HUIFEN SHEN
with a Foreword by Wang Gungwu

China's Left-Behind Wives

Families of Migrants from
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China's Left-Behind Wives

To

my mother, Shen Qingmei, and my father, Shen Jianguo,
whose own academic dreams were lost in the turmoil
of the twentieth century

Weights, Measures and Currency

A. *Weights*

100 catties = 1 *dan* 担 (picul) = 50 kg = 110 pounds

B. *Measures*

1 *huali/li* 华里/里 = 1/3 mile

6.6 *mu* 亩 = 1 acre

C. *Currency*

Silver yuan was used in the late Qing Dynasty and the Republican era until it was banned in 1935 by the Nationalist government.

The yuan was the standard unit of Chinese currency during the Nanjing period. The value of the yuan fluctuated considerably. *Fabi* (法币 legal tender) was issued as currency in 1935. The unit of *fabi* is also called "yuan". During the Anti-Japanese War and the civil war, the value of the *fabi* fell sharply because of the inflationary policy of the Nationalist government. On 19 August 1948, the Nationalist government carried out another currency reform by adopting the gold standard and issuing Gold yuan. The exchange rate was one Gold yuan for three million *fabi* yuan. However, this measure failed and there was further rapid devaluation.

Renminbi (人民币 People's currency, "RMB") is the currency of the People's Republic of China. In late 1948, the People's Bank of China began to issue RMB. On 1 March 1955, the new version of RMB began to be issued. Old RMB was called in at the rate of 10,000 yuan to one yuan of new RMB. RMB's foreign exchange rates changed with the time.

Sources:

Ng Chin-keong, *Trade and Society: The Amoy Network on the China Coast 1683–1735* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983), pp. xiv–xv.

The Editorial Boards for *A History of Chinese Currency*, Xinhua Publishing House, and People's Bank of China, eds., *A History of Chinese Currency (16th Century BC–20th Century AD)* (Peking: Xinhua Publishing House, 1983), pp. 38–9, 129–33, 189–91.

Xu Shaoqiang 许少强 and Zhu Zhenli 朱真丽, *1949–2000 nian de renminbi huilü shi* 1949–2000 年的人民币汇率史 (A History of Renminbi Exchange Rates from 1949 to 2000) (Shanghai: Shanghai caijing daxue chubanshe, 2002).

Preface

Before I began to do research on the Chinese women who remained at home when their husbands travelled overseas in search of work, I imagined that these women received remittances sent by their husbands and enjoyed comfortable lives in China. When I decided to write about these women for my PhD research at the National University of Singapore (NUS), I soon realized that my impression was not accurate, but the information in the secondary literature was meagre and I became concerned about whether it would be possible to construct a history of this group. During a field trip to Fujian in 2004, I searched every place I thought might have relevant information, and was very excited to find a large number of primary sources in libraries, archives, and personal collections.

My thinking about the lives of this group of women dramatically changed when I met Wu YQ, the wife of a successful emigrant who provided ample support for his extended family in Quanzhou. Wu looked pale and sad, and told me that large sums of money could not replace having a companion in life. My subsequent interviews with Lin D revealed a life full of sadness and regret, although she spent much of her life in a beautiful western-style house built with remittances sent by her husband. Lin introduced me to other *fankeshen*, including Xu LD, whose first statement to me was that it was a "misfortune" to be the wife of a Chinese man living overseas. Another interviewee, Chen LD, said with sadness that no one knew the history of a *fankeshen*. These women and other *fankeshen*, or left-behind wives, shared their personal experiences with me, relating their life stories with tears and sighs, often displaying a sense of pride mingled with regret. These conversations allowed me to piece together an account of the experiences of left-behind wives during a time of rapid change. Without their help, this account would be very different, because most archival documents and printed sources were written by men,

and the stories they tell differ in many ways from the accounts of the women themselves.

After this trip, the stories of *fankeshen* became part of my life. As the person who in a sense "discovered" them, I felt an obligation to tell more people about their experiences, and to make sure their accomplishments became part of the historical record. The women I interviewed were elderly and many have now died. Their passing makes me sad, but also gives added importance to the effort to share their stories with the world. These women played a significant role in modern Chinese history and their experiences are essential to an understanding of migration, women, and gender in modern China. This book is written in memory of, and as a tribute to, the *fankeshen*, although few of them will have the opportunity to read it.

The book is an extensively revised version of the PhD dissertation I submitted to the Department of History at NUS in August 2006. Some of the material has been published in the *Journal of Chinese Overseas* (May 2010) and in the second issue of *Huaqiao huaren lishi yanjiu* (Overseas Chinese History Studies), published in 2011.

From the time I met him in Fuzhou in 2000, Professor Ng Chin-keong provided generous guidance and support for this project. No words can describe my deep appreciation for his kindness and assistance. My first supervisor in Singapore, Assoc. Prof. Huang Jianli, provided guidance and assistance, and pushed me to work towards publishing my research as a book. He was a strict taskmaster, but his kindness and friendship made the process a warm experience. My third supervisor, Professor Liu Hong, was a very supportive presence during my studies at NUS, and I have happy memories of dinners with him and with good friends at his house.

I am particularly grateful to Professor Wang Gungwu of the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore for agreeing to prepare a foreword.

A special note of thanks goes to my editor and publisher, Dr Paul H. Kratoska, who provided much help with the writing and exceptional support throughout the production of the book. Without his assistance, the book would have taken a much longer time to come out. I also wish to express my gratitude to NUS Press, to its two anonymous readers for their helpful suggestions, and to Lena Qua for her assistance in producing the book.

Lou Meixue took time out from her own busy research schedule to draw the map for the book. Huang Qinghai kindly provided copies

of the remittance letters that appear in the book. Lin D, Liu Zhiyong, and Dong Qinghui kindly agreed to allow me to use their photos, including pictures of their relatives. The Museum of Quanzhou Overseas Chinese History gave me permission to take photos of their exhibits for use in the book. I am thankful to the owners of the traditional houses and western-style houses built by Chinese overseas in the 1930s–50s who allowed me to enter their homes and take photos for the book.

The following libraries and archives in China and Singapore gave me access to their valuable collections and provided assistance in locating materials: the Central Library and Chinese Library at NUS, Fujian Normal University Library, Fujian Provincial Library, Xiamen University Library, the Library of the Research School for Southeast Asian Studies at Xiamen University, the Xiamen Municipal Library, the Libraries of Quanzhou city, Zhangzhou city, Jinjiang city, Shishi city, Hong Kong University Library, the Fujian Provincial Archive, and the Jinjiang Municipal Archive.

Thanks also go to Liu Bozi, Huang Yali, Lin D, Chen Shuming, Zeng Kunluo, Lin Binzhou, Chen Rongdong, Xu Jiazhong, Zeng Lina, Lin Yanteng, Yang Yijia, and Dong Qinghui for helping me locate the homes or offices of *fankeshen* and other interviewees, or guiding me to sites of emigrant memories in Quanzhou villages and towns. Yali often prepared meals for me when I travelled in Quanzhou, and made the trips feel as warm and comfortable as my own home. Yang Zhiqiang, Huang Pingshi, Lin Yanteng, Lin Jianlai, and Huang Yali helped me prepare transcripts of the recorded interviews. Liao Bolun Edgar and Sandra Khor Manickam kindly read through drafts of my dissertation, provided valuable advice on my writing, and offered encouragement and support.

A great many individuals agreed to be interviewed, helped me gain access to important resources and channels of data collection in China, or assisted me in writing and publishing the book, and I am very grateful to all of them for their support. I would particularly like to mention Huang Guosheng, Lu Jianyi, Huang Yinghu, Xie Shuishun, Wang Ming, Li Mingshan, Guo Shengyang, Lin Zhanghua, Huang Jianping, and Jiang Tao in Fuzhou; Zeng Kunluo, Zheng Bingshan, Cai Shijia, Hong Zuliang, Su Yaodong, Huang Xiangfei, Liu Bozi, Guo Yongtong, Chen Rongdong, Zeng Lina, Xu Jiazhong, Huang Longquan, Xu Tianzeng, Liu Yide, Lin Yanteng, Yang Yijia, Lou Zhengquan, Zhang Huixin, Huang Yali, Li Hongxia, and Cai Yuzhang

in Quanzhou; Zeng Ling, Hong Buren, Liao Dake, Li Xuehua, Hannah Nelson, and Ashley Gabb in Xiamen; Michael Szonyi at Harvard University; Tan Chee-Beng at the Chinese University of Hong Kong; my late aunt Sim Ang Boi and her big family in Singapore; Tan Tai Yong, Ian L. Gordon, Albert Lau, Brian Farrell, Thomas DuBois, Yong Mun Cheong, Yang Bin, Bruce Lockhart, and Kelly Lau from NUS.

The NUS History Department provided a generous Research Scholarship and the university offered an environment of intellectual stimulation that eased the task of writing. I am also thankful for the support of the Asia Research Institute at NUS, which funded a research trip to Fujian in 2004. A month of residence as a visiting scholar with the NUS Department of History in 2010, with funding provided by the Research School for Southeast Asian Studies and Faculty of International Relations, Xiamen University, gave me an opportunity to work intensively on preparation of the manuscript. The Young Scholars Fund, a Project of the Foundation for Research on Humanities and Social Science of the Ministry of Education of China, 2011 (Grant No. 11YJC 770047) supported an additional field trip in 2012.

My colleagues Zhuang Guotu, Nie Dening, Shi Xueqin, Xu Ke, Zhang Changhong, and Yan Sen at the Research School for Southeast Asian Studies and Faculty of International Relations at Xiamen University have provided continuing support and encouragement.

Last but not least, I owe a great debt to my parents, parents-in-law and to my husband, Rongzu, for their love, patience, and support, and for taking care of my daughter Yang Ya, who makes my days joyful. I hope Ya will enjoy reading this book when she grows up, and will understand why her mother could not always be with her even though she loves her very much.

Any shortcomings remain my sole responsibility.

Shen Huifen
Xiamen University, Xiamen, China
1 March 2012

Foreword

Students of human migration have their reasons for stressing the common features of all migrations. But historians of the sojourning experiences of the Chinese of Fujian and Guangdong might wish to stress some of the differences. Shen Huifen's close study of the wives left behind by men who migrated from Fujian to Southeast Asia in search of work draws attention to the need to understand the exceptional institutionalized demands of Chinese family tradition on their women. She describes in rich detail some of the distinctive features in Chinese national policies concerning sojourners (*huaqiao*) and the wives they left behind between the 1930s and 1950s. These policies had evolved out of a radical change during the last years of the Qing Dynasty in attitudes towards the Chinese who were trading overseas. The Qing court had turned away from a policy of disapproval and discrimination of those who left home to go overseas to one of encouraging them to return to assist, and especially to invest, in China's economic development. Successive republican governments after 1912 went even further to engage the *huaqiao* ever more intensively in national affairs, and their policies were renewed and then subjected to political revisions after the Communist Party victory in 1949.

In the modern period, it is well known that the historical practices of the coastal mercantile communities of South China had become inseparable from increasing official and political involvements in the lives of their families. For nearly a century after the end of the nineteenth century, there grew exceptional national interest in the links between these families and their sojourning relatives overseas. This interest at the national level then encouraged intense official intervention at local levels. In that context, the story of left-behind wives developed some exceptional qualities. Shen Huifen's careful and sympathetic study draws on the rich oral and documentary materials that deal with the period from the 1930s to the 1950s and brings out

some of the most poignant features in the migration histories of these Fujian communities.

Her study highlights the special role that women play in the formulation of family strategies to support the practice of sojourning and when deciding whether or not to settle abroad. Where sojourning was the norm, women provided the anchor for families in which working-age men remained abroad for long periods at a time, and possibly even more so when the men eventually did not return. As long as the family system was functioning in a traditional framework, that anchor role was a positive factor in the lives of most families. When parents were alive, the men's filial piety demanded that they act to support them as well as ensure that the next generation had a good start at home. Their wives were instruments that enabled them to fulfil that duty. They could also do so by being dutiful daughters-in-law. After the parents were dead, or if the husbands were cut off by wars or natural disasters, or decided not to return for personal reasons, that would determine the fate of the left-behind wives. But as long as the husbands were successful and generous, their wives could gain status and wield influence in the extended family at home. In particular, if there were sons who grew up to join their fathers abroad, the left-behind wife-mothers could still be assured of their own welfare and security.

The left-behind wives of the twentieth century in Fujian province faced a whole range of unpredictable changes. They included at least two revolutions, local banditry, civil wars, and a world depression accompanied by Japanese incursions, events that led to frequent breakdowns not only in communication with their husbands overseas but also in the social order within China itself. The shifts in national policies and local conditions, as Shen Huifen outlines, were extraordinary and often drastic. She found a great deal of material in the records of the Quanzhou region about how left-behind wives coped with these shifts, about their homes, their survival strategies and also the entrepreneurial activities outside China of some of them. She also managed to locate many of those who are still alive and were willing to tell their stories. Her detailed accounts about how some of these wives coped with the changes to their lives invoke the sharp images of personal sacrifice and heroism as well as misery, loneliness and tragedy.

This is a fascinating work of scholarship that depicts families undergoing painful changes while a transitional society struggled to

adapt to the social demands of modernity. Although it depicts experiences that are specific to a powerful and resilient cultural heritage, there are features that should be of comparative interest to all students of modern migration. Let me nevertheless draw a longer historical thread to link the story here to that heritage.

What I find of particular interest is that the left-behind strategy in southern Fujian to bind sojourners firmly to their families has actually been effective over several centuries. There is evidence in local records to show that a successful family-centred strategy had gradually evolved out of the long history of trading and sojourning within the country itself. Merchants left their wives behind to serve the family and, if their wives were faithful and filial, their virtue was sometimes noted. If their husbands did not return and, especially if they died while trading, they might even be treated like virtuous widows, a status of some respect.

By the Southern Song Dynasty, large numbers of South Fujian merchants had braved the dangerous seas to go to Southeast Asia. When Quanzhou became China's major international port at the time, it also coincided with a neo-Confucian renaissance. In fact, Fujian province itself was one of the leading centres of a fresh commitment to spread neo-Confucian values among ordinary families. By the Ming Dynasty, when maritime trade became increasingly important to the Chinese economy and Hokkien men led the way in the expansion of trade with the port cities of Southeast Asia, it was a time when the institution of familism became popular and widely accepted as never before. In part because merchants were officially placed at the bottom of the social scale, they strove hard to display their adherence to Confucian family norms to gain respectability. What is interesting is how residual forms of that phenomenon survived in the way Shen Huifen has described them for the 1930s to 1950s. These were still pervasive after the end of state Confucianism and even after post-revolutionary Chinese society had acknowledged the status of the new woman. This meticulous and lively study is not only illuminating in itself but will open up a new perspective on the tensions in gender relations that persisted long after the Chinese trading world became globalized.

Wang Gungwu
National University of Singapore
7 May 2012

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