APPENDIX 2: Tong’ap Lives through Chinese Texts

1. Secret families

It will probably never be clear how widespread dual family systems were among Fujidung’on migrants in Suriname, but it was certainly far from uncommon for Chinese who already had a family back home to have a wife (legal or common-law) and children in Suriname. In any case, many migrants kept their lives in China secret from their Surinamese children. The secret of grandfather Zhang Sifa’s (Kejia: Zong Sifat; Chinese courtesy name: Zhang Youjun; Kejia: Zong Yuzun. Formal Western names: James Tjon Sie Fat, James Chong) other wife in Dongguan was revealed in the late 1970s, when a letter in Chinese arrived from a refugee camp in Thailand addressed to my father from a family whose mother claimed to be Zhang Sifa’s granddaughter, and therefore my father’s niece. She explained that her father, Zhang Ruiwen, was Zhang Sifa’s eldest son. He had moved to Vietnam where he became known as Trương Văn (the Sino-Vietnamese pronunciation of the characters for zhang and wen). He later resettled in Laos where he married and had children, and had died some years earlier.

The letters required my father, uncle and aunts to explain what they knew. Apparently, great-grandfather was unable to pay a village healer for treating his son for a boil on the head, and instead it was agreed that the young boy should marry the healer’s daughter. As Zhang Sifa explained, he left his wife in China without children, and so a son was purchased for her. Regardless of whether Zhang Ruiwen was Zhang Sifa’s biological son, it would have been difficult to explain to his Anglican wife from Guyana that she was technically a concubine rather than the principal wife, particularly after a conspicuously opulent wedding ceremony in the Kong Ngie Tong huiguan. We also found out that our grandmother, née Sue, was from the Hopetown Project in Demerara, and that her brothers had helped fund Zhang Sifa’s enterprises. Grandfather Zhang Sifa’s first son, whose existence we were not aware of, turned out to have contracted leprosy and to have died in obscurity in Paramaribo in his late thirties.
In the early 1990s we were overwhelmed by more information on grandfather’s family background, when another grandchild of his contacted me. In his letter he carefully avoided the issue of which of grandfather’s wives was the concubine and equally carefully raised the issue of family inheritance and real estate in the then booming economy of Dongguan:

Dear cousin: greetings!

A relative in our ancestral village wrote me and remarked that you visited in June of this year, and I’m very happy about that. Unfortunately I was not aware of your plans, or we cousins could have all been together in the hills of our ancestors, how much better that would have been!

Our grandfather Zhang Sifa (courtesy name Zhang Youjun) moved to Suriname when he was young. According to what my father Zhang Ruiwen (courtesy name Zhang Zuanming) told me once, Grandfather was well-known there because of his business selling chocolate and he often sent remittances back home. Later my grandmother died. At the beginning of the War of Resistance against Japan¹ we received a family picture from grandfather in South America. (I saw this photograph myself. I remember there were over ten men and women of various ages, among which the faces of Grandfather and Second Grandmother. The others were perhaps Uncle Ruilin and Uncle Ruipeng² and cousins of yours.) Contact between Grandfather and home were lost since that time. Before you know more than half a century has passed. Your return to the ancestral village represents Grandfather’s wishes and was accompanied by the deepest goodwill of my uncles and your whole family. Now there is the hope for renewed relationships in our unfortunate but also happy family.

Please forgive us for not keeping in contact for so long. I know nothing with any certainty about Uncle Ruilin and Uncle Ruipeng, I also do not know how many brothers and sisters you have. And what is the current situation? I hereby, on behalf of my brothers and sisters (who live spread over Canada, America, France, Belgium, Taiwan), send you cousins our heartfelt greetings, and to our uncles and aunts the most respectful greetings and affection.

My father Ruiwen and mother passed away shortly after each other some years ago (in Laos and Thailand). My brothers and sisters later moved to quite a lot of different countries. I am the only brother who returned to China from Laos to study and find work. I am 52 already this year. When I was young I graduated from a university in Beijing. Now I am a technician in a chemi-

¹ 1937-1945.
² Zhang Ruilin: my uncle I. Tjon Sie Fat; Zhang Ruipeng: my father H. Tjon Sie Fat.
cal plant. A few decades ago I worked in a city in northern China, Tianjin. The last few years I returned to Guangdong Province to work. Every year I go home once or twice.

Our grandfather left two houses in the village of Bolang Xinwei, one is still in good condition, the other was destroyed by fire and now a plot of open land remains. I don’t know whether anyone made this clear to you when you returned on this occasion? Connected to the burnt-down house were four additional houses that belonged to the other four uncles. (There were five brothers in our grandfather’s generation. Our grandfather is the fourth brother.) The five brothers of that generation drifted abroad one after the other to earn money and most never returned. Most of the sons and daughters in the generation after them lived abroad. Only Zhang Zihuan (courtesy name Zuanlin), the son of uncle Zhang Youye (who used to work with Grandfather in Suriname) returned from Hong Kong and built a beautiful Western-style house at the old address. This house embodies the fondest wish of Uncle Zihuan. It towers on good land of the whole Zhang Clan, welcoming foreign relatives on their increasingly numerous visits. In the last years Qianzhi, a French cousin, I, and you have returned.

The most exciting development in this process of return to the village is that I and cousin Zhuansheng (the eldest son of Uncle Zihuan) found the grave of the worthy Zhang Xikun on a nearby hill. The worthy Xikun was Grandfather’s grandfather and therefore our great-great-grandfather. His heir (son) was our great-grandfather Benqiu. Benqiu had five sons and one daughter. All the old buildings, residences, persons and things originate from these five brothers. Now, as Uncle Zihuan (the son of the ‘Fifth Brother’ Zhang Youye) built a magnificent Western house on family land in order to receive foreign relatives, the relatives that return to discuss the family situation and search for their roots will not be able to leave the comfort of this house, and so will not be able to do without the intervention and help of cousin Zhang Zhuansheng and other cousins. Cousin Zhuansheng lives in Hong Kong. He decided that next year during Qingming sacrifices will be offered to our ancestor, the worthy Zhang Xikun again for the first time. Then everyone will carry a roast pig up the hill. So all relatives returning from far and near are invited to come back around that time. Now that I have told you of this decision I don’t know whether you will be able to come back again next Qingming Festival (a number of days in March or April)? I hereby can tell you that the names of a number of generations of children and grandchildren are engraved on the funerary stele of Mr. Xikun. Among these are his heir (son) Benqiu, a grandson Youjun, and a great-grandson Ruilin, and some other names.

Greetings from afar, good fortune to all the family,
Cousin Zhang Boxiang, 27 July 1991
2. Severed ties

Remittances were a heavy burden for migrants, and severe loss of face could result when this obligation could not be met. Li Dingyao (Kejia: Li Tinyao), who was born in Dongguan on 3 October 1900, died in Paramaribo on 15 March 1995. Among his personal belongings, the Laiap family he had spent his whole life with found letters from his family in China spanning a period of more than fifty years, and I was allowed to copy them. There is no way of telling if and what ‘A-soek’ Li Dingyao wrote back to his family in China.\(^3\) One of the earliest letters was from his mother-in-law, dated 30 May 1932, which gives some idea of the emotions that prevented Li Dingyao from returning home and talking about his past:

Dingyao, my son-in-law;

We all know how many years have passed since you left. And there have not been many letters and we do not know your plans. You have not returned to your family and you have not sent any money for your family’s upkeep. Moreover, your family has no fertile fields. What should your wife and child live from? And your son has to go to school too. With regard to rearing sons, and old adage has it that sons you invest in now will be there for you in your old age, like grain hoarded to guard against famine. The education of sons and younger brothers is an important stage in life as well as the basis for future enterprise. It is the responsibility of parents to send you to school to learn to read and write when you are small. When you, my son-in-law, left all these years ago to look for work abroad, your wife had to be be there for her child. Who must the poor woman count on now? While your father-in-law was still alive there was still some help. Now he’s passed away, who can I look forward to? Everything is finished now, what are we to do? We are waiting for letters with money. Good son-in-law, you must do something to help things. In all sincerity, do every effort, send a little bit of money. Come back to China, to your wife. Work for your family’s happiness. You’re ancestors were glorious. You did not leave for nothing, otherwise you are just idling abroad without work. I keep seeing your friends return triumphantly. Are you not ashamed? Dying pointlessly abroad, how can you do that to your father, mother, wife

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\(^3\) A-soek is a rendition of Fuidung’on Kejia: asuk 阿叔, ‘father’s younger brother; term of address for an uncle; affectionate term of address for an older unrelated male.’
and child? Year after year abroad, nowhere to settle, is that not shameful? I truly hope that you will take this plea to heart. Make sure to respond when you receive this letter.

Your mother-in-law, Mrs. Li.

The last letter Li Dingyao received was from his son, dated 29 July 1949. Then suddenly, a little over than half a century after the letter from his mother-in-law, contact was re-established. A letter dated 2 September 1984 came from his son’s family in Lihe Village, Qingqi, in Dongguan:

Dearest Grandfather Dingyao;

It is hard to believe that more than sixty years of monumental changes have passed since you left your family to cross so far beyond the seas. Since your departure so many things have changed beyond imagination. Fortunately we retain a sharp image of you, abroad at your advanced age. Now we have a letter from far away telling us of how your are, which has caused so much happiness for the whole family. Let me now tell you of some family developments, I hope you will be delighted. Not much changes in the village, people come and people go. Your daughter-in-law Luoyou had three boys and two girls. The eldest daughter, Wenzhen, married a Liu and had two boys and a girl. When she grew up she moved to Zhangmutou and she works in the hospital. Newest Sister married a Huang from Luhuju village and had one boy and two girls who have now all adults. Wenkai is married and has two boys and a girl who are studying. Jiangren is married and has two boys and a girl who have graduated and are working. Wenlin is 29, unmarried, and works in a brick factory. We are all together, we are self-sufficient, we are healthy, one might say that our lives are okay.

How is your life abroad, Grandfather? How strange it all is. We were destined to receive a letter telling us about you. Perhaps Heaven may set an occasion to rejoin your family here. Unable to see you face to face for an eternity that spread like blotted ink, such sentiments can only be vaguely expressed in writing. And being told about something is nothing like seeing it, and that is nothing like being there yourself. I hope this opportunity is real and no mistake. I hope so much that you could plan to return to China sometime in the future. We should keep regular contact, and pray that those releatives who have gone to Suriname or further abroad or have good prospects will all reunite. I can hardly contain my emotions. This is the wish of the grandchildren, that we will have the greatest luck and that you will respond to this heartfelt request.

Sincerely yours, looking forward to your response, your daughter-in-law Luoyou.
3. Life in Suriname

There are very few texts in Chinese that express the relationship between Fuidung’on Hakka huaqiao in Suriname and their qiaoxiang in the Fuidung’on Region in their own words. One notable exception is the works of ‘Afoeng’ Chiu Hung (formal Chinese name in PTH: Qiu Hong; Kejia: Hiu Fung), former chairman of Kong Ngie Tong Sang and the very first Chinese immigrant to take Surinamese nationality. He set personal observations and social commentaries to the melodies of Hakka san’go or ‘mountain songs’. Quite a number of the texts are about the feelings and priorities of Fuidung’on Hakka chain migrants. A few examples:

Nr. 108, pg. 182 嘆窮日 Poverty
Debts every year, with heavy interest.
Nobody to borrow from, everyone is poor.
No money for rice, your stomach is empty.
Nothing in the pot all day long.

Nr. 109, pg. 182 嘆寒天 Cold
Panic breaks out when the wind turns north.
Threadbare clothes don’t help against the cold.
The poor fear days with northerly wind the most.
When will there be a good day again?

Nr. 110, pg. 182 嘆饑荒 Hunger
How far can you share a midday meal?
With rice running short you make congee.
You feel no hunger with congee in your stomach.
When your stomach is empty, your belly hurts.

Nr. 3, pg. 163 什咏 A Song
Hands pale as jade hold a golden cup.
She asks her husband: “When will you be back?
Don’t touch the wild flowers along the roadside.
A branch of cherry blossom waits at home.
We say our goodbyes in my bedroom. Come back to me.”

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“When I’ve learnt to do business, I’ll be back.
I care not for roses with their divine perfume.
All my heart longs for the cherry blossom at home.”

Nr. 118, pg. 183 自感一生 My Life
At sixteen I left school in China.
My family was poor, you see.
I went to look for work in Hong Kong as a youth.
There are no words to describe the alienation there.
At eighteen I met a rich man in China.
I borrowed money to go abroad.
Crossing the sea took three months.
Once in Suriname I tried to get settled.
In Suriname I was initially apprenticed to a goldsmith.
I suffered innumerable hardships.
It was during the Great Depression;
All businesses were hit hard.
Sixty-two years I lived in Suriname,
Working hard every day, non-stop.
It was hard, but I had self-respect.
I strove to get on and attain glory.

Nr. 60, pg. 173 寒舍失竊 Burgled
I came home in good cheer and climbed the stairs.
But thieves had ransacked the place, I was all shaken.
Money finishes your peace of mind, only Heaven grants security,
remember that Jesus saves and blesses.

Nr. 78, pg. 175 廣義堂月會 Kong Ngie Tong Sang’s Savings and Credit System
This excellent system benefits Chinese merchants.
Everyone joins together to provide mutual assistance.
Resources are pooled so businesses can be opened.
Mutual help and love flow like a great river.
Our brothers arrive here empty-handed.
Pooling their money they shared resources.
This system is for those who want to go into business.
Be hard working and patient and you need not worry about poverty.

Nr. 34, pg. 169 無題 Untitled
The community of Overseas Chinese is one great family.
The first immigrant started business for those who followed.
The associations of the immigrants work for the greater good.
Organizing things is to bring peace to the community.
Leaders should not act selfishly, and should not make plans that harm people. They should act sincerely and justly, to reach and connect all Overseas Chinese. You don’t just waste the family’s firewood. The aspirations of the Huaqiao community should be lofty. One cannot go and ruin reputations. Proper association must be the standard. Every action must be sincere. Nepotism must never occur and none should be favoured. There is so much talent in the Overseas Chinese community; With gifted people at the helm the huiguan will be as new.

Nr. 58, pg. 172 思亡妻 (金蓮) Thinking of My Late Wife (Jin Lian)
My wife passed away years ago. The day she died was a dark and hateful day. Will I ever stop remembering her? I drift like a white cloud, constantly depressed. Her life was over, she did not grow old. She would stand by me in the shop at the break of dawn. Those who have completed their business should go first. Sadness chokes me, disappointment overwhelms me.

Nr. 35, pg. 169 送子回國讀書有感 Reflections on Sending Sons to Be Educated in China
It was very hard making a life abroad. I never forgot how my travels cost me my youth. Sending a son back to learn civilization, is to continue the idea of training a successor. Everyone thinks of his glorious ancestors, feelings for the Old Country run very deep. I have laboured half a life without any luxuries, hoping that my son would return to become a man. I still dream of family and friends and how they are. The huge distance brings me down. The last three years he has studied diligently, he finished his studies and honoured his ancestors.

Nr. 106, pg. 180 雨天 Rainy Season
Every afternoon peals of thunder. Roaring rainstorms, flooding the town. A pedestrian, quiet and alone, looks up at the sky; will this ever end?

Nr. 100, pg. 179 家鄉巨變 Huge Changes in the Village
Today the village is not the same.
There is telephone, electric light,
Television, refrigerators, washing machines.
Living standards improve each year.
Tall buildings block the sky.
Industry and agriculture are developed.
Many old sojourners are returning.
‘Leaves of a tree returning to its roots’, happy in old age.

Nr. 122, pg. 184 感懷 Thoughts
‘There is moonlight at the foot of my bed.’5
A breeze carries the scent of fresh flowers.
Sojourners stick together abroad.
Homesick at the edge of the world.
Decades passed since they left home.
Drifting to far-off lands in search of money.
Now the Homeland is doing so well.
‘Leaves returning to roots’, to end their days.

4. Returning home

Sojourning was not a complete lie. It will never be clear what exact proportion of Fuidung’on Hakka chain migrants in Suriname returned home, but returnees did exist. One example is Li Runting (Kejia: Li Yuntin), born in the village of Fengchuilian, Qingqi (Dongguan), in 1873. He arrived in Suriname alone, not as a chain migrant, at the age of twenty. He started out as an assistant in a gambling den, but ended up as a successful entrepreneur importing Chinese goods. At the age of 37 he instructed his older brother Dingting to invest the remittances in real estate – houses, agricultural land, lychee orchards. Finally, at 48, he returned to Qingqi. During the next two years he and other big names in the village refurbished the Qingqi market, in which he acquired two shops. He became a handling agent and informal banker for Overseas Chinese business. In 1927 Li Runting became president of the Qun An Automobile and Transport Co., and a plan to construct a highway linking Qingqi to the world beyond the hills was hatched and completed in 1932.

5 An allusion to Thoughts on a Still Night (静夜思) by Li Bai (701-762), the huaqiao ‘anthem’: ‘Moonlight before my bed; It looked like frost; I gaze up at the bright moon; then lower my head and think of home.’
In the meantime he and other returnees also planned to set up a school for boys.

The Overseas Chinese had already invested quite some capital in the two public projects – the Qingqi Bazaar and the Qingqi-Zhangmutou Highway. So it was no surprise that the project of the Luming school faced funding problems. But they were determined, quite determined, to achieve that goal. Once again Li Runting invested in a trip across the ocean, to return to Suriname and personally convince the Overseas Chinese there to donate funds. Because of the connections and friends he had in Suriname, Li Runting managed to gain the support of the leaders of the Overseas Chinese in that same year. The status of those leaders abroad was such that if they gave the call, donations followed immediately. Li Runting accomplished his task successfully and returned to Qingqi with significant funds for the construction of the school. He took with him a young coconut palm which he planted in the schoolyard the next day. Later he took along Mrs. Chen Donghai to Vietnam to get money from the Overseas Chinese. Because of the tense situation in Vietnam at the time they had to take care with the funds. Departing male travellers could be checked by customs officers at any time. As a security measure, Li Runting converted the cash into small gold bars which he made Mrs. Chen carry to avoid trouble. Again he brought back small trees, two Flamboyant seedlings.6

Li Runting and his friends used the funds to set up the Luming school, and later he also helped found the Guangyu school. Li started a quicklime factory, and was instrumental in the construction of the Maooshe Reservoir. In this way he accumulated considerable prestige:

In the Republican era there were often conflicts between different clans. The chronicles of the Fengchuilian Li family record that: “In the Xianfeng Period7 of the Qing Dynasty the Li’s of this village fought the Zhu’s of Yuliang Village. In the middle of the night Li Sipu, the 17 year-old son of Li Bingquan, bravely took explosives to the roof of the Zhu clan house. He spied on the enemy until they had all gathered inside. Then he lighted the charges and threw them down into the building. He wanted to kill the enemy,  

6 Delonix regia, Phượng Vĩ in Vietnamese. The tree with its masses of fiery red flowers is strongly associated with students and summer in Vietnam. The two Flamboyant trees and the coconut palm were a tangible link to the Vietnamese and Surinamese contributors. It is unclear what other symbolism, if any, Li Runting invested in the coconut palm.
7 1851-1865.
but unfortunately he did not escape the conflagration himself. His injuries were very severe. The doctor could not help him and eventually he died.”

The example above shows that vendetta was an early phenomenon in Qingqi. In order to provide a solution Li Runting was willing to compensate the losses of both sides, which made people respect him even more. That is why, when vendettas or other conflicts broke out, Li Runting would always be chosen as a peacemaker to find solutions and arbitrate.

The biography goes on to relate that when the People’s Republic was proclaimed, Li Runting moved to Hong Kong. Land reforms were started in 1951 and his family were branded Overseas Chinese Big Landowners. His wife, Chen Dongmei, was ‘struggled’ during mass meetings in the village, and she and two sons lost everything. Cut off from his family, Li Runting had become a devout Christian in Hong Kong. He suffered a stroke in 1958 and died in his sleep the following year at the age of 86.8

5. Hidden quarrels

The image of a quiet, closed community of hard-working Chinese was partly fostered by ethnic Chinese themselves who extended the taboo against bringing out family secrets to anything regarding the Chinese ‘community’. The ubiquitous quarrels and scandals remained hidden from non-Chinese Surinamese, mostly because of a language barrier exacerbated by a tendency of the Chinese-language media to self-censorship. Traces of dissident voices do survive, however. In the early 1990s a number of anonymous stencilled pamphlets highly critical of the huiguan elite, in particular the Kong Ngie Tong Sang leadership, circulated among Chinese in Paramaribo. The texts had been copied out in a mixture of traditional and PRC orthography, with some characters fitting neither category. The following example is fairly typical.

‘The Rites are Over – Dismiss the Monks’
Du Yuefang donated 30,000 to the Chinese School. Only to be kicked out after a year on the board. That’s this world for you, unfair, especially with small-minded people in charge. The chiefs of Kong Ngie Tong Sang are an unscrupulous bunch.

8 Li Runting’s granddaughter in Suriname, Mrs. W. Hermelijn-Lie Kie Sang, provided documentation, which included Chinese-language texts prepared by Mr. Sammy Li / Li Linquan, a grandson of Li Runting’s in Hong Kong.
Look, someone donates 10,000 guilders, has been chairman for five years (including this year), and still refuses to hand over the reins. At the elections of 1993 though the ballots were readied early, six new board members each had a hundred votes, but ex-board member Du Yuefang got a paltry 57 votes?! The most pitiful results were for Zhuo Boyou and Li Yongrong, and these two gentlemen got the job. The guys in charge were clearly pulling a fast one, 'proving' to us Chinese that our elections are 'democratic', and 'free'. You didn't manage to get the highest vote, so people 'don't support you'. That's what's called playing for high stakes!

I don't get these so-called leaders. All rotten on the inside and all correct out front. Their activities go unchecked. They owe money and don't pay it back. They have no integrity or talent. But big surprise, they're good friends and frequent visitors of the PRC embassy. Me, A-Fu, I'm really ashamed of them, I avoid having to deal with them, I avoid having to shake hands with these people who follow every priest who promises them heaven, and when I have to I wash my hands a number of times. But that our PRC embassy keeps them of all people as friends, that's strange. In the Chinese community there are many of whole character and high prestige, yet the embassy does not deal with them. Is the Chinese embassy really serving the Chinese people? Or are they out to make things difficult? People here with a Chinese passport, if they should lose their passport they can't get a replacement in anything less than six months. Even getting a new Surinamese passport doesn't take as long as six months!

Now that this matter of Du Yuefang has been proven, do you want to donate to the Chinese school? By all means do, but if you want to be on the board, you can only do that for one year. Moreover, in that year you will need to 'cover up' your talents. Just listen to what is said and you might be allowed to continue. Otherwise, please pack your bags on your own accord. The chiefs of Kong Ngie Tong Sang use this kind of tricks to keep control of Kong Ngie Tong Sang. Every Chinese here needs to open his eyes.

Da Fu, 1 February