, 2022; Fan & Chen, 2020; Jacka, 2012, 2014) in rural China, and revealed the inadequacy of remittances to compensate for the negative impacts felt by left-behind family members and fulfil their social and psychological needs, thereby reflecting broader concerns regarding class, intergenerational and gender inequalities. The above studies provide valuable ethnographic insights into the complex relationship between migration and rural development and shed light on the contradictions, challenges and inconsistencies associated with material resource flows, agrarian change, and rural livelihoods. So far, migration research adopting such a critical perspective in the Chinese context focuses mainly on internal labour migration, while scholarship adopting an actor-centred approach to examining transnational labour migration and rural livelihoods remains scarce.

One recent study conducted by Loubere et al. (2019) critically examined the rapid influx of Chinese migrants from rural Shanglin County to engage in informal small-scale gold mining in Ghana. Based on several rounds of in-depth fieldwork in Ghana and rural Shanglin, the authors studied the diverse experiences and outcomes of Shanglin miners and their impact on local livelihoods from an actor-centred perspective. The research findings revealed a highly segmented picture of Shanglin miners and illustrated how migration and remittances reproduced and reinforced local socioeconomic hierarchies. On the one hand, local elites who had the financial capital to invest in mining equipment were able to accumulate substantial wealth and send back remittances to construct village houses, purchase luxury consumer items, and invest in urban real estate (ibid.). On the other hand, marginal actors who borrowed to purchase equipment found themselves further impoverished and heavily in debt due to the mass deportations of illegal Chinese miners since 2013 (ibid.). From an actor-centred perspective, the authors not only challenged the homogenising depictions of Shanglin miners in academic and media discourses, but identified important parallels between Shanglin miners and domestic

rural migrants, thereby proposing to reconceptualise Shanglin miners through the lens of domestic labour migration to uncover complex experiences, interactions, outcomes and identities associated with Chinese migration to the global South (ibid.).

2.3 Remittance Scholarship in the *Qiaoxiang* Context

There has been a rich body of diaspora research concentrated in the traditional emigrant hometowns (*qiaoxiang*) in Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang provinces in South China. This strand of research contributes to the immigrant transnationalism literature (Glick-Schiller et al., 1992; Ong, 1999; Vertovec, 2009) and focuses on Chinese diasporas' participation in the transnational fields through frequent and orderly economic, political, socio-cultural and religious activities in *qiaoxiang* while striving to assimilate into their host societies (Chan, 2018; Douw et al., 1999; Hsu, 2000; Pieke et al., 2004; Yow, 2013). Cross-border remittance flows are an integral part of immigrant transnationalism. In the *qiaoxiang* context, in addition to family-maintenance remittances, diasporas maintain their homeland ties through family/clan associations, district/hometown associations, and merchant guilds (*tongs*) in host societies (Portes & Zhou, 2012; Zhou & Lee, 2013), and such transnational engagement with *qiaoxiang* takes the form of 'remittances for collective consumption' (Zhou & Li, 2018). In the post-reform era, collective remittances have transformed the physical landscapes of rural *qiaoxiang* through the construction of symbolic structures (village gates and religious statues), lineage institutions (ancestral halls, lineage libraries, and lineage publications), village infrastructure (roads, bridges and irrigation channels), and educational and welfare facilities (schools, clinics and elderly care homes) (Kuah, 1999, 2000; Tremon, 2022; Woon, 1989, 1996; ibid.).

Several anthropological studies utilise multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in both *qiaoxiang* and destination countries and follow in the footsteps of Chinese diasporas as they return to *qiaoxiang* to study their experiences, aspirations, and moral sentiments towards their ancestral hometowns, as well as the motives behind their transnational activities (Kuah, 1999, 2000; Tremon, 2022; Zhou & Li, 2018). *Qiaoxiang* scholars developed several models to explain diasporas' remittance-sending behaviour associated with their homeland ties, including reaffirming their ethnic Chinese identity (Chen, 2005; Liu, 2005), accumulating social capital for future economic investment (Smart & Lin, 2007), fulfilling their moral obligation towards kinsmen (Kuah, 2000; Li, 2005), enhancing social reputations in home communities (Li, 1999b; Wang, 2000), and compensating for social status loss in host societies (Zhou & Li, 2018). This

strand of qualitative studies illustrates how diasporas maintain emotional and material ties with their homeland despite their orientation towards resettlement in host societies, and how their positionality in sending and receiving communities shapes their transnational practices.

Compared to qualitative studies focusing on the diasporas' side, research examining the linkages between diaspora remittances and rural livelihoods in *qiaoxiang* draws on mainly household questionnaire data and is largely quantitative in nature. Based on household survey data collected in the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province, several scholars conducted quantitative studies to measure the economic effects of overseas remittances on rural livelihoods in the post-reform era and found that overseas remittances explained income disparities and divergent household strategies between recipient and non-recipient households in rural *qiaoxiang* (Johnson & Woon, 1997a, 1997b; Woon, 1990; Zhang, 2007, 2010). However, these studies found no evidence that overseas remittances widened income inequality, as non-recipient households were gradually catching up with recipient households through agricultural sidelines and migrant labour. In general, these studies provide a detailed statistical description of rural development patterns and the effects of overseas remittances on the local economy and family strategies in the Pearl River Delta. These studies also draw attention to the long-established '*qiaoxiang* mentality' (Woon, 1990, p.156) among the locals who perceive emigration overseas as the best avenue for upward social mobility and expect overseas remittances to support local socioeconomic development and livelihood improvement, which distinguishes the region from other rapidly industrialising coastal regions in China.

Although these quantitative studies are useful to understand the linkages between overseas remittances and broader development patterns, they nevertheless reproduce the linear narrative of economic modernisation that assumes the 'transformative' role of overseas remittances in upgrading 'underdeveloped' communities in rural *qiaoxiang*, while neglecting the experiences and voices of rural inhabitants who may be excluded from new opportunities brought by overseas remittances. In contrast with the structural, linear perspective represented by quantitative studies in the *qiaoxiang* context, the thesis proposes to address the literature gap by drawing on the critical scholarship on internal/transnational migrant remittances and rural development in the Chinese context and beyond, and by following an actor-centred analytical framework to examine overseas remittances and rural livelihoods in *qiaoxiang* based on fieldwork methods in order to shed new light on the research topic.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Section 3.1 explains the conceptual roots of the sustainable livelihoods approach and its strengths as an analytical framework to gain insight into the complex realities of rural livelihoods from an actor-centred perspective. Section 3.2 discusses remittance scholarship adopting a livelihoods approach in the Asian context and explains why the concept of ‘remittance village’ is applicable to my empirical case. Section 3.3 outlines the core limitations of the livelihoods approach and identifies key areas to address these limitations.

3.1 Sustainable Livelihoods Approach as a Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the influential working paper produced by Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway (1992) for the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex, the concept of ‘sustainable livelihoods’ is defined as ‘the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base’ (as adapted by Scoones, 2009, p.175). This initial definition of livelihoods provided a foundation for a cross-disciplinary research team at the IDS to develop the ‘sustainable livelihoods framework’ which was applied and operationalised through empirical field research to understand rural development and livelihoods in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Mali, and Zimbabwe (Scoones, 1998). The framework links particular livelihood contexts (of policy setting, politics, and agro-ecology) with different combinations of livelihood resources (natural, financial, human, and social capital) that create the capacity to follow a diverse array of livelihood strategies (agriculture, labour migration, and livelihood diversification) with specific livelihood outcomes (assessed through different criteria) (ibid.). Of particular interest in the framework are the institutional processes and organisational structures that influence access to various livelihood resources and mediate the ability to pursue different livelihood strategies (ibid.).

Resonating with the sustainable livelihoods approach, Norman Long and his colleagues at Wageningen University broadened livelihoods thinking and developed an ‘actor-oriented approach’ to elucidate how rural livelihood dynamics is socially constructed through the contestation and negotiation of diverse interests and values of social actors in different socio-political contexts (Long, 1997). Underpinning the actor-oriented approach is the concept of livelihood defined as ‘the idea of individuals and groups striving to make a living, attempting

to meet their various consumption and economic necessities, coping with uncertainties, responding to new opportunities, and choosing between different value positions' (ibid., p.11). Hence, the actor-oriented approach places local actors and their agency at the centre of social inquiry and recognises the complex social interactions and relationships as an indispensable part of individuals' and social groups' pursuit of livelihoods.

From an actor-oriented perspective, rural development is understood as a heterogeneous process involving multiple levels of governance, value systems, and realities of social life, ranging from local patterns of resource management and organisation; to regional state and non-state intervening institutions; and global market, political, and cultural phenomena (ibid.). At the core of this complex process lies central issues concerning human needs and agency, organisational capabilities and discourses, power relations and authority, and intervention ideology and practice at the local level (ibid.). As such, the actor-oriented approach provides a way out of the 'impasse' in development studies where considerable interest has been directed towards addressing shortcomings of generic and structural theories of development embedded within 'various forms of determinism, linearity, and institutional hegemony' (Long, 2001, p.1). Unlike the 'people-less' perspectives obsessing with utilising 'scientific' methods to understand the 'driving forces' of social phenomena, an actor-oriented perspective tries to gain insight into how social actors 'are locked into a series of intertwined battles over resources, meanings and institutional legitimacy and control' (ibid., p.1).

3.2 Remittance Scholarship from a Livelihoods Perspective in the Asian Context

My adoption of the livelihoods approach is informed by remittance scholarship examining transnational labour migration and remittances from a livelihoods perspective in the Asian context. The studies conducted by McKay (2005), Peluso and Purwanto (2018), and Sunam (2020) operationalised the livelihoods approach to critically examine the role of overseas remittances in reconfiguring agrarian transition and rural livelihoods. Based on in-depth fieldwork in the rural Philippines, McKay (2005) adopted the livelihoods approach to study the interrelationships between transnational female labour migration and local agricultural transition from rice farming to bean gardening. The author coined the term 'remittance landscapes' to illustrate how migration emerged from and reconstituted complex processes of agrarian transition and land-use tensions, reflecting gendered versions of 'modernity' and 'development' as much as shifting local ecology and economic opportunities (ibid.). By reading

agrarian changes into ‘remittance landscapes’ that were simultaneously investment sites transformed by overseas remittances and sources of capital outlay necessary to sustain overseas migration, the author raised broader questions of long-term agricultural sustainability, since cultural norms of gender and labour determined that remittances were invested in short-term, ecologically unsound agricultural practices in the hope of enhancing future mobility (ibid.).

Based on McKay’s work, Peluso and Purwanto (2018) coined the term ‘remittance forests’ to vividly capture how women’s transnational labour underpinned by gendered structures and opportunities reconfigured agrarian environments, forest resource uses and production patterns, and household economies and labour practices. Based on eight-month ethnographic fieldwork in rural Indonesia, the authors studied, through a livelihoods lens, how transnational female labour migration for social reproductive waged work transformed their left-behind families’ forest-related livelihood practices and the forest ecological landscapes. The authors found that as migrant households invested remittances in raising dairy cows and cultivating fodder crops in the forest understory, remittances altered the households’ livelihood strategies from forest workers to dairy producers and enabled them to benefit from government projects developing the marketing infrastructure to support dairy production (ibid.). Although remittances sent by female migrants failed to alter the masculinised forest labour of logging and resin production, they reconstructed the forest ecological composition, and the planting of fodder crops enabled landless forest workers to expand their access to and control over forest resources and management, thereby transforming broader socio-environmental relations (ibid.).

Building on the concepts of ‘remittance landscapes’ and ‘remittance forests’, in *Transnational Labour Migration, Livelihoods and Agrarian Change in Nepal*, Ramesh Sunam (2020) developed the concept of ‘remittance village’ to emphasise rural people’s transnational mobilities as an important feature of contemporary rural livelihood dynamics in many developing countries, and to understand how the increasing embeddedness of villages in wider processes of transnational migration and globalisation transforms agrarian relations and patterns. Based on in-depth fieldwork in a Nepali ‘remittance village’, the author operationalised the livelihoods framework to examine how transnational labour migration interacted with complex socioeconomic differentiation, power relations, and institutional processes to influence livelihood outcomes and agrarian dynamics in the village.

The author found that the effects of transnational migration on rural livelihoods were contingent on processes of inclusion mediated by unequal social relations of class, caste/ethnicity, gender, and asset base. On the one hand, rural elites who had access to formal employment opportunities overseas were able to send back remittances to purchase land and invest in non-farm businesses (ibid.). On the other hand, low-caste households financed their migration expenses through selling land or using land as collateral to borrow from local lenders (ibid.). Precarious working conditions overseas due to processes of casualisation and informalisation meant that low-caste migrants were vulnerable to labour exploitation and not able to return with surplus savings (ibid.). Hence, Sunam's work illustrates how transnational migration generated contradictory livelihood outcomes due to unequal social relations, facilitating asset accumulation for high-caste households with strong social networks, while exacerbating livelihood insecurity and vulnerability of low-caste and landless households.

Overall, compared to the concepts of 'remittance landscapes' and 'remittance forests' that emphasise the gendered aspects of transnational migration and agrarian change, the concept of 'remittance village' is more applicable to my empirical case in rural *qiaoxiang*, since it provides a conceptual lens to examine the contradictions and inconsistencies associated with overseas remittances and rural livelihoods within a village community. Unlike the original concept that emphasises rural inhabitants' transnational mobilities, the thesis draws attention to diaspora-homeland ties as an important feature of immigrant transnationalism and a key driver of contemporary socioeconomic change in many parts of *qiaoxiang*, which are reconfiguring rural economic, political and social textures. The concept also embodies the enduring 'qiaoxiang mentality' unique to the region, the psychological orientation towards emigrating abroad for upward social mobility, keeping connections with diaspora communities, and relying on overseas remittances for maintaining and improving standards of living.

3.3 Weaknesses of the Livelihoods Approach

Despite the advantages of the livelihoods approach as an analytical framework to delve into the complexity and specificity of rural livelihoods while emphasising agency and action, Scoones (2009, pp.181-183) highlighted four limitations of the livelihoods approach in many empirical applications. Firstly, the livelihoods approach fails to sufficiently engage with wider processes of economic globalisation, which raises questions in terms of its compatibility with shifting patterns of economic and political relations under globalised capitalism (ibid.). As such,

the approach risks the danger of naïve idealism and localism and overlooks the structural forces of class and capital (ibid.). Secondly, the approach fails to pay sufficient attention to issues of politics, power, and social differentiation, and to link micro-level particularities of rural livelihoods with broader socio-cultural and political processes underpinned by institutional and policy framings at different governance levels (ibid.). Thirdly, despite having the word ‘sustainable’ in the concept, the approach focuses mainly on local capacities to cope with short-term shocks and stresses, while ignoring long-term livelihood adaptation responses to environmental challenges (ibid.). Finally, as the approach is static in nature and focuses on presenting an in-depth description of livelihood complexity, it fails to grapple with debates regarding long-run transformational shifts in rural economies and livelihood pathways (ibid.).

In response to these challenges, Scoones (2009, pp.183-190) suggested four key areas that researchers could address to improve the livelihoods approach for better analytical purposes. The first area is to reflect on the power relationships underlying processes of livelihoods knowledge-making, and to consider what is included or excluded in the normative framing of livelihoods, and what is assumed to be successful or unsuccessful livelihoods based on the notion of ‘progress’ in development thinking (ibid.). The second area is to put politics and power at the centre of any livelihoods analysis, and to integrate livelihoods perspectives with wider political economy analysis of agrarian change (ibid.). The third area is to link contextual place-based analysis with broader scales and to draw out transnational connections, flows, and networks, thereby reflecting on how particular forms of exchange and extraction under globalised capitalism impinge on rural livelihoods at the local level (ibid.). The fourth area is to conduct longitudinal analysis and consider how long-run dynamic variables are linked to different future livelihood pathways, thereby bringing debates about sustainability and resilience back into discussions about livelihood adaptation (ibid.).

In the methodology chapter, I will explain step by step, in light of my research questions, how I adapt and operationalise the livelihoods approach in the *qiaoxiang* context to guide empirical fieldwork data collection and analysis based on Scoones’s suggestions. In particular, I focus on prioritising the perspectives and voices of local actors in livelihoods knowledge-making processes, integrating political economy questions central to critical agrarian studies into the conventional livelihoods analysis, and shifting from a static snapshot of livelihood assets, resources and strategies towards a dynamic analysis of livelihood transition processes.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology, Data Collection, and Ethics

Section 4.1 explains the research design of the thesis in light of my overarching research question and how I select my fieldwork site and gain access. Section 4.2 discusses concrete method choices, data sources and the criteria for selection, and the implications of these choices, for each of my research sub-questions. Section 4.3 explains the data processing and analytical strategy and how I address the limitations of verbatim transcription. Section 4.4 reflects on ethical challenges during fieldwork and how I mitigate my subjectivity as an insider.

4.1 Research Methodology and Fieldwork Site

The research design of my thesis is a short ethnographic case study in rural *qiaoxiang*. I adopt an ethnographic methodological approach because my overarching research question, ‘What is the role of overseas remittances in local processes of socioeconomic development and the livelihoods of diverse actors in rural *qiaoxiang*?’, aims to examine the complex and relational dimensions of overseas remittances in processes of rural development from an actor-centred livelihoods perspective, which entails a social constructivist ontological and interpretivist epistemological positioning (Sumner & Tribe, 2008). Data collection is based on two-month in-depth fieldwork in one of the ‘remittance villages’ (Sunam, 2020) in rural areas in the western Pearl River Delta, which is the historical emigration region of overseas Chinese to mainly North America (Johnson & Woon, 1997a). I deliberately omit the specific county or township where I conducted fieldwork to protect the confidentiality of my research participants and the village, given that I would present a detailed analysis of selected household cases in my research findings chapter and the potential political sensitivity of my research topic. The fieldwork was conducted around the spring festival period between January and March in 2024.

My fieldwork site is Yaoyuan village (pseudonym), an administrative village (*xingzheng cun*) consisting of several natural villages (*ziran cun*) in rural areas in the western Pearl River Delta. The administrative village is governed by a villagers’ committee (*cunmin weiyuanhui*), with each natural village being governed by a villagers’ small group (*cunmin xiaozu*) headed by a formal leader (*cunzhang*). I choose Yaoyuan village as my fieldwork site because it has a long history of emigrating to North America (since the republican era), and it has a larger diaspora population than the current rural *hukou* population. Hence, I expect the villagers’ committee to utilise its diaspora connections to mobilise overseas remittances to support rural development projects and village economic growth.

To obtain access to the village, I visited the villagers' committee in person and communicated with both the party secretary and the deputy party secretary about my thesis project on overseas Chinese remittances and rural politics based on a livelihoods approach. Although the villagers' committee considered my thesis topic to be slightly politically sensitive, given the limited scope and space of my thesis, I was allowed to proceed with my fieldwork and data collection, as long as I adhered to key ethical principles to ensure the anonymity of my participants and the village by using pseudonyms, and to protect their confidentiality by modifying key information that would expose their identity (Bryman, 2016). After obtaining their approval of my fieldwork in the village, I had the freedom to stay in the village for an extended period and develop fieldwork relationships with village cadres and villagers through informal conversations on a daily basis. As the spring festival period was the busiest time in the village due to tourism development, all the village cadres were busy with organising various cultural events, and I was left alone most of the time to chat with villagers without any supervision from the village cadres, which enabled me to study conflictual livelihoods issues associated with overseas remittances from an actor-centred perspective. As I am a native-born Cantonese from the western Pearl River Delta and able to speak the local dialect and aware of cultural nuances, I adopted an insider positionality (an *emic* approach) during data collection to immerse myself in the cultural context and develop accounts and analyses based on the perspectives of my participants, compared to an outsider positionality (an *etic* approach) that adopts a positivist epistemology where an objective observer tests the applicability of theoretical hypotheses to new research contexts (Crawford et al., 2017, p.11).

4.2 Data Collection Methods and Data Sources

The dataset of my thesis comprises seven unstructured interviews with village cadres (3) in the villagers' committee and villagers (4) from rural households with distinct livelihood pathways, alongside two mapping exercises (one focusing on business activities and the other one focusing on housing categories), participant observation, and many informal conversations that I had with farmers, migrant workers, and petty traders in the village on a daily basis during fieldwork. I decide to use unstructured, open-ended interviews as my main data collection methods because I want my interviewees (both village cadres and villagers) to lead the conversation and discuss any aspects of the village development and their livelihoods that they deem important, and I listen carefully and follow up key information that emerge from the

conversation spontaneously (Creswell, 2013). Compared to semi-structured interviews where researchers prepare an interview guide to obtain specific facts or opinions on relatively straightforward issues from multiple perspectives (Bryman, 2016), unstructured interviews are more suitable in my case, since I want to give my participants more control over the interview process and privilege their knowledge and understanding of the implications of overseas remittances for their livelihoods and rural development, as opposed to me dominating the conversation and leading my participants in any particular direction (Creswell, 2013). Hence, conducting unstructured interviews provides a way for me to improve the capacity of the livelihoods approach by giving voice to my participants and allowing them to represent their own experiences, motivations and perceptions, thereby enhancing their agency in processes of livelihoods knowledge production (Scoones, 2009).

Date	Interview Type	Duration	Interviewee	Gender	Age	Occupation
26/01/2024	Unstructured Interview 1	60 minutes	Village deputy party secretary	Male	1980s	Village deputy party secretary
10/02/2024	Unstructured Interview 2	55 minutes	Fang (pseudonym)	Female	1980s	Restaurant and grocery store owner
15/02/2024	Unstructured Interview 3	65 minutes	Qing (pseudonym)	Female	1980s	Garment factory worker
18/02/2024	Unstructured Interview 4	50 minutes	Xuan (pseudonym)	Male	1980s	Commercial farm owner, rice noodle shop owner
20/02/2024	Unstructured Interview 5	60 minutes	Village party secretary	Male	1970s	Village party secretary
23/02/2024	Unstructured Interview 6	45 minutes	Village cadre	Male	1980s	Village cadre
28/02/2024	Unstructured Interview 7	90 minutes	Ling (pseudonym)	Female	1980s	Food stallholder

Table 1: Background Information of Research Participants

To answer research sub-question 1), ‘What is the role of the local state in mobilising overseas remittances for rural development projects?’, I select the village party secretary, the village deputy party secretary, and one of the village cadres in the villagers’ committee as my data sources, as they all have at least ten years of work experience in the villagers’ committee and are responsible for keeping in contact with diaspora communities and clan associations to mobilise remittances to support the upgrading of village infrastructure and the implementation of rural development strategies. The purpose of the unstructured interviews is to obtain an overview of rural development work in the village and identify specific projects that are supported by overseas remittances, which then allows me to dig deeper to uncover the livelihood implications of the projects from diverse perspectives during fieldwork. The interviews also provide the village cadres’ accounts of their experiences in utilising diaspora networks and remittances to implement rural development projects and how these projects influence village economic growth and local livelihoods. However, as it is in the village cadres’ best interests to present the successful side of the village development and livelihoods, I expect the data collected from the villagers’ committee to be biased and reflect only one aspect of the

story, which requires me to complement and triangulate the information through unstructured interviews with selected rural households, participant observation, and informal conversations with diverse local actors during fieldwork.

To answer research sub-question 2), ‘How do rural development projects supported by overseas remittances influence villagers’ livelihoods?’, I utilise theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006) to select my data sources based on the three typologies of livelihood trajectories developed by Dorward (2009) and Dorward et al. (2009), including ‘hanging in’ (maintaining current livelihood levels in the face of adverse socioeconomic circumstances), ‘stepping up’ (accumulating assets and investing in current economic activities), and ‘stepping out’ (accumulating assets and diversifying into new economic activities). I then add the livelihood transition category of ‘dropping out’ (moving towards destitution and exiting) developed by Mushongah (2009) to the above three categories in order to encompass marginalised groups who may experience livelihood precarity due to unequal social relations and be in the process of migrating away. These four typological classifications together serve as my data selection criteria and provide an analytical framework for me to study the contradictory and relational aspects of overseas remittances in local development and livelihoods. Adding the four livelihood transition categories to the livelihoods approach allows me to move from static to dynamic analyses by focusing not only on current asset base and livelihood options, but also on long-run processes of livelihood transformation (Scoones, 2009).

Due to the limited scope of my thesis, I decide to select four household cases corresponding to the four categories and present a detailed analysis of each of the four cases. To select rural households according to the analytical framework, this requires me to spend long enough time in the village and have informal conversations with as diverse actors as possible, including farmers, migrant workers, stallholders and shopkeepers, in order to gain an overview of different livelihood activities and strategies, before deciding on whether an interview is needed to obtain more in-depth information. While I was looking for suitable data sources, I utilised participant observation and informal conversations to complete two mapping exercises to gain a preliminary understanding of socioeconomic differentiation in the village, with one mapping exercise focusing on the different types of business activities (see Appendix 1), and the other one focusing on different housing categories (see Appendix 2). I adapted the table templates from the PowerPoint slides in COSM22 Lecture 6 Qualitative Methods (II) in my specific context to design and conduct the mapping exercises. For purposes of livelihoods analysis, I

distinguished between two categories of rural households, including households receiving overseas remittances (*qiaojuan* households), and households receiving no overseas remittances (non-*qiaojuan* households) (Woon, 1990). For mapping exercise 1, I observed different business activities and counted the number of each business type in the village. For mapping exercise 2, I observed different housing categories and took note of basic characteristics for each housing type. For both exercises, I had informal conversations with petty traders and small business owners to find out whether they come from *qiaojuan* or non-*qiaojuan* households and to obtain a general picture of their livelihood circumstances.

Once a suitable data source was identified according to the analytical framework, I utilised unstructured interviews to gain a more in-depth understanding of how rural development projects supported by overseas remittances lead to divergent livelihood outcomes and pathways. The purpose of the interviews is to provide the villagers' description of how their livelihood activities and strategies are reconfigured by development projects funded with overseas remittances, and how overseas links and remittances mediate their possibilities of capitalising on new economic opportunities and accumulating livelihood assets and resources. Since I strived to put local politics, power relations, and social differentiation at the centre of my livelihoods analysis (Scoones, 2009), I kept in mind the four core political economy questions concerning the social relations of production and reproduction developed by Henry Bernstein while I was conducting the interviews. These questions include who owns what (ownership of livelihood assets and resources), who does what (social and gendered divisions of labour), who gets what (income distribution and patterns of accumulation), and what do they do with it (livelihood strategies and patterns of consumption, savings and investment) (Bernstein, 2010, pp.22-24). Overall, answering research sub-question 2) allows me to mitigate the biasedness of my data sources in research sub-question 1) and to corroborate the information from the village cadres by exposing myself to diverse perspectives and utilising the four livelihood transition categories to uncover the different facets of rural livelihoods and agrarian relations.

4.3 Data Processing and Analytical Strategy

At the beginning of my fieldwork (Interview 1), I utilised the verbatim transcription method to transform my recorded interview into text prior to coding and analysis (Bryman, 2016). However, as my first interview with the deputy party secretary took place in an open setting in the villagers' committee, other village cadres who were curious about our conversation joined

the interview, which made it difficult for me to obtain their consent to be recorded beforehand. Moreover, as it was a busy day in the committee, there were other conversations taking place simultaneously, which became background noise in my interview recording. Due to the poor quality of recording, I had to replay my recording many times to capture important information during the transcription phase, not to mention that I had to identify ‘unintended’ participants and omit their part of the recording for ethical reasons. This turned out to be an extremely time-consuming process, and it took me seven hours to complete transcribing and translating my one-hour interview with the deputy party secretary. This not only kept me separate from the fieldwork event but prevented me from critically engaging with my fieldwork experience. This prompted me to rethink the feasibility and practicality of adopting the verbatim transcription method as my data processing strategy and search for alternative analytical strategies.

After discussing with my supervisor about my problems, I decided to utilise the systematic and reflexive interviewing and reporting (SRIR) method combined with selective verbatim transcription as my data processing and analytical strategy (Loubere, 2017). The SRIR method required me to take more detailed notes during the interviews and write up a systematic interview report (SIR) immediately after each interview (except for Interview 1, though I wrote up a short reflexive piece based on the initial transcription, my interview notes and my memory) to critically reflect on the interviewee’s verbal responses, identify key verbatim quotations and non-verbal observations, and attempt to draw out key themes from the interview data (ibid.). One advantage of implementing the SRIR method is to prompt me to engage with my data actively and critically while I was in the field and think about coding and analysing my data at an as early stage as possible (ibid.). Although the SRIR method is designed to be implemented jointly by at least two researchers who engage in reflexive dialogue to produce SIRs, in the case of independent fieldwork research, I decided to utilise the SRIR method in coordination with selective verbatim transcription in order to triangulate my SIRs and interview notes and obtain key quotations for use as final research outputs (ibid.).

After returning from fieldwork, I inserted all my SIRs and interview notes into the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo to undertake deeper analysis. Since I already produced preliminary analyses of the interview data in the SIRs, I can quickly generate initial codes that are ‘provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data’ (Charmaz, 2006, p.48). The next step was focused coding where I identified the most frequent initial codes to synthesise large segments of the data and to create codes that are more ‘directed, selective, and conceptual’

(ibid., p.57). Axial coding was utilised to link categories with sub-categories and reassemble initial codes in a hierarchical manner to make the emerging analysis more coherent (ibid.). Theoretical coding allowed me to reflect on the potential connections between the focused codes and move the analytical narrative in a theoretical direction (ibid.). I then wrote up my research findings based on the coding exercise and produced analytical narratives from the perspectives of both village cadres and villagers.

4.4 Ethical Considerations and Researcher Reflexivity

In accordance with the Swedish Research Council's ethical guidelines, I obtained oral informed consent from my participants before conducting the recorded interviews, and before collecting relevant data for the mapping exercises through informal conversations. This required me to always make clear my identity to my participants, and explain to them the aim, objectives, research questions and data collection methods of my thesis and its possible dissemination. I ensured the anonymity of all my participants by giving them pseudonyms, and protected their confidentiality by deliberately omitting the specific locality where I conducted fieldwork and modifying key information that would make the village and my participants identifiable. As I adopted an *emic* approach during fieldwork, I embedded myself in the village community and developed close relationships with my participants based on mutual trust and understanding, which makes it even more important for me not to abuse my insider positionality to extract knowledge from my participants and cause any harm to them. Considering the potential political sensitivity of my thesis topic, I informed my participants that they have all rights to refuse answering any of my questions and even withdraw from my research before the thesis deadline in case of privacy invasion (Bryman, 2016). All the interview recordings were deleted as soon as I finished transcribing selected quotations.

To mitigate my personal biases, unstructured interviews were utilised as main data collection methods to empower my interviewees during the research process. In particular, since my participants could be rural households living in conditions of marginalisation due to unequal social relations, unstructured interviews serve as a means to minimise inequalities of power between me, a masters student based at Lund University, and my participants, local villagers who may be coping with difficult livelihood situations, during fieldwork (Crawford et al., 2017). While I was writing up the research findings, I avoided using my own language to depict

my participants but tried to produce analytical narratives revolving around overseas remittances, village development, and rural livelihoods based on my participants' own accounts.

Regarding data collected from my interviews with the village cadres, I took the approximate whole number for all the key figures (rather than the exact number) regarding the village economic growth and the specific development projects, and I crosschecked the data from the interviews by obtaining access to relevant documents, reports, land contracts, and work contracts in the villagers' committee to ensure the accuracy of my data and the credibility (or internal validity) of my research (ibid.). Regarding data collected from my interviews with the villagers, I only took the approximate range of their household income data and the rough whole number for other key figures to protect their privacy. Since livelihoods information such as assets, income, rents, and investment could be considered private and sensitive by local villagers, I always double checked with my participants that I had not invaded their privacy when they revealed key livelihoods information to me. My interviews with the villagers, alongside participant observation and informal conversations with diverse actors, allowed me to further corroborate the data collected from the village cadres and identify any discrepancies.

However, I must acknowledge that due to the limited data sources and time constraint, my research findings are not able to consider all possible livelihood implications of overseas remittances beyond the four household cases that I will present, though I make efforts to provide a rounded perspective of livelihood dynamics in the village. Moreover, my research findings from the specific village context may not be generalisable to other village contexts in the western Pearl River Delta, which affects the transferability (or external validity) of my research (ibid.), though I strive to generalise my research findings through adapting the livelihoods framework that could be utilised in other research contexts.

Chapter 5: Research Findings and Analysis

Section 5.1 presents research findings based on my interviews with village cadres and shows how overseas remittances strengthen the village collective economy and improve villagers' livelihoods from the village cadres' perspectives. Section 5.2 presents research findings based on my mapping exercises and provides an overview of business activities and socioeconomic stratification in the village. Section 5.3 presents research findings based on my interviews with four households with distinct livelihood pathways, who are selected based on the four typologies of livelihood trajectories developed by Dorward (2009) and Mushongah (2009). My interviews with rural households illustrate the contradictory and relational aspects of overseas remittances and how they reinforce local socioeconomic differentiation by facilitating asset accumulation and livelihood diversification for households with overseas connections, while exacerbating livelihood precarity and economic insecurity for households without overseas connections. My analysis places emphasis on the interactions between the villagers' committee and rural households and the role of the villagers' committee in mobilising overseas remittances during processes of rural development.

5.1 Interviews with Village Cadres: Overseas Remittances Strengthen Village Collective Sector and Improve Villagers' Livelihoods

5.1.1 'Rural Vitalisation' Policy

The 'rural vitalisation' policy (*xiangcun zhenxing*) has been officially implemented since 2018 following the publication of the *Rural Vitalisation Strategy Plan 2018-2022* (State Council, 2018a) and the *2018 Number One Central Document* (State Council, 2018b). The aim of the policy is to make tackling the 'three rural issues' (*sannong wenti*)¹ a top priority of the party work. Important aspects of the policy include strengthening rural industries and enterprises, deepening rural ideological construction, improving rural governance mechanisms, and accelerating agricultural modernisation (State Council, 2018a). Under this policy background, the villagers' committee in Yaoyuan village has established two collective enterprises to

¹ Three rural issues (*sannong wenti*) refer to rural development problems related to insufficient support for agriculture (*nongye*), widening inequality between urban and rural areas (*nongcun*), and perpetuating absolute and relative poverty experienced by farmers (*nongmin*) and the frequent infringement of their rights and interests (Zhang, 2015).

‘strengthen the village and enrich the villagers’ (*qiang cun fu min*) since 2021, including an agricultural development enterprise and a cultural and tourist development enterprise.²

5.1.2 Overseas Remittances and Agricultural Modernisation

The agricultural collective enterprise is contracted to undertake small-scale agricultural projects for the county government, covering 150 *mu* paddy fields and 100 *mu* dry farmland to grow rice, wheat, potatoes, taro roots, and sweetcorn to fulfil the staple grain procurement quotas set by the county government. The villagers’ committee has mobilised 550,000 yuan overseas remittances (in the form of donations) from local *qiaojuan* families and overseas clan associations to develop the agricultural enterprise. The amount has been invested by the enterprise to purchase agricultural machinery and equipment, including rice transplanters, combine harvesters, and agricultural drones. With the help of new machinery, the enterprise has managed to revitalise 90 *mu* abandoned paddy fields (due to the lack of agricultural labour) and achieve annual income of 230,000 yuan by the end of 2023. The enterprise has employed 6 villagers to form the ‘agricultural work team’ (*nongye gongzuo dui*), with each worker being paid 3,000 yuan per month. As the enterprise only earns enough income to cover the workers’ wages and purchase basic agricultural inputs (e.g., seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, and farming tools), it expects to give out dividends to local villagers starting from 2027 at the earliest.³

5.1.3 Overseas Remittances and Tourism Development

The cultural and tourist collective enterprise is contracted to undertake small-scale cultural projects for the county government. The villagers’ committee has mobilised 880,000 yuan overseas remittances (in the form of donations) from local *qiaojuan* families and overseas clan associations to develop the cultural and tourist enterprise. The amount has been invested by the enterprise to set up different cultural activities and events, including the spring festival flower market, the lotus flower festival, agricultural arts exhibition events, educational events propagating overseas Chinese patriotism, and a cleaning campaign to improve the village’s sanitation conditions for tourism development. Undertaking cultural projects for the county government provides a stable stream of income for the enterprise as it can request the county government to make quick payment to employ temporary workers and purchase basic materials

² Interviews 1, 5 & 6.

³ Interviews 1, 5 & 6.

promptly for different projects. The enterprise has achieved annual income of 280,000 yuan by the end of 2023, and it has employed 5 villagers as permanent workers (3,500 yuan per month) and 5-10 villagers as temporary workers (150 yuan per day) depending on the manual labour need of the different projects. As the cultural and tourist enterprise only earns enough income to cover the workers' wages and purchase basic materials, it expects to give out dividends to local villagers at least three years later when it starts making sufficient net profits.⁴

5.1.4 Successful Rural Development Outcomes and Village Economic Growth

Based on the villagers' committee's recent success in mobilising overseas remittances to invest in the two collective enterprises that facilitate agricultural modernisation and rural tourism development, Yaoyuan village has been selected as one of the 'rural vitalisation model villages' (*xiangcun zhenxing mofan cun*) and 'beautiful overseas Chinese villages' (*meili qiao cun*) by the prefectural government. Moreover, the villagers' committee has been awarded by the county government as one of the 'advanced grassroots party organisations' (*xianjin jiceng dang zuzhi*) and 'civilisation construction demonstration sites' (*wenming jianshe shifan dian*), with all the village cadres in the villagers' committee being awarded the honorary title of 'advanced individuals' (*xianjin geren*) alongside 3,000 yuan cash each.⁵ Hence, overseas remittances function to empower the villagers' committee and village cadres in relation to other village officials due to their strong capability (*nengli*) to tap into the county government's rural development strategies and utilise overseas remittances to fulfil local development 'hard targets', such as agricultural production quotas, number of successfully held cultural events, and village economic growth, that form part of the cadre evaluation (Smith, 2013). This facilitates the formation of new political networks and enhances the promotion prospects of village cadres from the village to the township or county level, with one of the cadres saying:

The recent recognition award from the county government has helped expand my networks of interpersonal relationships (*guanxi wang*) with county government officials. This creates the possibilities for me to get promoted to the returned overseas Chinese federation office at the county level and work more closely with influential overseas Chinese and hometown associations to strengthen the overseas Chinese communities and

⁴ Interviews 1, 5 & 6.

⁵ Interviews 5 & 6.

mobilise more donations and investment to support the ‘rural vitalisation’ policy and the construction of civilised townships and villages (*wenming cun zhen jianshe*).⁶

Based on the recent official recognition of the villagers’ committee’s capability to leverage its overseas links to develop the collective sector, the rural commercial bank in the county seat has promised to provide half a million yuan loans for the two collective enterprises respectively starting from the second half of 2024. The aim of the loans is to strengthen the rural collective economy and increase overseas Chinese’s confidence to donate or invest their remittances in the collective enterprises to support the ‘rural vitalisation’ policy. The villagers’ committee plans to use the loans to purchase more equipment and expand the services offered by the two enterprises, as well as employing more local villagers to work in the enterprises, with the monthly wages being 3,000-4,500 yuan per worker.⁷

Hence, from the village cadres’ perspectives, overseas remittances have reduced the marginalisation of Yaoyuan village by strengthening its collective sector, creating employment for local villagers, and increasing the villagers’ committee’s annual income. As the village party secretary excitedly told me:

Before the ‘rural vitalisation’ policy, our village was less developed, and the village annual income was less than 100,000 yuan. The ‘rural vitalisation’ policy has created opportunities for us to leverage our advantage of overseas connections and mobilise overseas remittances to develop our collective sector. With the help of overseas remittances, we do not need to invest a lot of our own resources in the collective enterprises to maintain their operation, and we are able to hire local villagers to work in the enterprises [...] The collective enterprises have enabled the village annual income to reach 580,000 yuan by the end of 2023. We expect our annual income to increase further to 1 million yuan by the end of 2026, and 1.5 million yuan by the end of 2028.⁸

In addition to promoting village economic growth, overseas remittances can potentially improve local villagers’ income and livelihoods through profit redistribution, if the enterprises

⁶ Interview 6.

⁷ Interviews 1 & 5.

⁸ Interview 5.

manage to achieve higher profitability in the future. The deputy party secretary explained to me the profit redistribution:

Although our collective enterprises are not able to give out dividends in the coming 2-3 years as we are only breaking even and trying to get things running, I am confident that the loans from the rural commercial bank and further financial support from our overseas communities will enable the enterprises to earn higher income and create more jobs for villagers. The net profits from the enterprises will be redistributed to villagers based on their *hukou*. As long as the villagers' *hukou* is registered in Yaoyuan village, they are entitled to receive dividends from the enterprises.⁹

5.1.5 Cash Crop Farming and Livelihoods Improvement

Hence, my interviews with the village cadres reveal mainly positive effects of overseas remittances on rural development and villagers' livelihoods. This is especially the case as recent cultural events organised by the cultural and tourist enterprise attract more tourists to the village who buy agricultural produce directly from local farmers. Many farmers have capitalised on the new economic opportunities and changed from growing staple grain crops to growing cash crops like sugar cane and wampee fruits. Sugar cane is the main cash crop grown by farmers, as it takes fewer efforts for them to tend the fields compared to growing vegetables (which are often eaten by worms). During the harvest season from December to March, farmers who are successful in growing and selling sugar cane can earn several hundred yuan per day, and some farmers are able to earn over 2,000 yuan per day during the spring festival period when there are most tourists.¹⁰

In addition to sugar cane, many farmers are growing a specific variety of wampee fruits which are of higher quality than the usual variety in the local markets, which allows farmers to charge higher prices (20-25 yuan per *jin*) than those in the local markets (10-15 yuan per *jin*). Under the 'rural vitalisation' policy, the county government and the villagers' committee attempt to build a brand for the village's wampee fruits, and the cultural and tourist enterprise organises several events to raise public awareness of wampee fruit production in the village. During the harvest season from July to August, a large number of urban residents travel from the county

⁹ Interview 1.

¹⁰ Interviews 1, 5 & 6.

seat to the village to pick and buy wampee fruits, and many of them pre-order a large quantity of wampee fruits from local farmers even before the harvest season, despite the higher prices.¹¹ Based on the village cadres' accounts, tourism development improves the livelihoods of local farmers who are able to shift from subsistence grain crop to commercial cash crop cultivation.

5.1.6 Tourism Development and Land-Use Tensions

However, my interview with the deputy party secretary reveals that recent tourism development has given rise to tensions over land use between the villagers' committee and local villagers. Since 2021, the villagers' committee has been attempting to take back some of the collectively owned farmland from local villagers for tourism development projects under the cultural and tourist enterprise, including building a large-scale flower park (60 *mu*) and an exhibition centre showcasing local agricultural produce (15 *mu*). The villagers' committee encountered some resistance from villagers who were affected by the development work and were asked to contribute their farmland to tourism development. The deputy party secretary described how the villagers' committee resolved the tensions and negotiated with villagers by saying:

Most of the villagers were very supportive of tourism development, but we did receive disagreement from a minority of villagers. It is normal that some villagers hold different opinions. It is important for us to communicate with the villagers' small groups and villagers about the land contract. The actual situation is that there were usually eight to ten villagers in each natural village who disagreed with us and didn't want to sign the land contract. However, as the majority of the villagers were aligned with us and agreed to sign the land contract, those who disagreed didn't bother to raise their disagreement publicly, and they simply followed other villagers and signed the land contract, because they didn't want to offend the majority of the villagers and become an outlier (*yilei*). If villagers who disagreed with us didn't raise their disagreement publicly, we can proceed with the tourism development work on their farmland as long as over eighty percent of the villagers in each natural village agreed with the development work and signed the land contract [...] However, sometimes it was quite difficult because stubborn (*wangu*) villagers, especially those with low cultural quality (*wenhua suzhi di*), would speak out against us in public. In this case, we had to be very patient and do ideological work

¹¹ Interviews 1, 5 & 6.

(*sixiang gongzuo*) on these villagers. In the end, these villagers agreed to sign the land contract and allowed us to use their farmland for tourism development, as long as they saw the majority of the villagers sign the land contract.¹²

My interview with the deputy party secretary prompted me to dig deeper into the land conflicts and examine which households in the village are affected more by the land expropriation compared to the others, which are illustrated by my research findings in section 5.3. In the next section, I present my research findings from the mapping exercises I conducted during the spring festival period to understand livelihood activities among different rural households in the village, which reveals preliminary patterns of socioeconomic stratification.

5.2 Mapping Exercises and Participant Observation: Livelihood Activities and Socioeconomic Stratification in the Village

Based on the two mapping exercises I conducted in the village through participant observation and the many informal conversations that I had with villagers, I observed different business activities and housing types among rural households.¹³ As most *qiaojuan* households who have direct overseas relatives have been sponsored for emigration overseas, I observed only *qiaojuan* households with distant overseas relatives and non-*qiaojuan* households in the village. There are 14 small grocery stores in the village, with 9 of the stores being owned by *qiaojuan* households. These *qiaojuan* households are living in Class 2 houses (three stories) and able to transform the ground floor of their houses into a business place. 3 of the *qiaojuan* households establish a small restaurant on the ground floor of their houses, where the grocery business is adjacent to and complements the restaurant business.

5 of the grocery stores are owned by non-*qiaojuan* households who manage to establish the grocery business through savings from older generations and previous migrant work. These non-*qiaojuan* households are living in Class 3 houses (two stories) and transform the ground floor of their houses to run the grocery business. However, the size of their stores is smaller than those owned by *qiaojuan* households. Due to the lack of overseas links, non-*qiaojuan* households only sell local products in their stores, compared to *qiaojuan* households who source consumer items from abroad through their overseas relatives.

¹² Interview 1.

¹³ For detailed information about the mapping exercises and tables, see Appendices 1 and 2.

Non-*qiaojuan* households who are living in Class 4 houses (one storey) and not having the capital to run a grocery business would establish a food stall to sell homemade snacks and drinks in front of their houses to earn income. This is the second most common business activity in the village (33), especially in recent years when there are increasing numbers of tourists. Some of these non-*qiaojuan* households also establish a handicraft stall to sell hand-made objects (15). The majority of non-*qiaojuan* households with small landholdings grow cash crops in their farmland, and they establish a stall along the village lanes to sell sugar cane and vegetables to tourists, which is the most common business activity in the village (41).

There are two commercial livestock farms in the village where tourists visit and buy fresh agricultural produce and free-range poultry. One non-*qiaojuan* household uses the family's savings to contract some abandoned fields from the villagers' committee and establish a small-sized commercial farm (10 *mu*). One *qiaojuan* household uses overseas remittances to contract 50 *mu* farmland from the villagers' committee and establish a medium-sized commercial farm. Both households pay an annual rental rate of 1,000 yuan per *mu* and hire villagers to work in the farms (2 workers in the small-sized farm, and 5 workers in the medium-sized farm).

Overall, the mapping exercises reveal that overseas remittances explain disparities in asset ownership and resource endowment, as well as divergent livelihood strategies among rural households, with *qiaojuan* households engaging in lucrative entrepreneurial activities, while non-*qiaojuan* households combining cash crop farming with petty trading and migrant labour. As *qiaojuan* and non-*qiaojuan* households pursue different livelihood strategies, this leads to divergent gendered divisions of labour between the two types of households. In *qiaojuan* households, both the husbands and wives engage in running the family business, while the older parents undertake childcare and look after the family's farmland. In non-*qiaojuan* households, the husbands usually engage in migrant labour in the county seat or nearby townships, while the wives stay in the village to engage in petty trading, as well as sharing the childcare responsibilities and assisting the older parents in tending the fields. In general, both types of households utilise their livelihood assets and resources to run small businesses and capitalise on tourism development. However, as my findings in Section 5.3 show, not all households have an equal chance to profit from tourism development through trade activities and to 'accumulate from below' (Cousins, 2009; Neocosmos, 1993).

In the following section, I present in detail four household cases based on the analytical framework developed by Dorward (2009) and Mushongah (2009) that differentiates between households who are ‘stepping up’ (accumulating assets and investing in core livelihood activities), ‘stepping out’ (accumulating assets and diversifying to new livelihood activities), ‘hanging in’ (surviving by various means and struggling to accumulate), and ‘dropping out’ (becoming destitute and migrating away). This allows me to analyse the conflictual and relational aspects of overseas remittances and how they may create new economic opportunities for some, while aggravating livelihood precarity for others, thereby reproducing and reinforcing local patterns of marginality and socioeconomic exclusion.

5.3 Interviews with Four Households with Distinct Livelihood Pathways: Overseas Remittances Reinforce Socioeconomic Differentiation in the Village

5.3.1 Household Case 1: ‘Dropping Out’ (Becoming Destitute and Migrating Away)

I met with Ling (pseudonym) while she was setting up a food stall outside of the family’s house (Class 4). She is a mother of a seven-year-old daughter and has been running the food stall business for eight years, which earns 3,000-3,500 yuan per month. The family was allocated 3 *mu* farmland in the 1950s, before their farmland was expropriated for tourism development in 2021. Ling and her in-laws used to look after the farmland and grow staple grain crops for self-sustenance and some cash crops for sale. Her in-laws earned 1,000-1,500 yuan per month by selling fresh vegetables to tourists. Her husband Ming (pseudonym) used to work as a construction worker in the county seat and earn 3,000-3,500 yuan per month. However, as Ming tried to earn higher income to improve the family’s livelihoods, he left his job at construction sites in 2018 and cooperated with his older cousin to establish a restaurant business in the county seat that would allow him to earn 4,500-5,000 yuan per month. Due to the lack of financial capital, Ming borrowed 200,000 yuan from his neighbour Guo (pseudonym), who is a former village leader of one of the villagers’ small groups and has close connections with village cadres. Ming signed a loan agreement with Guo and accepted the terms to repay the loans within four years with an annual interest of five percent.¹⁴

The restaurant business went well in the first year, which allowed Ming to earn 50,000 yuan annual income to repay the first instalment of the loans and to use the family’s savings to cover

¹⁴ Interview 7.

the annual interest payment. However, the restaurant business was hit hard by the local restrictions and the bad economic conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The restaurant business went bust at the beginning of 2021, since Ming and his older cousin cannot cover the rents of the business site or the costs of sourcing raw ingredients from local suppliers due to the lack of customers and cash flows. As Ming and his older cousin still owed the local suppliers 30,000 yuan payment, Ming cannot repay the second instalment of the loans or the annual interest. After the business failed in 2021, Guo visited Ming's family several times and pressured them to repay the loans. As Ming needed to maintain the family, he cannot possibly use all of the family's savings to repay the loans, and Ling's and her in-laws' income was barely sufficient to cover the family's basic expenses of daily necessities. The family tried to ask Guo to extend the repayment period or lower the interest payment, but their request was rejected by Guo as Ming had signed the loan agreement. Moreover, the family was threatened by Guo that he would raise this issue to the villagers' committee and that the family would face bad consequences if they failed to repay the loan instalments according to their agreement.¹⁵

Shortly after the conversation with Guo, the villagers' committee visited Ming's family and decided to reclaim their farmland (3 *mu*) for tourism development. As compensation, Ming's family would receive an annual payment of 800 yuan per *mu* during the land contract period of twenty years. Initially, Ming didn't want to sign the land contract as he believed that the committee's decision had impaired his family's land use rights. However, the villagers' committee referred to Article 65 of the *Land Administration Law* that the committee can cancel the family's land use rights if the land is 'needed for building public facilities and public welfare undertakings of townships and villages' (NPCSC, 2004). Moreover, the villagers' committee threatened to send Ming to the police if he objected to the villagers' committee's decision as he owed a lot of money to Guo whose overseas relatives donated 50,000 yuan remittances to support the cultural and tourist collective enterprise, not to mention that he would hinder the village's tourism development work that would benefit the village economic growth and local villagers' livelihoods. Ming eventually gave in and unwillingly signed the land contract on behalf of his family.¹⁶

¹⁵ Interview 7.

¹⁶ Interview 7.

After their loss of farmland, the family was hoping that the villagers' committee could help them negotiate with Guo to cancel their loan repayments, as they had agreed to contribute their farmland to tourism development that could be used as collateral when defaulting on loans. On the contrary, not only has the family lost their farmland with a very small amount of compensation, but the villagers' committee has told the family that they must repay the full amount of the loans with interest according to their original loan agreement with Guo as soon as they are able to do so. As the family relies on their farmland to secure food self-sufficiency and sustain various livelihood activities, the villagers' committee's decision has driven the family into destitution who lost their vital livelihood assets. Moreover, the family has fallen into a serious debt trap as they have little hope of repaying the rest of the loans without their farmland to support their livelihoods. As Ling told me during the interview:

It is very difficult for us to repay the loans without our farmland. Our family depends on the farmland to feed ourselves, I depend on the farmland to source raw ingredients to keep my food stall business running, and my in-laws depend on the farmland to sell fresh vegetables to earn extra income. Now my family has nothing to fall back on. Unlike other villagers who can rely on remittances from their overseas relatives to maintain the family during periods of business bottlenecks, our family has to rely on ourselves to make a living and find ways to pay off the debt as we have no overseas connections. As we have lost our farmland, we have to buy staple grain crops and source raw ingredients from our neighbours who are lucky enough to retain their land use rights and are able to sell fresh agricultural produce from their farmland.¹⁷

After the family lost their farmland, Ming has migrated to live with his older cousin's family in a neighbouring county and worked as a sports teacher in a local primary school through his older cousin's connections, which allows him to earn 3,500-4,000 yuan per month to maintain the family. Meanwhile, as the food stall business is struggling to make profits due to higher costs of production, Ling plans to close the food stall business after the spring festival this year and migrate to work in a bakery shop opened by one of her friends in the county seat, which would allow her to earn 3,000-3,500 yuan per month. She will bring her daughter and in-laws with her and live in her friend's vacant 60-square-metre old apartment next to the bakery shop. The family plans to rent out their house to migrants from outside of the village who are looking

¹⁷ Interview 7.

for employment opportunities in Yaoyuan village. They are hoping that the income from undertaking migrant work and renting out their village house would enable them to repay the loans and improve their livelihoods someday.¹⁸

Overall, Ling's family's case illustrates how overseas remittances reinforce unequal power relations between rural elites and marginal actors in the village. As Guo is a former village leader and his overseas relatives donated 50,000 yuan remittances to support tourism development, Guo has the power to ask the villagers' committee to exercise its authority and punish marginal actors by ceasing their land use rights. As the villagers' committee relies on overseas remittances to fund tourism development projects that form part of the cadre evaluation, it takes advantage of marginal actors like Ling's family to reclaim collectively owned farmland for tourism development at the least possible costs. As the villagers' committee makes use of Article 65 of the *Land Administration Law* to legitimise the land expropriation, marginal actors like Ling's family have little agency to resist the tourism development work and articulate their land use rights, especially in a situation where they have no overseas links and owe money to Guo. Hence, tourism development supported by overseas remittances acts as a means for rural elites to exploit marginal actors in their own interests, thereby aggravating livelihood precarity for villagers without overseas links who are excluded from possibilities of livelihood improvement and pushed towards destitution and exiting. As such, overseas remittances engender new forms of vulnerability for marginal actors and function to perpetuate unequal structures of power at the local level.

5.3.2 Household Case 2: 'Stepping Up' (Accumulating and Investing)

I visited a small restaurant and met with Fang (pseudonym) while she was working in the kitchen. The restaurant is owned by Fang and her husband Mu (pseudonym). The couple make use of the ground floor of the house (Class 2) to open a restaurant and grocery store. The couple have a five-year-old son who is looked after by Mu's older parents. Mu's great aunt Lan (pseudonym) married an overseas Chinese who is a descendant of historical migrants through local connections and emigrated to live in the US in the 1950s. In 2012, Lan sent back 100,000 yuan remittances to help the family establish the restaurant and the grocery business, without asking Mu to repay the amount. Moreover, Lan sends back 5,000 yuan remittances every month

¹⁸ Interview 7.

to help Mu with elderly and child care. In addition to family-maintenance remittances, Lan sends the family some consumer items (in-kind remittances) from the US every month for sale in the grocery store, which allows the family to charge higher prices than local products.¹⁹

Overseas remittances not only provided the family with the necessary financial capital to establish a business but enabled the family to recover from financial stresses during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. After the implementation of local restrictions, there were very few tourists in the village, and the couple closed the restaurant for six months. The grocery store remained open, and Fang looked after the store with her in-laws. As the monthly income from the store was only 3,000-3,500 yuan during the pandemic (compared to 4,500-5,000 yuan on average), Mu moved to live with his younger cousin in the county seat and worked as a cashier in a local supermarket, which allowed him to earn 3,500-4,000 yuan per month to maintain the family. To help the family cope with financial stresses, Lan sent back an additional 10,000 yuan family-maintenance remittances every month during the closure of the restaurant, without asking Mu to pay back the amount. After the local COVID restrictions were relaxed, the couple re-opened the restaurant and their business gradually recovered.²⁰

The villagers' committee approached Mu's family in 2021 and managed to mobilise 35,000 yuan overseas remittances from Lan to support the cultural and tourist collective enterprise. Following Lan's donation, the villagers' committee promised to hold cultural events next to the family's business to bring them more urban customers. The family's business has been revitalised due to increasing streams of tourists brought by recent cultural events. Following the establishment of the cultural and tourist enterprise, the monthly income of the family's business has increased from 12,000-15,000 to 25,000-28,000 yuan. In particular, the spring festival flower market in 2023 (held near Mu's house) allowed the family to earn 2,500-3,000 yuan per day (twenty days, 50,000-60,000 yuan in total) due to the large number of tourists (peak time in the village). This represents quite a significant increase in the family's earnings over a short period of 2-3 years. As the couple earn higher income, they plan to invest their extra income in the business, including expanding the space of the restaurant (utilise the entire ground floor of the house) and the grocery store (build an extra one-storey house next to the

¹⁹ Interview 2.

²⁰ Interview 2.

family's house), improving the kitchen facility in the restaurant, increasing the varieties of consumer items in the grocery store, and hiring 1-2 villagers to work in their restaurant.²¹

The family was allocated 5 *mu* farmland in the 1950s. Mu signed the land contract in 2021 and agreed on the villagers' committee's proposal to reclaim 3 *mu* farmland from the family for tourism development. Based on the land contract, the family is promised to receive an annual payment of 2,000 yuan per *mu* as compensation during the land contract period of thirty years (compared to only 800 yuan per *mu* for twenty years in Household Case 1), and the annual payment increases by ten percent every five years. The family considers it a favourable deal as their business will benefit from future tourism development and the accompanying increasing number of tourists. As the couple were busy with running the business, only 2 *mu* farmland was utilised by Mu's older parents to grow staple grain crops and vegetables for self-sustenance and for supporting the restaurant business. The remaining 3 *mu* farmland was left uncultivated and overgrown with weeds. As the villagers' committee has reclaimed the 3 *mu* abandoned farmland for tourism development, the family no longer needs to cultivate the farmland themselves while receiving some compensation as extra income every year.²²

Overall, overseas links and remittances provide the family with the necessary working capital to engage in lucrative entrepreneurial activities, as well as coping with negative income shocks during the COVID-19 pandemic (compared to Household Case 1). As Mu's overseas relatives donated 35,000 yuan remittances to support tourism development, this enables the family to cultivate good relations (*guanxi*) with the villagers' committee and better capitalise on the economic opportunities created by tourism development. This allows the family to earn much higher income and accumulate financial capital to invest in their current business. Moreover, close *guanxi* with the villagers' committee enables the family to benefit from land expropriation and receive favourable compensation (compared to Household Case 1). As the family retains some farmland where they can source raw ingredients, this gives the restaurant business a cost advantage which, combined with increasing streams of tourists, will enable the family to achieve higher profitability and make further business investment.

²¹ Interview 2.

²² Interview 2.

5.3.3 Household Case 3: ‘Hanging In’ (Surviving by Various Means)

I met with Qing (pseudonym) when she was washing some vegetables outside of the family’s house (Class 4). She is a mother of a three-year-old son who is looked after by her in-laws in the house. She works in a garment factory in the county seat and earns 3,000-3,500 yuan per month. Her husband Chen (pseudonym) is a construction worker in the county seat and earns 3,000-3,500 yuan per month. The labour conditions have been arduous for Qing and Chen as they need to endure long work hours with not much pay. They go out to work at seven o’clock in the morning and only come back to the village at eight o’clock in the evening, and sometimes they have to stay overnight at their work sites for over-time work. Qing’s father-in-law used to be a construction worker in the county seat and suffered an injury seven years ago. After the injury, he cannot do any heavy labour work, and no labour contractors are willing to hire him for construction projects. He is recently hired as a temporary worker by the cultural and tourist enterprise and offers his manual labour to set up the spring festival flower market in 2024. He gets paid 100 yuan per day during the 20-day work contract period in February (2,000 yuan in total, which is lower than the daily wage of 150 yuan during my interview with the deputy party secretary). Qing’s mother-in-law mainly does housework in the house and looks after the family’s farmland (less than one *mu*).²³

Qing sources some leftover fabric from her factory every day. Her mother-in-law utilises the fabric waste to make some handicrafts and sets up a handicraft stall for sale in front of the house, which earns 1,500-2,000 yuan per month. Due to the limited size of the farmland and the poor quality of the soil, the family only grows enough staple grain crops and vegetables for self-sufficiency, and they don’t have the capacity to grow cash crops like sugar cane or wampee fruits for sale to earn extra income. As the family has no overseas connections, they struggle to accumulate financial capital and to capitalise on tourism development in the village by establishing a restaurant or a grocery business like Household Case 2. Qing described the family’s economic hardships by saying:

As we have no overseas relatives, we are not doing very well economically. We receive no remittances, and we don’t have the opportunity to be emigrated overseas. It depends on fate. Some families are very lucky to have overseas relatives. Our family is not that lucky. We must depend entirely on ourselves to make a living. Otherwise we don’t know

²³ Interview 3.

how to feed ourselves [...] Although my father-in-law works in the cultural and tourist enterprise and earns extra income for the family, the pay is not very high. In general I think tourism development brings very little benefits to our family. My mother-in-law tries to profit from it by setting up a handicraft stall in front of the house. Although the handicraft business provides us with extra income, we struggle to earn more as more villagers are trying to set up a handicraft stall. Tourism development mainly benefits farmers who have large enough farmland to grow sugar cane and wampee fruits and villagers who have the assets and resources to establish a restaurant or a grocery business. As our farmland is less than one *mu* and the soil is not very fertile, we struggle to grow enough grain crops to feed ourselves, let alone sell agricultural produce to tourists or utilise it to run small businesses. If my husband and I don't look for jobs outside of the village, we cannot sustain our daily expenses.²⁴

Qing also expressed her concern about the economic and environmental implications of future tourism development for her family's livelihoods by saying:

We are worried that in the future, as more tourists come to the village, the villagers' committee may begin to charge tourists entrance fees. This will affect the normal life of villagers. During the spring festival, my family members and relatives living outside of the village would come to visit me, and they could be charged entrance fees in the future. Tourism development also leads to more cars and vans in the village. As our village lanes are very narrow, this often causes congestion and brings inconvenience to villagers. As my husband and I need to be at work on time very early in the morning, we often need to leave the village even earlier in the morning to avoid congestion, especially when there are cultural events. Increasing numbers of tourists and vehicles also make the air less fresh and lead to more garbage in the village. The ongoing construction work also brings a lot of noise that we find almost unbearable [...] We are very worried that the villagers' committee may pressure poor villagers like us without overseas connections to leave the village and then take our house and farmland for tourism development. Only privileged families with overseas connections can stay in the village, and poor families like us will be driven out, not to mention that our livelihoods will be improved. Tourism development only widens inequality in the village, as privileged families can make profits and earn

²⁴ Interview 3.

higher income by taking advantage of tourism development, while poor families like us relying on migrant work are completely left out.²⁵

Overall, comparing Qing's family's case to Household Case 2 illustrates how overseas remittances exacerbate inequality on two different levels. On one level, overseas remittances determine that families with overseas relatives have the necessary capital to engage in lucrative business activities and profit from tourism development, whereas families with no overseas links are excluded from certain economic opportunities due to the lack of livelihood assets and resources, thereby creating 'winners' (small business owners) who are accumulating and investing, and 'losers' (migrant workers and petty traders) who are struggling to accumulate. On the other level, tourism development supported by overseas remittances gives rise to negative economic and environmental implications that are borne disproportionately by poorer villagers whose main source of income comes from migrant work. My interview with Qing also reveals a sense of insecurity that poorer households without overseas links could be dispossessed of properties and farmland by the villagers' committee for tourism development, which resonates with Household Case 1 whose absence of overseas connections renders them powerless under circumstances of exploitation and land expropriation.

5.3.4 Household Case 4: 'Stepping Out' (Diversifying to New Activities)

I visited a large-scale commercial farm (50 *mu*) and met with Xuan (pseudonym) while he was unloading the newly harvested potatoes and sugar cane from his van. Xuan is the owner of the commercial farm that grows mainly cash crops such as sugar cane, tangerines, tomatoes, dwarf bananas, dragon fruits and wampee fruits, alongside some grain crops such as potatoes and sweetcorn. He is also the owner of a small shop selling rice noodle products. His wife Shu (pseudonym) works as a music teacher in a local kindergarten and earns 4,000-4,500 yuan per month, and she works part-time in the rice noodle shop and makes the rice noodle products using ingredients from the family's farmland (3 *mu*), together with her in-laws. The couple have a ten-year-old son who is attending primary school in the village.²⁶

Before establishing the family's business, Xuan worked as a chef in a local restaurant and earned 4,500-5,000 yuan per month. Overseas remittances from Xuan's great aunt Ying

²⁵ Interview 3.

²⁶ Interview 4.

(pseudonym), who married an overseas Chinese and emigrated to live in Canada in the 1950s, enabled the family to establish the farm business and the rice noodle shop. In 2018, Ying sent back 300,000 yuan remittances (informal loans) to help Xuan contract 50 *mu* farmland from the villagers' committee and establish the commercial farm. The remittances enabled Xuan to cover the annual rental payment (1,000 yuan per *mu*), the costs of agricultural inputs and equipment, and the costs of hiring five farm workers (3,000 yuan monthly wages per worker). The remaining remittances were used to renovate the ground floor of the family's house (Class 2) to establish the rice noodle business, as well as supporting the child's education.²⁷

As Xuan's investment in the farm business contributes to the village annual income growth and local employment creation, Xuan's family has been designated as 'new farmers' (*xin nong ren*) by the villagers' committee for their contribution to the 'rural vitalisation' policy, who are seen as capable, entrepreneurial, and 'high-quality' (*gao suzhi*) rural individuals. The commercial farm taps into recent tourism development and becomes a recreational site where urban parents bring their children to experience rural life, and where urban residents with growing health consciousness visit and buy 'pollution free' agricultural produce and free-range poultry. Tourism development has enabled the farm business to achieve annual income of 250,000-300,000 yuan per year since 2021, which allowed Xuan to repay the full amount of the loans to Ying without interest by the end of 2023. Xuan plans to invest the extra income to increase the varieties of cash crops, establish a greenhouse and a small teahouse inside the commercial farm, and employ more local villagers to work in the farm.²⁸

Similar to Household Case 2, the villagers' committee approached Xuan's family in 2021 and managed to mobilise 55,000 yuan overseas remittances from Ying to support the cultural and tourist collective enterprise. Following Ying's donation, Xuan's rice noodle products have been selected by the villagers' committee as one of the food products to be showcased in the newly built agricultural produce exhibition centre managed by the cultural and tourist enterprise. This creates opportunities for Xuan's products to be sourced by large retailers from cities like Dongguan, Foshan, Shenzhen, and Zhuhai and to be sold in their shops. Increasing numbers of urban buyers due to tourism development, combined with increasing orders from large retailers and better brand recognition, have benefited Xuan's rice noodle business which earns 20,000-

²⁷ Interview 4.

²⁸ Interview 4.

25,000 yuan per month. Following an increasing demand for their products, Xuan plans to invest the extra income to expand the business and contract out product manufacturing to a local factory, while supplying raw ingredients from the commercial farm. Rather than selling only to local buyers through the family's small shop, Xuan's wife plans to do live streaming to increase product recognition and utilise e-commerce platforms to increase product sales. The couple also plan to increase product diversification and utilise locally grown ingredients to create more varieties of food products, thereby fully capitalising on tourism development and the local integrated system of producing, supplying, processing, and marketing.²⁹

Overall, similar to Household Case 2, Xuan's family's case illustrates how overseas remittances enable the family to participate in lucrative business activities alongside commercial cash crop production, and to accumulate livelihood assets and resources. As Xuan's overseas relatives donated 55,000 yuan remittances to support tourism development, it facilitates close *guanxi* between the family and the villagers' committee that enables the family to better capture the economic opportunities created by tourism development and realise higher sales and profitability. Higher income enables the family to not only invest in existing business but also diversify into new commercial activities that open more possibilities for business development and success. In contrast with the village cadres' depiction of recalcitrant villagers objecting to tourism development as 'stubborn' and 'low cultural quality',³⁰ as Xuan's business contributes to village economic growth and local employment creation, the family is praised as 'new farmers' who are perceived as 'high quality' and being at the forefront of agricultural modernisation and rural development. As such, overseas remittances function to intensify the dichotomous division of 'backwardness' and 'modernity' among rural inhabitants and reproduce and reinforce local socioeconomic differentiation.

²⁹ Interview 4.

³⁰ Interviews 1 & 5.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Discussion

Through the prism of a Cantonese ‘remittance village’ (Sunam, 2020), my research findings reveal the complex and multifaceted roles of overseas emigration and remittances in local socioeconomic development and rural livelihoods in *qiaoxiang*. On a community level, ‘remittances for collective consumption’ play an important role in strengthening the village collective sector and promoting agricultural modernisation and tourism development under the ‘rural vitalisation’ policy. The newly established collective enterprises supported by overseas remittances increase the villagers’ committee’s annual income, facilitate local employment creation, and potentially improve villagers’ livelihoods through profit redistribution. The villagers’ committee’s success in leveraging its diaspora networks and mobilising remittances to implement rural development strategies enhances village cadres’ promotion prospects to higher-level government positions and reduces their marginalisation in relation to other village officials. Moreover, tourism development supported by collective remittances benefits local farmers’ livelihoods who are shifting from subsistence grain crop to commercial cash crop cultivation in order to profit from urban buyers. Hence, overseas remittances function to drive agricultural transition towards cash crop farming in the village.

My mapping exercises in the village reveal that overseas remittances explain disparities in asset ownership and resource base, as well as divergent livelihood strategies, with *qiaojuan* households investing in either lucrative non-farm activities or commercial livestock farming, while non-*qiaojuan* households combining agricultural sidelines with petty trading and migrant labour. Divergent livelihood strategies explain differences in gendered divisions of labour between the two types of households. In *qiaojuan* households, the husbands and wives equally engage in productive labour and manage the family’s business, while the older parents undertake social reproductive labour (childcare and housework) and farming production. In non-*qiaojuan* households, the husbands usually undertake migrant work in the county seat or nearby townships, while the wives engage in petty commodity production in the village and assist the older parents with social reproductive labour and farming production. Despite asset and income inequality, both types of households are fully involved with the local economy through trading activities and utilise their livelihood assets and resources to capitalise on tourism development albeit to different degrees. However, on a family level, my in-depth interviews with selected households reveal that not all households have an equal chance to ‘accumulate from below’ (Cousins, 2009) through farming production and trading activities,

and that tourism development functions to aggravate livelihood insecurity of marginal actors due to exploitation and land expropriation (Household Case 1).

My interview findings reveal that *qiaojuan* households who contribute their overseas remittances to tourism development maintain close *guanxi* with the villagers' committee and gain a business advantage during processes of tourism development. This enables them to accumulate assets and resources to either invest in core economic activities (Household Case 2) or diversify income sources from farming into other lucrative agri-business opportunities (Household Case 4). Moreover, family-maintenance remittances from overseas relatives not only provide *qiaojuan* households with the necessary capital to establish non-farm businesses but enable them to cope with business bottlenecks and financial stresses during the COVID-19 pandemic (Household Case 2). On the contrary, non-*qiaojuan* households relying on migrant labour and petty commodity production struggle to profit from tourism development and accumulate wealth due to resource scarcity and increasing competition (Household Case 3), and their absence of overseas connections and remittances renders them vulnerable in situations of land expropriation and negative income shocks (Household Case 1).

My mapping exercises and interview findings together suggest that overseas connections and remittances engender an emergent 'rural petit bourgeoisie' (Cousins et al., 1992, p.13) who manage to invest in off-farm business activities, accumulate assets, hire in wage labour, and diversify to more lucrative non-farm opportunities, in relation to 'petty commodity producers' (ibid., p.12) who utilise their small landholdings to produce farm and handicraft goods for self-sustenance and for sale in the marketplace, as well as seeking for off-farm wage employment. Moreover, as the 'rural petit bourgeoisie' are praised as 'new farmers' by the villagers' committee who are seen as advanced, forward-looking and entrepreneurial rural individuals (Household Case 4), overseas connections and remittances function to reproduce the imagined socioeconomic hierarchies among rural households, with those without overseas links retaining and internalising their marginal identity as 'backward' and 'low-quality' individuals.

My overall findings resonate with previous *qiaoxiang* studies (Woon, 1990; Zhang, 2007) and suggest that the transnational mentality, the mental faith of emigrating abroad to achieve upward social mobility, maintaining close contact with diaspora networks, and depending on overseas remittances for livelihood improvement, continues to permeate rural *qiaoxiang* and shape the local socioeconomic developmental course. My findings also resonate with Sunam's

(2020) research, albeit in a different empirical context, and suggest that access to land and farming remains critical for the livelihoods of rural households to secure self-sustenance, insure against negative shocks and stresses, and capture trading opportunities brought by tourism development. Since off-farm business opportunities are either inaccessible or accessible in disadvantageous terms for non-*qiaojuan* households, farming production remains important livelihood means for them to make a subsistence living and prevent further marginalisation.

Overall, adopting an actor-centred livelihoods approach in the *qiaoxiang* context sheds light on the contradictory, conflictual and relational aspects of overseas remittances, and illustrates how overseas remittances contribute to divergent livelihood outcomes and pathways among rural households due to unequal social relations, thereby reproducing and reinforcing local socioeconomic differentiation. Hence, integrating the concept of ‘remittance village’ (ibid.), the four livelihood transition categories (Dorward, 2009; Mushongah, 2009), and the political economy questions central to critical agrarian studies (Bernstein, 2010) into the actor-centred livelihoods approach (Long, 1997, 2001; Scoones, 1998) enables me to address some of the inherent weaknesses of the approach and improve its analytical capacity by focusing on the active agency of diverse local actors, micro-processes of change and continuities, and patterns of accumulation and social differentiation. This pushes the livelihoods framework beyond its descriptive, static approach to serve better analytical purposes.

In conclusion, in contrast with the structural, top-down methodological approach dominating the current migration literature both globally and in China, I situate my thesis at the nexus of remittance scholarship adopting an actor-centred approach both in China and other Asian contexts, in order to contribute to the current *qiaoxiang* studies on overseas remittances and rural livelihoods on both a theoretical and methodological level. On a theoretical level, I conceptualise my empirical case through the lens of a ‘remittance village’ to critically examine how overseas remittances reconfigure agrarian relations and rural livelihood dynamics in *qiaoxiang*. On an empirical level, I adapt and operationalise the livelihoods approach through fieldwork methods in *qiaoxiang* to incorporate rural politics and power relations into the conventional livelihoods analysis. Finally, as my discussion of overseas remittances is informed by different strands of remittance scholarship both globally and in China, I propose to think beyond the binary divisions between internal and international migration, emplacement and transnationalism, immobility and mobility, and people and objects, in order to develop fruitful analytical frameworks to critically examine interrelated realms of migration in future.

Appendix 1

Mapping Exercise 1: Business Activities in Yaoyuan Village

Business Type	Number of Businesses	Business Owner
Small restaurants (selling homemade dishes, snacks and drinks)	3	<i>Qiaojuan</i> households (3)
Small grocery stores (selling fresh and dried agricultural produce, basic grocery items, homemade food products, and food products sourced from abroad through overseas links)	9	<i>Qiaojuan</i> households (9)
Small grocery stores (selling fresh and dried agricultural produce, basic grocery items, homemade snacks and drinks)	5	Non- <i>qiaojuan</i> households (5)
Food stalls (selling dried agricultural produce and homemade snacks and drinks)	33	Non- <i>qiaojuan</i> households (33)
Handicraft stalls (selling hand-made objects)	15	Non- <i>qiaojuan</i> households (15)
Fruit and vegetable stalls (selling fresh agricultural produce from the fields)	41	Non- <i>qiaojuan</i> households (41)
Commercial farms (one small-sized, one medium-sized, where tourists come and buy fresh agricultural produce and free-range poultry)	2	Non- <i>qiaojuan</i> household (1, 10 <i>mu</i>), <i>Qiaojuan</i> household (1, 50 <i>mu</i>)
Total	108	

Appendix 2

Mapping Exercise 2: Household Socioeconomic Classification By Housing Type

Class 1	<p>Western-style multistorey fortresses and watchtowers (<i>diaolou</i>) constructed through overseas Chinese remittances in the republican era (3-4 stories).</p> <p>Renovated within the last decade.</p> <p>Concrete construction and modern facilities.</p> <p>Located on larger plots of land than other houses.</p> <p>Owned by influential overseas Chinese.</p>
Class 2	<p>Large houses renovated within the last decade (3 stories).</p> <p>Concrete construction and modern facilities.</p> <p>Located on medium-sized plots of land.</p> <p>Owned by <i>qiaojuan</i> households, renovation work financed through family savings and overseas Chinese remittances.</p>
Class 3	<p>Medium-sized houses renovated within the last decade (2 stories).</p> <p>Concrete construction and modern facilities.</p> <p>Located on medium-sized plots of land.</p> <p>Owned by non-<i>qiaojuan</i> households, renovation work financed through family savings and remittances from migrant work.</p>
Class 4	<p>Small-sized houses renovated within the last decade (1 storey).</p> <p>Concrete construction with traditional grey bricks on the exterior walls, and limited modern facilities (e.g., fans instead of air conditioners).</p> <p>Located on small-sized plots of land.</p>

	Owned by non- <i>qiaojuan</i> households, used to be very old houses, some in bad condition, the villagers' committee renovated the exterior walls of these houses to improve the village's overall 'appearance' for tourism development.
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