“The Public” for Sojourners: Xiangyi and the Translocal Network of Public Participation

During the Qianlong (1736–1795) reign of the Qing dynasty, more sojourning Huizhou merchants contributed more money, more often, to philanthropic and charitable projects in Huizhou than ever before. Funds for famine relief, bridge and road construction, and building and renovation of academies formerly underwritten by local gentry came increasingly from distant places such as Yangzhou and Hangzhou. In addition, merchant contributions to these projects also took new forms. While individual merchants continued to make donations for small projects, the largest and most celebrated ventures were collectively undertaken by merchant sojourners of particular cities. In 1752, for example, after a severe drought wreaked havoc in Huizhou, salt merchants in Yangzhou pooled over 60,000 taels of silver in a onetime donation for construction of a granary against future famines.

In all such cases, no formal organization coordinated the contributions and participation. What facilitated the fundraising efforts and justified the merchants’ commitment in individual as well as collective undertakings was the idea of a person’s obligation to preserve and promote the well-being of the home place, a sense often referred to as xiangyi 鄉誼 (lit. native-place sentiment).1 This complicates the picture of Ming-Qing philanthropy presented by recent scholarship, which has focused on such new developments as formal philanthropic organizations, the notion that the wealthy had an obligation to take care of the poor, the normally local scope of such projects, and the rationale of maintaining social order.2 The pattern that emerges from the merchants’ charitable and philanthropic spending in Huizhou was rather that of public participation from beyond locality, driven by the connection they felt to their place of origin. Wealth-derived duty toward the poor and the imperative of maintaining social order were not denied, but the idea that most prominently motivated and helped organize these efforts was xiangyi.

1 The idea was sometime also expressed in phrases such as xiangqing 鄉情, sangzi zhi qing 桑梓之情, sangzi zhi yi 桑梓之誼, or simply sangzi 桑梓.
2 See Joanna Smith, The Art of Doing Good: Charity in Late Ming China. (California University Press, 2009), 284; Fuma Susumu 夫馬進, Zhongguo shanhui shantang shi yanjiu 中國善會善堂史研究 (Beijing: shangwu yinshuguan, 2005), Chapters 2, 3, and 5; and Liang Qizi, Shishan yu jiaohua, 67–69.
But philanthropy at home place was just one of several dimensions of the Huizhou sojourners’ xiangyi-based commitment to public welfare. Additionally, merchants contributed to projects that served fellow Huizhou sojourners in the same host cities, as well as ones in other cities where Huizhou sojourners needed help. In all these projects, it was the connection to Huizhou that justified their commitment. And the connection did not have to be with the physical place of Huizhou; rather, the merchant sojourners recognized a bond between people based on a common connection with the place. This bond could be transported and resorted to for mutual assistance from fellow Huizhou natives even though the home place was no longer present. In other words, the physical place had become a symbol, on the basis of which merchant communities built a network that incorporated fellow natives scattered across the realm.3

To explore this xiangyi-oriented network of public engagement hinging on Huizhou, as physical place and as symbol, I will focus here on three highly celebrated (and well documented) projects undertaken by Huizhou salt merchants sojourning in Yangzhou. Two were located in She County, the primary county of Huizhou: a granary built in 1752, and a local academy constructed in 1792. The third involved sponsorship of a huiguan in Beijing that lasted over seventy years, from the 1740s.4 The period in question,

3 Madeline Hsu’s study of Taishanese in the U.S. indicates that a network of this type was actually extended beyond the Chinese realm and functioned in a transnational context. See Madeline Hsu, Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration between the United States and South China, 1882–1943 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

4 Most of the successful Yangzhou salt merchants came from Huizhou’s She County. For this reason, while Huizhou as a whole was often evoked in their discourses of connection and obligation, on many occasions She County was in fact where their commitment originated and where their priority remained. For example, the granary was supervised by the prefecture, and so was categorized as a prefectural institution in local gazetteers, but it was located in the She County. Its managerial guidelines specifically stipulated that when the standard volume of storage in the She County granary was met, the fund designated to maintain the granary could be used to build branch granaries in other Huizhou counties, and that if the other counties needed special relief, grain from this granary could be used. Obviously the priority was She County. The academy, too, was built for the prefecture as a whole, but the management of its funds was entrusted to the instructors of the She County School (xianxue). Therefore, with regard to the projects we examine here, She County often stood for the whole Huizhou prefecture. This confluence of a She County identity and a Huizhou identity does not seem to have been a problem for the salt merchants. To their thinking, as the county where the prefectural seat was located, She County was Huizhou.