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EMBODIED MOBILITIES: TRANSNATIONAL HOUSES IN QINGTIAN

Irene Masdeu Torruella

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

Centro de Estudios e Investigación sobre Asia Oriental

Grupo de Investigación Inter Asia

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Contacto editorial

Centro de Estudios e Investigación sobre Asia Oriental
Grupo de Investigación Inter Asia

Edifici E1

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

08193 Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès) Barcelona

España

Tel: + 34 - 93 581 2111

Fax: + 34 - 93 581 3266

E-mail: gr.interasia@uab.cat

Página web: <http://www.uab.cat/grup-recerca/interasia>

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Embodied mobilities: Transnational houses in Qingtian

Irene Masdeu Torruella

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

Resumen

Desde la década de 1980 el condado de Qingtian ha forjado vínculos transnacionales con los países europeos donde se ha asentado su población, siendo España e Italia los principales destinos. Las prácticas transnacionales han conllevado cambios socioculturales materializados en la transformación de los espacios públicos, de los estilos de vida y las prácticas de consumo. El impacto de la migración es especialmente visible en el desarrollo urbano y la construcción inmobiliaria. Basado en una investigación etnográfica, este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar los vínculos transnacionales y los patrones de movilidad tal y como se materializan en las casas, en tanto que objetos arquitectónicos y espacios de interacción social. Se analiza los diferentes tipos de casas que adquieren los migrantes y se examina la intersección entre los valores simbólicos y de uso. El estudio de las casas de los migrantes conlleva una reflexión sobre el concepto transnacional de hogar.

Palabras clave

Casas remesas, prácticas transnacionales, migración china, desarrollo urbano

Abstract

Since the 1980s, Qingtian County has forged transnational links with the European countries where its population has settled, with Spain and Italy being the main destinations. Transnational practices have led to socio-cultural changes that have materialised in the transformation of public spaces, lifestyles and consumption practices. The impact of migration is particularly visible in urban development and real estate construction. Based on ethnographic research, this article aims to analyse transnational links and mobility patterns as materialised in houses as architectural objects and spaces of social interaction. It analyses the different types of houses that migrants acquire and examines the intersection between symbolic and use values. The study of migrants' houses entails a reflection on the transnational concept of home.

Keywords

Houses, remittances, transnationalism, Chinese migration, urban development

EMBODIED MOBILITIES: TRANSNATIONAL HOUSES IN QINGTIAN

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Introduction: Transnational Qingtian

Qingtian County, located in south-east Zhejiang province, is the region from where most of Chinese migrants in south Europe come from. It is precisely the input of international migration that differentiates Qingtian from its neighbors' towns and counties (Masdeu, 2014). Although the first migrants who moved to Europe from Qingtian can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century, it was not until post-Mao economic and political reforms in China, that international migration began to be significant (Li, 2013; Beltrán Antolín, 2003). From 1978 onwards, physical movements of Chinese towards foreign countries created what has been called "the migration fever" (*chugore* 出国热) and set the population on the move (Chu, 2010). Leaving the country and going overseas to find a better life was a desirable goal, especially in areas that had experienced a prior influx of internal migration (Beltrán Antolín, 2003; Chu, 2010; Li, 1999).

Since the 1980s strong transnational links have been forged between Qingtian and the different localities in Europe where Qingtianese have settled down, being Spain and Italy the main destinations. In a place like Qingtian, where almost everyone has connections in Europe, and where more than half of the population is engaged in international migration, the impact of

transnational flows of resources is visible in all the corners of the region.

The life of Qingtianese who have not migrated is also geared towards mobility through several transnational practices and linkages, in which they take part as agents of change to the same extent as migrants. As Chu (2010) points out in her research carried out in an emigration region in Guangdong province, mobility not only concerns people who travel abroad because “one did not need to physically leave China to be a subject emplaced within a larger global and transnational field” (Chu, 2010). In a similar way and in relation to social life in Hong Kong, Abbas states how “whether one goes or stays, the experience of migrancy is inescapable” (Abbas, 2004:129).

These transnational connections configure an habitus in Bourdieu’s sense (Beltrán Antolín, 2003; Li, 1999; Thunø, 1999), involving a set of ideologies, values and beliefs based on transnational links (remittances, donations, investments and returns) that made migration as a crucial part of the social structure. This set of ideologies also materializes in the streets, squares and other public and private spaces of the region.

As we will see throughout this article, the socio-cultural changes inherent to migration processes are manifested in the material world through object circulation as well as within architectural designs and building activities.

The image of the main town of the county, Hecheng zhen (和城镇), at night, with its illuminated bridges and tall buildings rising up on both sides of the Ou River, is the pride of many Qingtianese. They refer to their hometown as “the little Hong Kong” due to the narrow strip of space that sits between two bodies of water (on one side sea, on the other, river) and the mountains, as well as to the high buildings and frenetic

construction industry that have transformed the landscape of the place and have brought strong urbanization and development into this rural area. They also refer to some parts of the area as the “*Ouzhou zhen*” (欧洲城, the European town), where cafes, and import-export shops managed by returnees or migrants’ relatives appear one after the other.

These two images are the outcome of an historical process deeply linked to international migration and transnational links, which have kept and continue to keep migrants linked to Qingtian through visits, returns, investments, objects and money circulation. The bridges, buildings - houses, restaurants, cafés, shops, temples, schools, etc.- and the main development infrastructures of Qingtian county have been made mainly with the ideas, remittances, investments and donations of international migrants over the last four decades.

Based on ethnographic research undertaken in Qingtian from 2011 to 2014 and a follow-up fieldwork in 2017, this article aims to analyze the transnational links and mobility patterns as they are embodied in houses, as architectural objects and social spaces.

The study of migrants’ houses has led to a reflection on the transnational concept of home in the migration context. Given that migrants locate and construct a sense of home in different places (Leung, 2007), “home” is increasingly seen as a transnational social field spread across different physical and geographical places (Constable, 1999).

In this article, the analysis of transnational practices through a place lens will focus on examining houses in their material form, examining their different social uses and their relational function. Concretely, in the present article I will analyze the different types of remittance houses as embodied and

materialized forms of mobility and social transformation. As we will see these places and buildings -as properties of material culture– have an agency and capacity to act beyond representation value, and thus, they play a key role in the Qingtianese mobility and migration culture.

This analysis follows the theoretical work of Appadurai (1986) and Gell (1998) towards a restitution of the agency of objects beyond their representational functions, and the methodological approach to transnational links through a space lens (Bivand Erdal 2011; Gielis 2009; Massey 1994, Appadurai 1995). Both perspectives are based on the relational character of material culture and the social interaction between objects, people and places.

Embodied mobilities: Transnational houses in Qingtian

One of the earliest and most relevant outcomes of remittances and physically reverse transnational practices -such as visits and returns– in Qingtian was the construction activity. The architecture of “remittance houses” (Lopez, 2010) is one of the most relevant and visible aspects that shows Qingtian to be an international migration village (*qiaoxiang*).

During the last four decades migrants’ remittances and donations have dramatically affected the landscape of Qingtian. House construction activities and infrastructure development are one of the main outcomes of this monetary circulation. Qingtianese often complain about the cost of living in the area, claiming that the circulation of international currency has changed Qingtian into a place with very high prices, in some instances reaching the same level as in the large cities of Zhejiang province. Housing is perhaps one of the main domains receiving such commentaries and the space where inequalities related to the migration process are best visualized.

We can find different types of houses purchased and use by migrants or migrants' relatives according to their location (rural / urban), its architectural design (detached villas, modern apartments, or restored traditional old houses), and its uses (symbolical or practical and use value).

In the following sections I will analyze the different types of building projects focusing in their material form and its social meaning. First, I will focus on the modern apartments in the main urban areas of the county (Hecheng and Youzhu) and secondly, I will examine the different types of remittance houses in the smaller villages.

Table 1. Typology of houses in Qingtian county

| | | |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| <i>Location</i> | Urban areas | Hometown villages |
| <i>Architectural desing</i> | Modern appartments in high buildings. | Large houses with "neocalssical" western ornamentation and design. |
| <i>Value</i> | Practical and use value "Houses to be live in" | Symbolical and ritual value "House to be seen" |

Source: Author's ellaboration

Urbanization process in the Qingtian: Modern apartment in high buildings

The impact of migration in Qingtian's urban development was originally circumscribed to Hecheng, the main town of the county and the first place where imported product stores, cafés and the so-called "Western restaurants" (西餐厅) run by returnees in co-operation with friends or relatives were established at the beginning of the 21st century.

The small city of Hecheng has become the social gathering place for Qingtianese migrants coming back to China on short-term visits or for more extended return trips, and therefore a strong construction industry has emerged. The business, which incorporates elements from the European countries where Qingtianese have emigrated, and the modern 20-storey apartment blocks where migrants reside during their visits are exceptional in the way they have transformed the town's landscape and way of life.

But it is not just the migrants originating from Hecheng who are buying new houses in the main urban area of the county. Even if they have never lived in Hecheng and their hometown is one of the surrounding villages in Qingtitan (Fushan, Fangshan, Youzhu, etc.), migrants would prefer to stay in the county's main urban area when they visit Qingtian rather than spend their vacations, or provisionally settle down, in the villages where they were born. The intensive building boom has turned Qingtian into a destination place for internal migrants mostly coming from Henan and Sichuan provinces, who are the workers in construction building companies, and has also attracted the return of Qingtianese migrants investing in real estate.

The income of a given family determines the type of constructions and buildings they acquire. Some families decide to remodel pre-existing buildings constructed in the 1980s or 1990s, while those with the highest income purchase new and modern flats in the high-rise buildings with modern facilities. Almost all the families that own apartments in the new and some of them luxurious tall buildings compounds are involved in the migration dynamics. Some apartments are empty most of the year and are used by migrants during return visits. The second type of residents of these modern apartments include returned migrants who settle down for a longer period. And,

finally, some of these new flats are the everyday homes of relatives who didn't migrate and have used remittances to buy new houses.

Next to the high demand, the topography and geographical features of the place -sited between the mountains and the river - are also influential in the high housing prices. Reference to the scarcity of flat land, which was traditionally evoked to explain the harshness of Qingtian life (Beltrán Antolín, 2003), is now used to explain Hecheng's high-priced housing market.

Shuinan (水南), a neighborhood located opposite Hecheng on the other side of the river, was the first place to be transformed from fields into town. In fact, as soon as the bridges connecting the two sides of the river were built at the end of the 1990s, Shuinan was integrated as a part of Hecheng Township where the hospital, the high-speed train station, the museum and a different array of infrastructure and apartment buildings were constructed. Nowadays the housing prices in Shuinan have already reached or surpassed levels in Hecheng, with luxurious apartments contrasting with the cheap, simple buildings erected in the latter half of the 1990s where internal migrants and humble local families who have no recourse to overseas income now live. The social inequalities originating with the development of Qingtian's migrant habitus are clearly materialized in the mixture of houses.

This area's transformations are clearly illustrated in the pictures taken in 1994 and in 2012. In the first picture (figure 1) there were no bridges over the river and Shuinan was empty farmland with few houses between the river and the slope of the mountain. Fifteen years later (figure 2), the three bridges had changed the daily life of this area, and the landscape was completely transformed with high buildings on the Hecheng side, and the construction of a totally new town in Shuinan.

Figure 1. Hecheng and Shuinan, winter 1992



Source: Photo taken by Joaquín Beltrán. Courtesy of the author

Figure 2. Hecheng and Shuinan, winter 2012



Source: Photo taken by the author

The development of Qingtian County's infrastructure, with bridges, tunnels and highways that twist and turn, connecting the different villages located around the mountains and the river has dramatically changed the life of the people living there.

We have to place these changes within the larger context of China's development and urbanization process. Infrastructure development and building activities have been undertaken in hundreds of medium size towns and cities all around the country over the past three decades. However, the construction fever that has affect the whole of China with its empty houses and an emerging real estate bubble, is especially striking in *qiaoxiang* areas (emigration villages) such as Qingtian where remittances, return movements and visits have a strong effect on the building industry and in pushing house prices up. Therefore, next to the changing consumption behaviors and lifestyles concerning the wider scope of Chinese society, the building industry in Qingtian is also strongly influenced by the impact of international migration and the behavior of using remittances and savings to buy a house in the hometown.

The rising prices of the real estate market, the lack of empty space in Hecheng and Shuinan and the potential saturation of cafes, restaurants and imported product stores in town, brought about further movements that implied the reproduction of Hecheng's business and building model in other smaller villages nearby, encompassing the progressive urbanization of the migrants' ancestral villages.

Youzhu, located at 15 kilometers of Hecheng, was the first place where this urbanization of rural Qingtian started. The highway going through a tunnel and over the mountain constructed in 2005 has dramatically reduced the distance between this village and the town. The journey from Youzhu to Hecheng, which used to take the whole morning 25 years ago

and required the use of different transport systems (ferry, carts or a long walk through the mountains, etc.), is now a convenient bus or car ride that takes no more than 15 minutes.

The large advertising hoarding hanging at the entrance of the tunnel in March 2011 anticipated what we found on the other side (see figure 3). Next to the pictures of the new apartments, the sentence in English on the real estate company's advertising stated "In Qingtian, life as in Paris", illustrating the main economic activity in the village and the reference to imagined European lifestyle patterns as a selling point and identity marker.

Figure 3. Real estate advertisement in the tunnel connecting Hecheng with Youzhu. "In Qingtian life as in Paris"



Source: Photo taken by the author

And this is what we can nowadays find after passing through the tunnel: a newly built residential area that started

development in 2007 in the intersection of the neighborhoods comprising Youzhu (Ya'ao and Youzhu Shang).

This area, that used to be just fields and a few isolated houses, appears to be a modern town with wide avenues and new streets where high building compounds with their gardens and recreation areas are continuously being constructed. Up in the mountains, as in Hecheng, the landscape is also dominated by the presence of villas and large detached houses. Real estate and the construction of luxurious compounds to the “European taste” are the main economic and business activities in the villages close to Hecheng.

Next to these new residential areas, in 2014 Youzhu also was the place where a “commodity city” was conceived and designed encompassing an enormous space of 339.000 Square meters. The “Emigration Hometown Qingtian’s Imported Commodity City” (ICC), started to be build in 2014 and in 2017 it was already a reality encompassing an infinite row of shops selling imported products from Europe (mainly Spain and Italy) and Japan or Corea (Bofulin, 2021).

Even though migrants are buying apartments in the new compounds they do not always use them when they visit Qingtian, at least during the early years following purchase. Most of these apartments remain empty, and some of them are not yet finished and ready to be lived in. The empty new houses need some time and work to get ready and thus, if the visits are too short, they prefer to stay in relatives’ houses or even in hotels in Hecheng (Masdeu, 2021).

The urban area apartments in Hecheng or Youzhu have a practical function as a place to stay or live in Qingtian. These houses are filled with objects that embody the incorporation of Spanish or other European lifestyles and habits and materializes transnational ties.

Kitchens are the main space of expression of these hybrid transnational cultures resulting from the exchange and circulation of objects, ideas and symbols across national borders in the context of migration. Spanish gastronomic products - mostly olive oil, ham, and different types of sausages which they called embutido or salami - are some of the main items that migrants bring with them as gifts when they travel back to Qingtian. As well as sausages and olive oil, we can find other relevant products such as chocolate, red wine, and a variety of different cooking spices and sauces sitting in the kitchens and fridges of these houses.

We can also find house-cleaning products such as washing up liquid and floor-cleaning detergent, as well as shampoo and shower gel in migrants' apartments. The presence of the cleaning products in their houses is related firstly to the shared idea about the low quality of the hygiene products made in China but an image of pre-1980s Chinese society also endures, when these products were difficult to find or were not as effective as the ones on sale today. Thus Qingtianese that emigrated in the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s and have regularly lived in Spain ever since, are the ones that bring these products for personal use in their homes in Qingtian, in the assumption that they will not easily find them in China and thus reproducing stereotypes that divide their world between an undeveloped China versus a modern Europe. As soon as they realize how China has been transformed and that they can find the same cleaning products as in Spain two different reactions come about. Some migrants recognize their naïve attitude in thinking that China was still the same as when they left, while others hold on to the common perception of low-quality Chinese products versus the reliability of European ones. On some occasions this small domestic detail also points to the symbolic function of those objects that move with migrants and materialize their international lives. Alongside these basic

cleaning products, we also find diverse beauty products, which, like gastronomic goods, carry a mixture of symbolic and practical values.

All these objects – gastronomic, cleaning and beauty products – can travel with the migrants in their suitcases but are also available for buying in the stores of the western “commodity city” in Youzhu.

Migrants’ homes in China are also full of other objects related to transnational leisure and avocation, as well as communication and language dimensions. On the shelves and decorative furniture, especially in returnees’ homes, there is a range of Spanish books (from materials for learning Spanish to bilingual dictionaries and novels), Spanish music, football club posters and photos, and other paraphernalia that inform us about the inhabitants’ living experience and background in Spain. On their trips to China their suitcases are full of Spanish products and material culture. The same process goes back the other way. Migrants’ suitcases are filled with local Qingtian products that are going to be stored and consumed in their Spanish homes.

The interior of the urban apartments where migrants stay during their long-term visits reveal how migrants’ houses in China are “transnationalized homes” (Leung, 2007). They are inhabited by a mixture of objects and material culture, which give us many clues about the life of these people who are involved in two language settings, having homes in two countries and making a living through continuous regular contact across national borders (Portes, Guanizo, and Landolt 1999).

For migrants, these flats have a relevant practical value as places to live during their visits but are also key elements in their future plans for post-retirement. That said, the idea of a return does not mean they lose their house in Spain because,

these return paths are not always conceived as a final step (Masdeu, 2021).

A house in the hometown: Ritual and symbolic value

Migrants' housing practices are not limited solely to the new and modern apartments located in urban areas. Depending on their income, migrants can fulfill their desire of owning two types of houses in Qingtian: an apartment in the urban areas, as well as a house in their rural hometown.

We find different types of houses in the hometown embodying the specific circumstances of the family who finance and build or reconstruct them. The typology of houses is diverse and ranges from large, colorful, luxury residences and villas, to the vertical cement-block houses, which have practical or symbolic values for different members of the family. Alongside these already institutionalized building activities new trends towards the restoration of old and "heritage houses" are also emerging among Qingtianese migrants and their descendants.

Detached-Houses and villas: Symbolical and ritual value of remittance houses

Large houses and villas with highly ornamented, colorful and sumptuous facades are scattered throughout the villages in Qingtian. These houses were among the first hallmarks of migrants embodied and symbolic presence in their hometown. The majority of these houses remain empty for most of the year and are emblems of the rising social status of the families who finance them. Whether the owners of the houses are living in Europe or whether they have returned to China, they seldom spend more than a few days in their village house. Whenever they stay in Qingtian they would rather live in the city and visit their country house on special ritual occasions such as funerals,

Chinese New Year, and during other relevant celebrations related to ancestor worship.

These houses symbolize the migrants' success and prestige and embody the presence of the families whose members are spread across different cities in China and several countries in Europe. These vernacular architectural forms are a way to obtain reputation and prestige, and thus to gain social status. The external appearance and facades, more than their interior, plays a relevant role among the community.

Figure 4. Remittance house in Fushan



Source: Photo by the author

The external design of the houses generally includes Western architectural elements fashioned into a totally unique shape. There are different forms and designs going from the castle look-alikes covered with colorful tiles to detached large villas and luxury houses with lavish decorative entrances integrating

Chinese motifs. Neoclassical columns and pilasters normally flank the door and windows of the large remittance houses, which are erected either on empty plots in the middle of the countryside or in the heart of small villages and neighborhoods. Some migrants decide to build large chalets of a simpler design that could be found on any high-status residential estate in Europe.

Instead of the practical value we observed in the migrants' urban apartments, the village houses mainly hold a symbolic value. The houses built in the migrants' hometowns or villages are not regarded and used as "homes-from-home" - expressing the everyday practical uses and the place of everyday social interaction of their inhabitants- but are "houses to be seen and commemorate". These houses convey ideas of the prestige of the family and are emblems of the presence of the migrants. Hence, villas, chalets and large remittances houses in the countryside express and materialize migrants' involvement and presence in Qingtian beyond physical mobility (through visits or returns) but throughout the agency of materiality (buildings).

The sumptuous and extravagant remittance houses in Qingtian do not bear any resemblance to the vernacular architecture in Spain, Italy or other European countries but, instead, are local prototypes of what was supposed to be "Western" and "modern". This unique house style, created from isolated architectural elements taken from European traditions, has been adopted by middle-class urban dwellers and dominates the outskirts of other cities in Zhejiang province such as Hangzhou, configuring a unique architectural form that has emerged in China as a benchmark of modernity and "Western lifestyles and modes of dwelling". The correspondence between the qiaoxiang migrants' houses and Chinese middle-class urban families' homes illustrates the shared prototypes of modernity and Western vision in contemporary China (Chu, 2006).

While some years ago Qingtianese villages had only a few of these houses belonging to the most distinguished families, there have been several waves of building activity of large houses in the villages. The building fever is not restricted just to urban areas of the county. The more remote villages such as Fangshan, Fushan, Shankou and other places where migration originated are also going through a relevant process with the widespread construction of large houses and villas and the reproduction of perceived Western-based motifs that are incorporated in almost all the new buildings.

The forms and designs introduced by the first remittance houses have entered into Qingtian's general building repertoire and thus we find a diversity of houses built with different materials and to differing standards, emulating the same design and motifs that the remittance houses present. As in other localities strongly influenced by migration these architectural motifs have become a status symbol in Qingtian.

Figure 5. Architectonical contrasts. House building with neoclassical motives, Shankou



Source: Photo by the author

Figure 6. Construction of villas following the neoclassical repertoire, Renzhuang, Qingtian.



Source: Photo by the author

Multi-storey houses: Mixing of symbolic and practical value

The second type of remittance house located in the villages is represented by multifunctional homes that meet both symbolic and practical uses. The façades of these houses are not as sumptuous as the villas, but the neoclassical pillars and the balconies with ornamented balustrades still identify the house and the family with international migration trajectories.

These houses are built upwards and include as many stories as there are brothers and sisters in the extended family that finances it, each floor having all living facilities including its own kitchen, bathroom and bedrooms.

The first floor is usually intended for the day-to-day living of the parents who stay in the village for most of the year, and

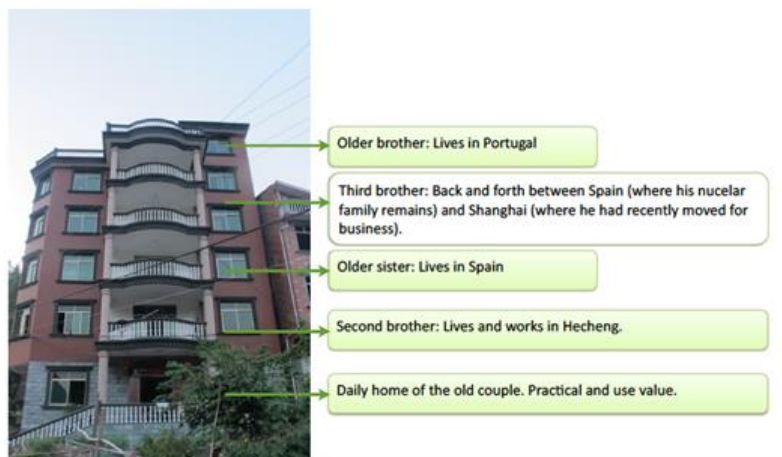
each of the upper floors is supposed to be used by the nuclear families that belong to the extended family. The most sophisticated and high-rise houses include elevators to connect the different apartments destined for each of the married couple and their offsprings.

The large living room and kitchen located next to the main entrance –with the ancestors’ altar in the center – is the meeting space where all the relatives gather when they are in their hometown, serving a similar function to the traditional houses’ central courtyard. However, as in the villas described above, the upper floor apartments are empty for most of the year with overseas nuclear families only going there for relevant celebrations. In some cases, one of the siblings remains in Qingtian to care for the parents and is normally the one who dwells in the first-floor apartment.

The frequency of these houses in different villages in Qingtian and their homogenous appearance makes it difficult to distinguish between them. Migrants take part in financing their part from Spain and in some cases, they will not travel to Qingtian to see the house until long after it is finished. They usually receive pictures and keep track of the building process, usually managed by the brothers or sisters in Qingtian. In contrast to the villas described above, which are totally empty for the most part, the vertical houses are built by families who have some relatives remaining in Qingtian and hold a mixture of symbolic and practical uses.

In most cases the brothers and sisters who co-operate in financing the house are spread out across different countries, therefore each of the floors of the house represents the connections with a specific country.

Figure 7. Diagram of multi-storey extended family house in Fushan, Qingtian



Source: Photo by the author

The example provided in the diagram (Figure 7) represents a five-storey remittance house. The ground floor has been home to the old couple since their daughter and sons built the house. The second floor belongs to the only son who didn't emigrate. However, he works and lives with his nuclear family in Hecheng and even though he often visits his parents in the village he seldom stays overnight in the house. The third and fourth floors are intended for the older sister and brother who live in Spain, while the top floor is the space reserved for the oldest brother who resides in Portugal.

As we can see, the morphology and structure of the house express the symbolic presence in the hometown of an extended family and reveal how multiple belongings and localities "are present and interrelated" in the hometown. On the one hand, these houses are the everyday homes of the relatives who stay behind (normally the parents of migrants) and on the other, they

embody the symbolic presence in the hometown of the Qingtianese who live abroad.

The remittance houses can be constructed in the newly bought field area or replacing the old wooden and stone traditional houses. This is the case of Lina's house, 25 years-old women who left Qingtian when was 14 to reunite with her parents who have left 10 years before. In the 1980s the house was the home to 18 nuclear families –around 120 people– but nowadays the south and east wings are only dwelled in by a internal migrant family from Henan province who work in the construction sector, and the west wing has been totally transformed. Breaking the sense of unity, the west wing is now a six-storey remittance house (figure 8).

Figure 8. A multi-storey remittance house inserted in the west ring of the old courtyard house, Shankou



Source: Photo by the author

In 2005 the family that was still living on the left side of the house decided to demolish their part instead of remodeling the existing structure so that they could erect a completely new

vertical remittance house. On the first floor a married couple whose sons and daughters all live in Spain are the only relatives of the extended family who still live in the house. The upper storeys are empty and reserved for each of their children now residing in Spain.

Sitting in the courtyard and preparing the vegetables to get dry in the sun (see figure 9), the old man of the remaining family got a bit nostalgic about how busy (热闹 *renao*) the house used to be before “everybody left”. He explained me that in 1940s the first family migrated to Belgium and although they still come back to Qingtian frequently they only go to the old house to “have a look” or to take part in ritual ceremonies (especially funerals) since they have bought a new apartment in town. The man goes on to explain that the families started to leave the house and the countryside en masse from the 1980s onwards and that, since 2008 when the last family left, they have been the only ones remaining.

Figure 9. South wing of Lina’s old house. Contrast with the new buildings on the background



Source: Photo by the author

“Nowadays they are all in Europe and the old people have moved to new apartments in Hecheng. But I didn’t want to leave so that’s why I constructed this new house. When my sons come back we all stay here together” (Interview with Ling, May 2012).

Gazing in astonishment at the clashing result of this old house juxtaposed with the new building, Lina commented that some relatives opposed the project but given that the Ling couple are the only ones living in-situ nobody could do nothing to stop it going ahead. And, of course, it is much cheaper and easier to build a new house than restore an old one.

Lina told that with her older brother, were thinking of restoring the house. After a few attempts, however, they realized how hard it is to make contact and set a deal with relatives located far away with whom they have almost lost touch. She says that her relatives who share the south wing do not have any intention of joining their project.

The visible outcome of the rural transformation of the villages in Qingtian are clearly evoked by the contrast of different architectonic constructions as we can observe in figure 9.

Re-visiting the past and rebuilding old houses: The construction of heritage sites

Whereas the dominant building tendency in the villages still involves new-built houses that incorporate Western architecture to express the migrants’ success abroad and increase the family social status and prestige, new trends are emerging surrounding the restoration and rebuilding of old houses which are, for the most part, derelict or dwelled in by families with scarce economic resources.

During the 1980s and 1990s families that could afford to buy or build simple concrete houses moved out of the old stone and wood houses they used to share with their extended family. These houses followed the traditional Chinese three-sided courtyard structure with different sizes and layouts and were the homes of different nuclear families normally belonging to the same patrilineal family, as we have seen in the case of Lina's family house in the section above. From the beginning of the 1980s onwards the houses were progressively abandoned as their inhabitants either went to Europe or moved to new apartments or concrete houses in the villages or the city.

When travelling to Qingtian migrants usually visit the old houses where they were born or raised. This sensibility towards old houses illuminates the different perceptions between generations as well as between migrants and their same-age relatives who remain in Qingtian. A 40-year-old woman who has all her siblings in Europe once told me that she would be very busy for the next days because her relatives from Spain were travelling to Qingtian and she had to accompany them everywhere.

“When they come here, they always want to go to see the old house where we were born and I'm the one who has to accompany them to the village. Sometimes it is a bit exhausting, going all over the place, and I don't know why they are so interested to see that, as each year it looks worse” (Fieldwork notes, Qingtian, March 2011).

Even though migrants generally have a special emotional perception of old houses and like to visit them, new perspectives and attitudes towards their restoration are emerging among the younger generations and middle-aged

people who have lived abroad for a long time and have incorporated another image of modernity.

Migrants' descendants who were born in Qingtian and move to Europe with their parents at school-age, have different memories and feelings for the old houses and, on different occasions, have told me that they would like to restore the houses in order to have a place to stay in the countryside and experience a different lifestyle to the one they have in Spain.

It is important to mention that migrants' social standing and image are changing with the times and with the generations. The younger generations sometimes disregard the large and lavishly decorated remittance houses, claiming that its a waste of money to "play the game" of the *mianzi* (social standing and prestige) that is particularly pertinent for international migrants and expressed by means of the large houses. These emerging attitudes envisage changes in the migrants' representation, the penetration of new modernity imaginings and bring about variations in the traditional model of *qiaoxiang*.

Instead of sumptuous houses that follow the institutionalized architectural repertoire, the younger migrants show a preference for the simplicity and antiquity of the old houses, arguing that this "heritage" could give a chance to tourism development and also to their Spanish-born children to learn and experience the unique elements of Chinese culture and transmit part of their life history to their descendants.

Young migrants who have been living in Europe for long periods of time manifest their intentions and will to restore the old houses in order to use them during their holidays in China. A 35-year-old Qingtianese that came back from Spain and provisionally settled in Hangzhou illustrates the perception of these old houses held by his generation, the divergence

perspectives in relation to the Qingtianese, and the difficulties of pursuing these projects:

“I am really serious about starting to restore my old family house... the problem is it is very expensive, and people here look at you strangely if you say that, they don’t understand. For me it’s a pity to see how the house is getting more and more decayed... I lived there for just three years, but I remember spending the summers with my grandmother in this courtyard in summer... I would really like to spend my vacations with my children there, surrounded by nature and in this old wooden house. It’s more authentic I think” (Fragment of an interview with a returnee, Qingtian November 2012).

Narratives of authenticity and a romantic view of the past emerge among younger generations. These young migrants express a different relationship with the houses and have the will to save them, but this is a difficult enterprise to undertake for a number of reasons.

Alongside the relevant economic investment required, most of these houses “belong” to different nuclear families scattered across different countries. So it is not always easy to find out who has property rights and come to an agreement with the extended family about these restoration projects. This is the case also for the house in Shankou where Lina was born and lived until 1998.

There are already several finished projects carried out by wealthy families with a long and famous migration history in Qingtian. However, these pioneers’ examples of restored old houses point towards another direction, as they do not have a practical use as a place to stay but, instead, have a new symbolic use related to the family’s history and the heritage of

the place. These houses stand as museums and spaces where historical and cultural heritage can be presented, but they are not places to live in.

The first example is located in Fushan and involves the history of one of the first Qingtianese families to settle in Spain, the same family that founded the Fushan School in 1920's (Masdeu, 2014). Along with the overseas adventures of the well-known Chenxi and Chenying, who travelled as officials of the Republic of China, Chen Tse-Ping was the first person from the Chen lineage who travelled to Europe in the 1930s and settled there. The overseas connections of the family and the fact that they were landlords and “intellectuals” led to them losing their properties in the 1950s and being a Red Army target during the Cultural Revolution, when they lost their position at the school.

Figure 10. Chen family museum in Fushan, Qingtian



Source: Photo by the author

In 2005 the Chen family built two modern villas next to the old house that was their family property before the communist collectivization campaign. Then, in 2009, the family focused all their efforts on restoring the property and rebuilding the large old house that these days holds a small museum about the family. This house is elegantly restored maintain the original structure and claim to having the two most elaborate courtyard-style traditional of the area.

Concluding remarks

In Qingtian and other places with strong migration culture, conceptualizing houses as a unit of analysis –both from a relational perspective and by examining their material forms– provide a wealth of information about transnational practices. As we have seen, houses make explicit the processes of mobility. And we have also seen how a single house embodies transnational networks and practices beyond the local.

In this article we have seen the different types of remittance houses as embodied and materialized forms of mobility and social transformation. We need to place the analysis of the urban development and construction activities, within the larger context of China's development and urbanization process in the last decades. However, the construction boom and the introduction of western type of symbols and forms that has affect the whole of China, is especially prominent in rural regions like Qingtian with strong migration culture. A type of rural cosmopolitanism derived from the international migration and transnational practices have transformed this rural area as much an earlier as other larger town in the province.

The urban area apartments in Hecheng, Shuinan or Youzhu have a practical function as a place to stay or live in Qingtian. These houses are filled with objects that embody the incorporation of Spanish or other European lifestyles and habits

and materializes transnational ties. The new houses have a mixture of practical and symbolic value and are sited next to exported commodities market and shops, as well as restaurants and cafés.

We have also seen how the desire to build a house in the hometown implies and incarnates the migrants' presence in Qingtian (proxy presence). Houses are objects to be seen and discussed; they are commodities and objects of "public expenditure" involving social prestige and position. Beyond a merely representational function we can see how the meaning of these objects –houses– play a key role in the mobility and Qingtianese migration culture. They do have an agency and a capacity to act beyond their representation value. These objects materialize relationships between various social actors involved in the mobility: migrants (people who physically move), returnee, and non-migrants.

The rapid transformation of the Chinese society has also emerged in the transformation of dwelling and living characteristics, which materialized in the construction contrasts between villas, high-storey houses and old and traditional buildings.

There are some cases of Qingtian's emerging self perceived heritage related to houses and the migration history of well-known, wealthy families. Along with this we have also seen how common people demonstrate preliminary new trends and present another type of relation between migrants and their hometown.

On one hand, for the older generations and people who have not migrated, the old houses are perceived as an image of a past society that they want to forget in order to consume and own new material products, including houses, that in China are conceived as symbols of modernity and prosperity. On the

other, younger migrant generations born in the 1970s who have lived and inserted in Spanish society have integrated another sense of modernity and practices related to the modern lifestyles in the countryside and a re-evaluation of traditional, old heritage.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that in relation to migrants' identities, the interplay between homes (as places of belonging) and houses (as material containers of symbolic and pragmatic values) underscore the emergence of multiple identities and evidence how transnational involvement with the society of origin does not imply a weak attachment and sense of belonging in the place and society of residency. Reflecting on the relationship between migrants and the localities that integrated their itineraries Jacobs underlines the relevance of material houses as a way to map migrants' paths:

“Migration involves a complex system of inhabitations that incorporate architectures as various as the ancestral home, the departure lounge, the vehicle of passage, the temporary shelter and the new house. As such, architecture is always being called upon to structure the spatiality of a mobile world” (Jacobs, 2004:167).

However, this article has shown that migrants' mobilities cannot be grasped in the linear perspective underlined by Jacobs, and how these architectures –from the buildings with a use value to the symbolical representation of belonging by means of houses or large candles– play a key role simultaneously, covering the different layers and localizations of home for mobile citizens or migrants. As one of the informants expressed when considering her return: “Qingtian is my first hometown, but after such a long time Spain is my second hometown”. The circular housing process is a

manifestation of migrants' circular itineraries that does not stop upon return.

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