Dan Bell

Dr. Joshua Howard

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A Community without Borders: Transnational Taishan

In nineteenth century Taishan, very few economic opportunities existed. Agriculture was a risky business due to the hills and mountains that covered the county's surface, and only 34.9% of the total land was cultivatable.1 The terrain also proved unfavorable because it was more expensive to build roads, railroads, and canals in the hilly area.2 With no way to improve Taishan's economy, men were forced to search for better opportunities. When talk of gold in California circulated through China, it was no surprise that many Taishanese men migrated to America. Even when gold became sparse, other economic opportunities were more favorable compared to what was available in China. As a result, a transnational relationship between overseas Taishanese and their communities in China formed. The key factors that led to the formation and preservation of this transnational community are the *jinshanzhuang* role in transporting Chinese remittances and letters, Chinese adaption to exclusion laws, and Taishanese dependence on family members working overseas.

The ability of the *jinshanzhuang* to transfer Chinese remittances and letters was critical for Taishan to establish a transnational identity. Otherwise, Taishanese men would have to resolve to unreliable ways to send money to their families. Couriers could be hired to transport money and letters to China, but the Taishanese overseas had to be able to trust them.3 Without a way for overseas workers to continually support their families, it's likely that transnational Taishan would not last long. Luckily for the Taishanese, *jinshanzhuang* managed to solve this issue.4 *Jinshanzhuang* supplied the demand for Chinese groceries in foreign places,5 but they also handled Chinese remittances and letters between America and China.6

*Jinshanzhuang* enabled Taishanese Americans to interact with their families from afar. In *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home*, Madeline Y. Hsu notes that the *jinshanzhuang* had "well-established connections to businesses in Chinatowns around the world. Their transactions with others were guaranteed, not by contracts but by relationships based on kinship or native ties."7 These connections provided an accessible and reliable method for Taishanese Americans to support their families. Communication through letters became possible as well. A transnational system was in the works.

Some Taishanese were able to do more than simply send money and letters. *Jinshanzhuang* offered special services to customers.8 Hsu describes a situation in which overseas Taishanese managed financial aspects of their families:

Those with sizable savings (several thousand up to US $10,000) and unreliable, sons, wives, or younger brothers could send a lump sum of money to the jinshanzhuang, which would then use the interest to make a regular payment to the family in China. Thus merchants and restaurateurs who could not leave their businesses to personally supervise the upbringing of their heirs could delegate the responsibility.9

Chinese migrants gained even more access to interacting with their families across the Pacific. With the ability to transport money, letters, and even the delegation of funds, *jinshanzhuang* became the flowing blood that moved nutrients across the body of transnational Taishan. However, there were other obstacles that Chinese immigrants had to overcome.

The Chinese ability to circumvent the Chinese Exclusion Act preserved Taishan's transnational activities. One of the frustrations faced by Chinese immigrants was actually getting into America. When the Exclusion laws came into effect, Chinese laborers were not permitted to enter America. These laws posed a serious threat to the economic development of transnational Taishan, but the Chinese adapted to the situation.

Chinese laborers were restricted from entering America during the Exclusion laws, but Chinese merchants, tourists, diplomats, and teachers could enter.10 Chinese laborers claimed to be merchants, natural-born citizens, or the sons of merchants or citizens in order to enter America. Immigration authorities attempted to reduce perjury through rigorous interviews with applicants and witnesses about irrelevant information.11 Hsu references an excerpt from an interview in 1921. Detailed questions include "How many houses are there on your row, the first one?" and "Who lives on the second one of your row?"12 Hsu adds that the same detailed questions were asked to both the applicant and the witnesses, and both accounts had to match.13 Processes like this account forced the Chinese to devise a system that outwitted the immigration authorities.

The extensive paper-slot system allowed Chinese to overcome the immigration officials. The first generation of "paper sons" consisted of Chinese men claiming to be native-born citizens.14 From this point, Chinese men brought their "sons" and "grandsons" to America.15 Four or five generations of Taishanese up to the early 1960s were able to enter America through this network.16 This system maintained the transnational bond between Taishanese living in China and America.

The paper sons system required the Chinese to work extensively in networks to get through the interview process. The Chinese wrote papers to coach young men before encountering the immigration officers.17 The information given by the applicant and witness had to match. Hsu references a paper that shows how detailed the Chinese immigrants were. Part of the paper reads, "Be sure not to say that there are two schools, because your two elder brothers when they came to the United States said their village had but one school…."18 In turn, this practice strengthened transnational ties. Chinese immigrants had to keep records that would flow between America and China. Consequently, the process of circumventing exclusion became a transnational activity itself.

The major characteristic that made Taishan a transnational community was the dependence of families in China on the immigrants in the United States. Successful Taishanese Americans were able to support their families with money to spare. Hsu demonstrates such surpluses:

During the 1920s, hired laundrymen could earn US $50 in a good week. In the first decade of the twentieth century, they could support a family in China on $100-150 per year. However, it was not uncommon for the families of overseas Chinese to have considerably more money lying around the house.19

The stability of Taishanese families is accredited to the development of the transnational community. Because Chinese men found work in America, their families prospered.

Taishanese transnationalism also affected the overall communities. After providing for their families, Taishanese Americans used their earnings to bring education to Taishan.20 Hsu compiled some examples:

In 1900, Wu Limen of Meiwan Village and Wu Hui of Xize Village collected money from approximately 500 clan members in the United States to build a clan school of 872 square meters. In 1905, Wu Huci solicited 200,000 yuan from U.S. compatriots to build the Chengwu Elementary school in Duanfen. Over the next few decades, overseas capital and the initial prodding mind of education-minded county magistrate Tan Shoufang produced at least 86 elementary schools and nine middle schools before 1949.21

Taishanese children gained access to education through the contributions from overseas Taishanese. There were more developments besides education, however. Through the efforts of Chen Yixi, a returning Gold Mountain guest, a railroad centering on Taishan City was built.22 Subsequently, Yixi's railroad brought more commerce to Taishan.23

Taishanese people also suffered with the overseas workers. When the Great Depression occurred, many Chinese workers experienced lower wages or lost their jobs altogether.24 Hsu presents a description from *Xinning Magazine* that states, "As for the external reasons, the world economy is in crisis and overseas Taishanese [hai-wai yiqiao] are out of work and have no means of helping with expenses in the home villages."25 Consequently, dependents in Taishan either received less money from America or none at all. Taishan's dependence on labor in America demonstrates it transnational character.

The Taishanese developed a sense of transnationalism through their use of the *jinshanzhuang*, their adjustment to exclusion laws, and their dependent relationship between people in China and America. *Jinshanzhuang* provided a way for overseas workers to send remittances and letters to keep in touch. The Chinese were able to adapt to and bypass exclusions laws, and ways for continuing the transnational relationship developed. Dependence on foreign labor was the driving force that set up this special community. It was the reason that many Taishanese men endured racial discrimination and separation from family. This constant flow of money, information, and people between China and the United States constitutes a transnational community that survived the only way it could.

Notes

1. Madeline y. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 21.

2. Ibid., 19.

3. Ibid., 35.

4. Ibid., 36.

5. Ibid., 34.

6. Ibid., 35.

7. Ibid., 36.

8. Ibid., 38.

9. Ibid., 38.

10. Ibid., 65.

11. Ibid., 69.

12. Ibid., 70.

13. Ibid., 70.

14. Ibid., 75.

15. Ibid., 81.

16. Ibid., 81.

17. Ibid., 82.

18. Ibid., 82.

19. Ibid., 43.

20. Ibid., 45.

21. Ibid., 45.

22. Ibid., 47.

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23. Ibid., 48.

24. Ibid., 52.

25. Ibid., 52.

Works Cited

Hsu, Madeline Yuan. *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration between the United States and South China, 1882-1943*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford UP, 2000. Print.