

# RETURN TO MY NATIVE LAND – KAIPING

By Raymond Douglas Chong

## INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 2008 (June 29 to July 4), the Year of the Rat, I returned to my Native Land – Kaiping. I took a trans-pacific voyage of 7,226 miles on China Southern Airlines from Los Angeles International Airport to Guangzhou International Airport in Guangdong Province of China. I was very anxious to return to Kaiping in search of my ethnic identity.

Since December 2007, I carefully planned my journey to Kaiping. My mission was to perform a comprehensive study on ancestral roots in Zhang and Yu villages. My fateful journey was a series of amazing encounters, startling finds, and memorable moments in Kaiping. I will always cherish them forever.

## COUNTRYSIDE

The countryside of Kaiping was always teeming with people and animals. The weather was unusually wet during their dry season. It was a constant rain from Sunday with a typhoon to Wednesday.

Farmers were busy harvesting and drying rice grains and peanuts. Elders were chatting and playing games with their friends. Pedestrians, bicycles, motorcycles, tricycles, small trucks, and tractors mingled in the chaotic traffic flows.

As we drove on the tree-lined two-lane concrete road, the beautiful scenery of my Native Land enthralled me. Along the way, I saw poor farm villages along with their Diaolous (watchtowers). Bamboo groves, evergreen forests, and verdant hills surrounded the fertile valleys of the Pearl River Delta.

I saw rice paddy fields, vegetable plots, and tropical fruit orchards with their bountiful crops. In addition, pig farms, duck and geese farms, and fishponds. Chickens and dogs roamed in the villages. Water buffalos arduously labored in the fields.

## YANG LU GANG VILLAGE (Zhang Clan)

On Monday morning, in the VIP room of the Pan Tower International Hotel, I met Shirley Zhang with Zhang Fu Chang, her father, and Huang Rui Juan, her grandmother. They gave me a copy of the Zhang clan zupu (register). I was very elated in obtaining this special prize. This invaluable document showed that our male lineage dates back to year 1506, during the Ming Dynasty. On page 21, it shows that names of Zhang Pei Lan, Zhang Mei Xin, and Zhang Jin Rui. As Zhang Wei Ming, I represent the 42th generation of the Zhang males!

Later in the morning, we visited Yang Lu Gang Village, my paternal home. Zhang Mei Xin had married Huang Qin Chun, my grandmother in 1921. The number 9 house on the 6<sup>th</sup> alley was the birthplace of Zhang Jin Rui, my father. Adjacent to it, my Grand Uncle Zhang Chang Wen lived in the number 7 house. I gazed at his portrait and noted his similar features as my grandfather.

Zhang Guang Ye, is the Village chief, who is a talented painter, was very helpful. He advised me about an adopted uncle in Hong Kong and an aunt, Zhang Zai Yi, in San Francisco Chinatown. Zhang Jin Jui had an older adopted brother, Zhang Bao Hui. He had left the Village of Southeast Asia in anger.

In the early afternoon, I interviewed Zhang Liu Cai, Zhang Hui Xin, and Huang Rui Juan. Their remarks gave me a glimpse of village life before the start of the Japanese War in 1937. Life was idyllic and simple for them as children.

I met Zhang Guo Xiang, the son of my adopted uncle. He lives in Baisha. After lunch in Baisha, we visited the site of old Daai Suen store in Baisha. Zhang Pei Lan with other partners had operated a dry goods store. I was jubilant in walking these streets as my great grandfather.

The next day on Tuesday, it constantly rained. Two elegant Diaolous grandly stood in the Village. The gate tower protected the villagers from bandits. An Overseas Chinese family owns an elegant residential tower, Fu Pei Lou, "Wealthy Nourish Tower." They were known as "Gold Mountain Houses."

From the top on the watchtower Diaolou, I was mesmerized by this ancient village and the surrounding tropical landscape and its rolling hills. There were vivid hues of green in this beautiful scenery.

As we regrouped on the ground, an elderly man anxiously rushed to greet me. Zhang Yue Xin was a classmate of Zhang Jin Rui. Uncle Yue excitedly described my father's life in the village before he departed for Gum Saan in 1932. He was very joyful in my return after 76 years.

We walked up the dirt trail of the solemn Fei E Shan “Hill of the Flying Swan” as rain fell upon us. We walked thru a beautiful eucalyptus forest with fern cover along farms. The song of cicada echoed in the forest. When we arrived, birds and butterflies were flying above us. The graves were laid out in Feng Shui way facing a lake. The rain was a good omen. I paid respect to Zhang Pei Lan and Lee Shee, my great grandmother, by bowing three times. The grave of Leung Kai, number one wife of Zhang Mei Xin, was nearby. I collected ferns and other plants, earth, and rocks that surrounded the graves. As I gazed at the serene scene on Fei E Shan,

At the Zhang ancestral hall, a portrait of Master Shi Quang Gong was at the shrine. He founded our Village during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. We interviewed Uncle Yue. He gave me extensive information about my family. In a remarkable scene, I sat with five elders who were classmates of Zhang Jin Rui, in 1932, in the classroom of the Zhang Ancestral Hall.

Later, we went up to second floor of the Entertainment Center. In grand style, the elders celebrated my homecoming with a Lion Dance with beating of the drum and waving of the Zhang Clan flag. It marked our return since 1932. They proudly accepted me as a member of Zhang clan. I was deeply touched by their kind gesture.

After a tour of Kaiping City Center with Richard Liang, we met Uncle Yue for another interview of late Thursday afternoon. He anxiously presented two written folk stories about the Zhangs. In the first story, he told a tale of four girl cousins who lived in the same alley of a village. The four girls, including Huang Qin Chun, married four boys from Yang Lu Gang Village, including Zhang Mei Xin, my grandfather.

His second story was more remarkable. He told a tale about three Zhang brothers who left for America. They operated a Chinese restaurant in Little Tokyo of Los Angeles. One brother married a Japanese girl. It was known as Yet Quong Low (Sun Light Building) Chop Suey Café. I was astonished by this story. Zhang Jin Rui and Zhang Mei Xin lived and worked there in the late 1930's. They couple were Fong Lung and Fong Hanako Nishi. I know Henry Fong, their son, who I had recently met at the Far East Café Reunion.

In a final note, Uncle You casually mentioned that Zhang Pei Lan, my great grandfather went to America in the first wave of emigrants from Yang Lu Gang Village. He worked as coolie, contract laborer. He returned to Kaiping as a rich man. He wanted Zhang Mei Xin, his second son, to succeed him in America. Meanwhile, Zhang Pei Lan became a respected Village chief.

## DONG YANG VILLAGE (Yu Clan)

On Wednesday, we with Uncle Wu Zi Wen and Si Tu Mu Zhen, his wife, and Aunt Wu Zhong Xiu and Chen Jia Cheng, her husband, visited Dong Yong Village, my maternal village. Uncle Yu Li Qiang greeted us. Two Yu brothers and their two cousins had founded the village about 110 years ago. Our ancestors are buried at Ba Joksam ancestral hill, including Yu Qi He, my great grandfather. His was the first son of Yu Zhong Nian, my great great grandfather. We visited the Yu Ancestral Hall with its banyan tree in front.

We interviewed Uncle Li at our ancestral home in the sweltering heat. Yu Bo Zhu, my grandfather, had built our house in 1931. Yu Xin Kai, my mother, was born in it in 1932. He shared it with Yu Yoke Em, his younger brother. During the interview, Uncle Li revealed that Yu Zhong Nian, was a farmer who never left for America. However, he died in China in 1881 at the age of 48 years old.

Uncle Li also said that Yee Gip Wah, his third son, my great granduncle, was actually born in China. He arrived in America in about 1890 with Yee Thuy Hu, his second son, who was a translator for a bank. We looked at the two homes of Yee Gip Wah. The first one was for Wong Shee, his first wife. The second one was for Quan Shee, his second wife.

I challenged Uncle Li to find the grave of Yu Zhong Nian near Chishui. His last visit was in 1950, 58 years ago! Yee Gip Wah had buried his parents far from the village for Feng Shui reason. We wandered into two villages and asked elders for help. It was difficult due to recent floods and the passage of time. After three hours, we gave up. However, I had the opportunity to review the scenery of ancestral hills, one that may contain the grave of Yu Zhong Nian. I firmly vow that we will find it during my next trip.

## RELATIVES AND FRIENDS

My Yu relatives of uncles, aunts, and cousins were watchful of my activities. I felt a strong affinity with them in spite of the language barrier. They showed their kindness for my welfare. We celebrated my homecoming at Sunday dinner at the Fun Garden Restaurant. It was a joyful occasion as I gave gifts to them. Cousin Chen Qin Wen and Huang Xin Jie, her husband, kindly shuttled me between Guangzhou International Airport and Pan Tower International Hotel. The most important value I learned in Kaiping was that “We are Family!”

Huang Zhen Hui, Zhang Yi Chao, and Richard Liang and I formed a “Kaiping Brotherhood.” I bestowed the nickname of Alan “Greenspan” to Mr. Zhang, who is an economist with Kaiping City, as a term of endearment. As brothers, we bonded well during my short stay.

Richard was a very competent translator. He skillfully maneuvered thru the ancestral mazes. He flawlessly interpreted the stories and read the letters during the course of the fast pace three days. He was patient with me as I deeply focused on my mission.

My Zhang and Yu relatives were very glad for my homecoming to their villages. They offered constant help and kind advice. They were very excited by my presence as a returning son. I was very humbled when the Zhang elders proudly celebrated my homecoming with their Lion Dance. This fine village tradition with their elderly vigor deeply touched me.

Shirley Zhang was an invaluable supporter for my mission. She was very respectful to her elders. She has a gentle soul and a smart mind. I was thankful of the kindness by her grandmother, her father, and her. She arranged the invaluable Zhang Clan zupu. I enjoyed her company with “Greenspan” and Richard at the Tang Club for karaoke on Monday night. We had a late snack at Café D’amour at the City Center on Thursday evening.

Kyna Liu of the Pan Tower International Hotel kindly arranged my hotel room and van driver. She introduced Jan Li, her boyfriend, and Zhang Ri Aoi, her mother, to me. Fanny Ao cooked a fine Kaipingnese dinner for me. I met Sam Yin, her husband, and Sarah Lee, a young divorcee with a son. We developed a strong friendship. On Friday, Fanny and Sarah toured City Center with me. I was dazzled by the depth and breadth of consumer goods and eateries. We walked among sleek modern buildings on the New China.

#### KAIPINGNESE CUISINE

I ate a diverse range of Kaipingnese cuisine in Kaiping City as well in the river towns of Baisha, Chishui , and Chikan. The entrees of poultry and river fish were enriched with leafy green vegetables. We were treated with delicious desserts of tropical fruits. Our hearty meals were washed down by endless pots of hot tea. Their diversity of foods is strongly influenced by fusion of Western and Indian cuisines. At the Pan Tower International Hotel, I enjoyed the western buffet of Peninsula Restaurant as well as Dim Sum and Cantonese cuisine at the Guangdong Restaurant.

## REFLECTION

In solitude on my return voyage to America, I quietly reflected about this extraordinary journey in Kaiping. I gradually absorbed the ancient and modern worlds of Kaiping. I slowly developed keen senses of sight on the landscapes, sound of the people and animals, and smell of the earth and water.

I was fascinated by the legacy on my Zhang and Yu ancestors. Thru the centuries, as peasants, they endured deep poverty in the countryside of Kaiping. They toiled in drudgery in the farms during their rural subsistence lives. They made supreme sacrifices for our ultimate success in Gum Saan (America).

I have found my ancestral roots in our Zhang and Yu villages. Nevertheless, I also left with bittersweet memories of my ancestors. In a melancholic way, I had left my spirit and soul in Kaiping. I deeply value my new relationships among relatives and friends. In America, my thoughts of Kaiping evoke strong sentiments. My fate is to return to My Native Land - Kaiping.