

## MY KAIPING JOURNEY: FROM GOLD MOUNTAIN TO DRAGON HILL VILLAGE (Part one)

By Raymond Douglas Chong (Zhang Weiming)

### Beginning

As a fifth generation American Born Chinese (ABC), I grew up in a barrio of Elysian Valley near Downtown of Los Angeles, City of Angels, in California, The Golden State of America, Gold Mountain. I was vaguely aware of my Chinese heritage and was utterly ignorant of my Zhang ancestry. My narrow realm was Chinatown and Little Tokyo near Downtown. I ate our Chop Suey, Cantonese cuisine. I attended family affairs. I celebrated traditional festivals. But I was a jook sing, bamboo, one who looked Chinese (solid) outside but who thought American (hollow) inside.

I quietly lived and studied in an insular enclave of Chinese from Canton with dark secrets, a dreadful legacy of racist Chinese Exclusion Act, paper son scheme, and Chinese Confession Program during the scary Red Menace. As a youth, my parents and elders never shared their tales about our forefathers nor their lives in Kaiping. Except for brief forays into Chinatown, I knew very little about China, an exotic world, and had no reverent respect for my Zhang elders or my Chinese heritage.

After a defining moment on a stark winter day of January 30, 2003, my life paradigm drastically changed. It has led me to My Kaiping Journey: From Gold Mountain to Dragon Hill Village.

### Kaiping

Kaiping County lies in the southwest region of the rich Zhu Jiang Pearl River Delta of Guangdong Province in The People's Republic of China. Facing the South China Sea, it is a fertile land of rice and fish with beautiful evergreen panorama of vales, glens, and mesas.

Long Gang Li, Dragon Hill Village, is located in the Chishui Township of Kaiping County of Jiangmen City. It lies on the east bank of Tan Jiang River Valley near the glorious emerald Mount of the Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea. Long Gang means dragon hill. The five-clawed dragon was an imperial symbol of the Chinese emperors.

My ancient Village has a long history that extends back to 1466 A.D. during the Ming Dynasty. Today, about 250 people, mostly elders and children, of the Zhang Clan live in this crumbling Village among rice fields, vegetable gardens, tropical fruit orchards, and fish ponds near bamboo groves. In diaspora, six hundred Zhang descendants live overseas of Southeast Asia and America in.

### Homecoming

After a sojourn of one day, from Los Angeles to Guangzhou, across the azure Pacific Ocean, I finally gazed upon the vibrant scenery of Kaiping for my homecoming. As the Toyota white van carried my mother, Yu Xinkai, and I toward Long Gang Li along a tree-lined concrete road, I saw myriad farm villages of rice fields and fish ponds with their magnificent Diaolou (watchtowers and villas). Bamboo groves, evergreen woods, and emerald mounts surrounded the fertile valleys of the Tan Jiang.

On a fall day of November 2007, we entered Long Gang Li as the van slowly drove us into the Village square on a dirt road. During commotion of our surprise visit, jubilant villagers greeted us as they poured from the temple and their homes. They recognized me as a fallen leaf from America.

I was quickly introduced to Zhang Yongchang and Huang Meihua, the caretakers of the house where Zhang Baoshen, my father, was born in 1922. The couple led me to the ninth house of the sixth alley in Long Gang Li and through a narrow alley, I saw an early twentieth-century house made of gray brick and topped with a red tile roof, the house built by my great-grandfather, Zhang Peilan.

Inside the house, I saw a parlor with a skylight, two kitchens and two bedrooms on the ground brick floor. The upper wood floor contained the family altar and storage lofts. Both kitchens had brick hearths with shrines. The parlor had a rice grinding pit and a water basin with a God of Heaven shrine below the family altar. The couplets on the Zhang family altar read: The Light of the Lamp Can Bring Bright Future. Above the lintel of a parlor door, I saw stuccowork showing a soaring dragon with two peaches. On the other parlor door, the stuccowork depicted a soaring phoenix.

In the lofts, I found precious family treasure in a cupboard. Inside was the December 1921 wedding china dishes of Zhang Yangshou, my grandfather, and Huang Qinchun, my grandmother. One dish reads Zhen Ri, which means Day of the Wedding Ceremony. Another dish reads Xi, which means Double Happiness. I cherish these family treasures and brought several dishes back to America as keepsakes.

My old gray brick house in a poor village is in dilapidated condition. The roof leaks during every heavy rainstorm, and the wood frame and floor have dry rot. But this ancestral house has a special place in my heart and in my mind. Zhang Peilan, built this Gold Mountain House from the fortune he made in Gold Mountain, as opium purveyor and gambling lord in Boston Chinatown. Furthermore, my father was born here. My father studied here and played with friends outside the house. He explored the groves, forests, and hills near the Village. Three generations of Zhangs lived in this simple house until 1955. This old house is my tangible link to the past — a physical bond with Long Gang Li, my ancestral hometown.

During the clamor, I also met Zhang Yongchong, an elderly man who is the grandson of my father's paper father. Zhang Guoxiang, his grandfather, escorted Zhang Baoshen during his entry to Port of Boston in spring 1932. I was quite stunned to meet Zhang Yongchong, for he represented a solid link to the past of seventy-five years ago.

I met another elderly man, Zhang Liucai. His grandfather, Zhang Peimu, was a business partner of Zhang Peilan. Together with two other partners, they operated Da Xin dry goods store in Baisha in Taishan County. Zhang Liucai clearly remembered my great-grandfather as a child.

(To be continued)