

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

By Raymond Douglas Chong (Zhang Weiming)

Discovery

My second Kaiping Journey was the summer of June 2008. I met Zhang Baoqing along with Zhang Fuchang, her father, and Huang Ruijuan, her grandmother. They gave me a copy of the Zhang Clan zupu, family register. I was elated to obtain this invaluable treasure. The zupu cover shows a master and his driver in a chariot with his horse. This vintage document showed that our male lineage dates back to 778 A.D. during the reign of Emperor Tang Daizong of the Tang Dynasty when Zhang Cheweng founded our family line. He was an imperial officer of the fifth rank.

Zhang Clan zupu shows the names of Zhang Bingyao (great-great-grandfather), Zhang Peilan (great-grandfather), Zhang Yangshou (grandfather), and Zhang Baoshen (father). As Zhang Weiming, I represent the forty-third generation of the Zhang males. I felt well connected with my Zhang ancestors who span from 778 A.D. through forty-four generations in China, Southeast Asia, and Americas, with its legacy across thirteen centuries.

We climbed the Zhang Clan Diaolou (watch tower) on the east end, which protected the villagers from bandits during turmoil of early 20th century. From atop of the Diaolou, I was mesmerized by vista of this ancient Village, the surrounding tropical landscape, and the lush rolling hills. I intimately bonded with this ancient land of my Zhang ancestors, an idyllic paradise.

As we descended from the Diaolou, Zhang Youxin, an elderly man rushed to greet me. He was a classmate and dear friend of Zhang Baoshen. Uncle Youxin excitedly described my father's life in the Village before he departed for Gold Mountain, America, in spring 1932. He was so overjoyed to meet the son of Zhang Baoshen who had left the Village 76 years ago. I too was astonished with this moment.

I felt more connected to my Zhang ancestors when we hiked a dirt trail up the solemn Fei E Shan, Hill of the Flying Swan, to visit the tombs of past generations. Shaped like a swan, the Hill symbolizes graceful love. With a falling drizzle, we walked through a rustic monsoon rainforest of eucalyptus and ferns. The song of tawny cicadas shrilly echoed in the rainforest. When we arrived, we saw blue swallows and black butterflies flew above us. The tombs amid the ferny field were laid out in Feng Shui fashion facing Ping Hu Ping Lake below Mount of Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea. The delicate rain was a good omen on this summer day.

In front of their tombs, I respectfully respected Zhang Peilan and Li Shee, my great-grandmother, by bowing three times. The tomb of Li Shee, first wife of Zhang Yangshou, was nearby. Above their tombs, my ancestors (thirty-seventh, thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth generations) are buried. I had journeyed from Gold Mountain to respect them. I felt a powerful spiritual affinity here. I collected ferns, earth, and rocks that surrounded the tombs as keepsakes from these sacred grounds.

We went to the Culture Kingdom Garden, where the Zhang elders celebrated my humble homecoming in grand style as a returning fallen leaf. They vigorously performed a Xingshi, Lion Dance, while joyfully beating drums, gongs, and cymbals and waving the bright yellow Zhang Clan flag. This ceremony marked the first return of our family since spring 1932, when Zhang Baoshen left the Village. When the elders accepted me as a member of Zhang Clan, I was deeply touched by their kind gesture. This marvelous moment affirmed my Zhang ancestral roots in soulful, spiritual and hearty ways.

Respect

On the first day of my arrival in China in spring 2009, I hosted a banquet in at Pan Tower International Hotel for my Zhang and Yu (maternal) relatives and my friends. I reunited with my Kaiping Brothers: Zhang Wuhuiping, Huang Zhenhui, and Liang Zhuowei. Zhang Li read aloud to the gathering my poem Kaiping: My Native Land.

We arrived at Long Gang Li. As we waited at the stony pavilion at outskirts of Long Gang Li, I heard the sounds of a pounding drum, a beating gong, and a clanging cymbal inside the Village. I was completely surprised when Zhang Guangye, the Village chief, led an entourage of ten in a Xingshi to celebrate my return. Zhang Huixin carried a pitchfork to eagerly ward off evil spirits. They proudly waved their yellow Zhang Clan flag and a red Xingshi flag. I was deeply humbled by this show of respect as a fallen leaf.

As we marched to the Zhang Shiquan Temple, the villagers waited for me. I was very proud and well excited to stand in front of the Xingshi troupe as they waved the bright Zhang Clan flag. I respectfully honored Zhang Shiquan, the Village patriarch, by bowing with smoky joss sticks and cups of rice wine.

After my reception, Zhang Guangye led me on an excursion of landmarks of Long Gang Li. We looked at three Diaolou, six shrines, and two banyan trees. There were shrines for gnomes for the old villages: Xiang Bei and Lian Tang Li. Near a pond: The Pond of Lotus with the God of the Land and The God of Grain. Another one: Lead a Long Life and Never Die and A God. Near the Zhang Clan Diaolou, I saw a shrine for Divinity of Grain and Earth.

At the Diao Ge watchtower, I found a plaque that read Donation List for Rebuilding Long Gang Li East Wen Ge. It included the names of Zhang Peilan and Zhang Yangshou as donors. Zhang Yongchang and Huang Meihua, the caretakers, then joined me in my ancestral house. I reviewed the inscriptions on the wood panel of the Zhang family altar as well as the shrines. I examined the three ancestral tablets and panel. The tablets proclaim Altars of Zhang Family Generations: Thirty-Seventh Generation Hua Chong and His Wife. The ancestral panel proclaims The Altar of the Thirty-Ninth Generation: Zhang Yao and His Wife and also mentions the fortieth, forty-first, and forty-second generations. They are an invaluable link to the past. I properly placed them at the Zhang family altar that was damaged during the Cultural Revolution.

During a crispy spring day of May 2009, we held the Zhang ancestor respect ritual in Long Gang Li. The villagers greeted me with a glorious Xingshi to the sounds of drums, gongs, and cymbals. We proudly marched along a path lined with the colorful flags of Zhang Clan, Long Gang Kung Fu, Long Gang School, and Xingshi to the Zhang Shiquan Temple.

I humbly greeted the elders at the entry as I entered the Temple. The altar of the Village patriarch was lit by a pair of red candles. I honored Zhang Shiquan by bowing and leaving joss sticks, paper money, and rice wine at the altar. Two elderly ladies, Xu Lianti and Huang Caiyun, carefully managed the ancestral respect ritual. The Lion heartily entered the Temple to pay respect to our Zhang ancestors and bless the offering of baked geese and steam buns to Zhang Shiquan. It danced, pranced, and bowed in front of the Zhang Shiquan altar. Villagers lit firecrackers at the end of the ritual to scare the evil spirits away. My heart and my mind were jubilant in finally respecting the Zhang ancestors in my Kaiping Journey. I was simply overwhelmed by the significance of the moment.

In Chinese culture, ancestral respect is an important tradition. The good fortune of a person is associated with happiness of his ancestral spirits. Three bows show respect to one's ancestors in heaven. A pair of red candles at the altar lights show the way out of darkness. Flowers symbolize respect and remembrance of ancestors. Food is offered to the ancestors. The smoke of joss sticks represents the ancestral spirits. Hell bank notes represent good fortune to the ancestors. Rice wine is poured on the ground for the ancestors to drink, and firecrackers to scare the evil spirits.

This humble day of Zhang ancestral respect required much preparation. Zhang Guangye made elaborate arrangements. Seven new granite tombstones were engraved for my ancestors at the Fei E Shan and workers cleared the overgrowth at the tombs. The food offering included baked geese, baked chicken, boiled duck eggs, barbecue pork, steamed buns, golden sponge cakes, and snacks, plus rice wine and beer.

At my ancestral house, I met four relatives from Hong Kong for the first time: Huang Cuixiao, Zhang Guoxiang, Zhang Suteng, and Zhang Supeng. Huang Cuixiao is the wife of the late Zhang Cemin, who died in late 2008. Zhang Guoxiang is their son: the forty-third generation. Zhang Peiyi, their ancestor, was the younger brother of Zhang Peilan, my great-grandfather. I showed them my collection of vintage photos from 1920's. I was very joyful to meet these relatives — another connection to the past. In the parlor above us, I sensed that the spirits of our Zhang ancestors were happy with our family reunion. With Huang Cuixiao, we repeated the ancestral respect ritual in the parlor in front of the Zhang family altar.

During the late morning, about 50 people trekked to the sacred Fei E Shan to respect the Zhang ancestors in the tombs. Two porters carried the offerings and supplies on the trail. We hiked through the monsoon rainforest of eucalyptus on the ferny ground. The Feng Shui master approved this day of respect on April 6, 2009. His marker read May the Project Go Smoothly.

At the tombs on the ferny slope, we offered many plates of geese, pork, eggs, and buns to five generations (thirty-seventh to forty-first) of Zhang ancestors. Each tombstone read Long Gang Li Generations – Rebuilt in 2009. Burning red candles and joss sticks were placed in front of the tombs. Paper tomb flowers adorned the tomb mounds in display. Paper money lay on the ground for burning. Everyone repeated the ancestral respect ritual and bowed three times with joss sticks, paper money, and rice wine. I scattered bits of bread and egg. Zhang Guangye quickly passed out the lucky money. Healthy, Wealthy, Happy and Come Back, it said. We reverently feasted on the food for our lunch.

During a pensive moment, I touched the coarse tombstones of my eight ancestors. In poignant solitude, I sensed their gentle presence. I smelled the sweet fragrances of the wildflowers, soapwort, redbud, and eucalyptus of the monsoon rainforest. In serenity, I saw the towering peak of Shi Jin and gazed upon crystal Ping Hu as it shimmered during the late afternoon.

As I marveled at the panorama of the Fei E Shan, I was spiritually impressed by the Chinese tradition of ancestral respect. I was humbled as we respected my Zhang ancestors in Long Gang Li.

Muse

My soulful Kaiping Journey to Long Gang Li has led me to my spiritual awakening in search of my Zhang ancestral roots. Through this unforgettable Kaiping Journey, I have gained and absorbed knowledge of my Chinese heritage in Kaiping. My ethos has radically transformed in myriad ways, since January 30, 2003, when my friend, John Thomas Killip, committed suicide in despair in Monterey, California.

My very essence had truly transcended during this fantastic odyssey. From the insolent and surly young American boy who resented the traditions of the past. To a humble and reverent mature Chinese man who respects his Zhang ancestors.

Now, I clearly realize that my Zhang ancestors have always etched a subliminal influence on my life. They are always in my blood, in my bones, and in my thoughts. With tremendous pride, I am an American with Chinese roots.

A precious part of my heart always dwells in Kaiping, for I deeply value my Zhang relatives and intimate friends there. Upon my return to Gold Mountain, I constantly muse about my Zhang ancestors in Kaiping — especially the ancestral respect ritual at Long Gang Li and Fei E Shan.

Adrift in America, I have finally arrived in full circle as a fallen leaf, indelibly rooted in Long Gang Li, with my Zhang ancestors, during My Kaiping Journey: From Gold Mountain to Dragon Hill Village. (end)
