

Butte County Historical Society
DIGGIN'S



Mystery Rack #2, Chico Chinese Temple

Merchants and Revolutionaries: Chinese-Language Letters Held in the Chico History Museum

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The below is a collaborative effort by the authors, all PhD candidates in the departments of East Asian Languages and Cultures or Art History at UC Berkeley, to transcribe, translate, and introduce the Chinese-language letters and envelopes on display in the Chico History Museum. We would like to thank Jianye He 何劍葉 of the C.V. Starr East Asian Library for her help with difficult points of transcription and the non-standard numeral systems used in these commercial documents, as well as Yinou Chang 張以諾, who holds a PhD from National Cheng-Chi University, for providing historical expertise on details of the National Protection War. We also thank professor emeritus Keith Johnson of California State University Chico for his encouragement and assistance with local knowledge. All of these documents are on loan to the museum for display from Randy Taylor, who purchased them from a dealer in San Francisco roughly twenty years ago. Randy Taylor serves on the museum's Board of Directors.

These documents offer a window into Chinese American life, particularly that of merchants of general goods in the Sacramento Valley in the 1910s and 1920s. The letters and envelopes seem to have been at some point “shuffled”; a close examination of the dates and recipients reveals that only one of the envelopes definitively matches a letter, this being the commercial note sent on December 29, 1911 from the “Chinese Bazaar” of the Quong Tai Lung 廣泰隆 Company, at 148 Broadway in Chico, to the W. Sang Leung Company in San Francisco. For this reason we have placed this letter and its envelope (which are chronologically earliest) first as our “Document 1.” Documents 2, 3, and 4 are letters addressed to one Huang Shuzi 黃樹滋, apparently the proprietor of Wing Sang Wo 永生和公司, located at 706 Cherry Street. (Huang is the surname and Shuzi the personal name; in the early twentieth century, “Huang” was commonly romanized as “Wong,” according to its Cantonese pronunciation.) Perhaps the most remarkable letter in this collection is Document 2, which narrates a dramatic story of war and loss in the wake of the establishment of the Republic of China; Documents 3 and 4 describe commercial transactions. Finally, we examine the remaining four envelopes, all also addressed to Huang Shuzi, and variously postmarked from San Francisco, Mexico, and Guangdong Province in China.

Two other documents exist in the Chico History Museum which we have not translated here due to their length and technical nature. One is a long receipt of shipments to Wing Sang Wo from the San Francisco-based Cuitai company (see Document 4 below). The other is an account-book for the year 1917, describing commercial transactions, money-lending with interest, donations, etc.; whether this book pertains to Quong Tai Lung Company, Huang Shuzi's Wing Sang Wo Company, or some other enterprise is unknown.

Few letters in Chinese of this kind have been translated, and there is often an impression that Chinese migrants in California left no written record. The minutiae of detail here show that a vast amount of material was probably generated in commercial transactions and personal letters, much of it now lost, uncollected, or simply untranslated into English. The detail also gives us a glimpse of the rhetorical world of Chinese American merchants, shows us the ease and cheapness of importing goods, and draws our attention to the amount of correspondence flying back and forth, as business orders were conducted in close communication with suppliers in the USA and abroad. The ready communication, indicated by envelopes postmarked in two neighboring small towns to the east of Guangzhou (Canton), and the letter describing turmoil in the region, suggests a continued orientation towards southern China, while these immigrants made lives and livelihoods in northern California. This correspondence invites us to see Chico and Butte County as well-connected – networked across California to other Chinese communities, to San Francisco as port and cultural hub, to Mexico, and to Guangdong Province, in a regular flow of goods and words at multiple scales.

The fancy-goods store Quong Tai Lung (“Broad, Peaceful, and Flourishing”) Company, originator of our Document 1, sold imported, affordable luxury items from a location outside of Chinatown on Broadway between First and Second for over thirty years. The store advertised itself to an English-speaking audience every holiday season as “the largest importers and distributors in the Sacramento valley” of Chinese and Japanese goods, selling tea sets, rattan furniture, lacquerware, and embroidered silk clothing, and in one banner year, canaries.¹ As of 1930 one Lew Ed, who had arrived in the US forty

¹ “Advertisement: Big Stock Reduction Sale, High Grade Staple and Novelty Chinese and Japanese Goods,” *Chico Record*, 20 December 1923, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=CR19231220.2.56.1>; “Canton Bazaar,” *Chico Record*, 2 December 1911, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=CR19111202.2.37.3>; “Buy Your Christmas Gifts Here; Oriental Art, Dry Goods and Toys; Eighteenth Annual Holiday Sale,” *Chico Record*, 10 December 1922, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=CR19221210.2.127.2>.

years before, had been “the proprietor for many years,” assisted at various times by nephews and California-born grandchildren. It is unclear if Lew Ed is the author of Document 1, as it is signed and stamped only with the name of the company, and he may not have been the owner at the time.² Of note to the display of Chico temple objects at the museum, Lew Ed is reported to have arranged the donation of embroidered tapestries from the shuttered temple to the Bidwell Memorial Presbyterian Church, a mission of which he was a member.³ The Quong Tai Lung Company letter translated below is addressed to W. Sang Leung, another emporium of Chinese and Japanese goods in San Francisco.⁴

Wing Sang Wo (“Ever-Arising Harmony”), the company concerned in the remainder of these letters and envelopes, designated itself a “general merchandise store” (*zahu* 雜貨) in the 1913 International Chinese Business Directory. Except for two laundries and three drug stores (herb shops), so too were the other 25 or so Chinese businesses in Chico in the directory that year. The general store likely supplied local Chinese residents with groceries and sundries: foods, paper and stationery, clothing, and perhaps some medicine (though those were also found in the specialized shops in town). Wing Sang Wo perhaps also supplied the local white population with imported small luxury goods, though this trade would mostly have been in stores like the Quong Tai Lung Company of Document 1.⁵ While many Chinese businesses had multiple partners, Huang Shuzi appears to have operated Wing Sang Wo alone, although it is unclear when he took it over. As is common with Chinese commercial enterprises, the name Wing Sang Wo Company did not reflect the proprietors’ personal names, and the name itself was sold in 1907, along with the stock and building, according to a notice in the *Chico Record*.⁶

² “Chinese to Open New Restaurant,” *The Chico Enterprise*, 31 Oct 1930, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-chico-enterprise/136022933/>; US Census Bureau, 1930 US census population schedules, Chico, Butte County, California, National Archives and Records Administration, https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/88936368:6224?tid=&pid=&queryId=19f7a2b684ea69d895aad66232acb31e&_phsrc=kLm240&_phstart=successSource.

³ Vida Shepard, “Take It From Me,” *Chico Enterprise-Record*, 28 Oct 1946, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/enterprise-record/136023185/>.

⁴ Wong, “International Chinese Business Directory of the World For the Year 1913.”

⁵ Wong Kin, compiler, “International Chinese Business Directory of the World For the Year 1913” (San Francisco: International Chinese Business Directory Co., Inc., 10 February 1913).

⁶ “Notice of Sale,” *Chico Record*, 24 January 1907, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=CR19070124.2.27.4>

The company was located at 706 New Chinatown, or Cherry Street – the addresses were deemed interchangeable enough for the letter-writers to address them to New Chinatown. The building would have been a narrow storefront in a block of brick buildings with wooden storage sheds behind (see map figure). This block of Cherry and Orange Streets between 7th and 8th, dubbed “New Chinatown,” was composed of stores and dwellings of Chinese and Japanese residents, and had emerged after 1890 as Old Chinatown burned and anti-Chinese Chicanos fought to prevent its rebuilding. Migrants from the Pearl River Delta region in China had settled in Chico and the surrounding areas from the 1850s to mine and to supply miners, before moving into railroad work and then service industries and agriculture (both as independent tenant farmers or as employees, such as on John Bidwell’s ranch). Michele Shover estimates there were 500 Chinese people in a city of 4000 whites in the 1880s.⁷ But with the anti-Chinese movement across the state growing in the 1870s, “incidents of murder, lynching and arson reached heights between 1877 and 1888,” including the murder of five men on the Lemm Family ranch in 1877, precipitating an “exodus by several hundreds of Chinese from Chico” in the late 1880s.⁸ Butte County’s Chinese population dropped from about 3700 in 1880 to about 1000 in 1920, due to combined factors of anti-Chinese violence, a changing economy, and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. The letters to Huang Shuzi date to roughly the 1920s, by which time there were about 180 Chinese people living in Chico, out of a total recorded population of over 9,000.¹⁰ The 1920 census lists nine men living at 706 Cherry: one merchant of Chinese goods, Wong Com Eye, who owned the property outright, and the rest middle-aged cooks for restaurants and private families. The store likely also functioned as a lodging house, as did many general stores. An earlier mention of the address, in 1913, gives us a supporting picture of people living communally: Nine men were arrested for gambling with dominoes

⁷ Michele Shover, “Chico Women: Nemesis of a Rural Town's Anti-Chinese Campaigns, 1876-1888,” *California History*. Vol. 67, No. 4 (Dec. 1988), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25158493>: 230.

⁸ Shover, “Chico Women,” 243.

⁹ US Census Bureau, “1880 Census: Volume 1. Statistics of the Population of the United States, Population, by Race, Sex, and Nativity. Table V.- Population, by Race and by Counties: 1880, 1870, 1860.” <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1883/dec/vol-01-population.html>

¹⁰ Shover, “Chico Women,” 243; US Census Bureau, “1920 Census: Volume 1. Population, Number and Distribution of Inhabitants, Table 49.- Area and Population of Counties or Equivalent Divisions: 1850 to 1920,”

<https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1921/dec/vol-01-population.html>



Detail from Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Chico, Butte County, California, 1921. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, Sanborn Maps Collection.

https://www.loc.gov/resource/g4364cm.g4364cm_g004591921/?st=gallery

in a police raid but indignantly defended themselves by saying that “they were playing to see who should pay should pay for a supper, and that they play for the same purpose every night.”¹¹ (Stores did frequently operate gambling parlors in the back.) Wong’s lodgers were likely older because Chinese people had begun to move out of the area to look for work elsewhere. Significantly, these men are all listed as unmarried, and thus had more tenuous ties to homes in China or now larger centers of Chinese American life around the state, such as nearby Marysville or Sacramento, which benefited from growing families.

The merchant of Chinese goods, Wong Com Eye, could be the recipient of these letters. His surname is the same (Wong was a common transliteration of 黃 Huang) and different personal names could be used in different circumstances (literary courtesy names, for example, or affectionate nicknames), not to mention the difficulties with communicating with Anglophone census takers. Wong Com Eye is also the only merchant listed at this address. He owned the property (relatively rare for Chinese people, especially after it became illegal for aliens to own property under a series of California laws). He was 65 years old and had immigrated in 1870, and thus had lived in the United States for 50 years, most of his adult life.¹² He apparently spoke English, which we can also expect from his role as organizer of a search for a missing friend, Wong Toy, in 1922, with appeals to the police and the *Chico Record*.¹³ Five of his lodgers were also Wongs. Likely they were part of the same family or clan; family name associations were one of many ways Chinese migrants organized themselves for social, political, and economic ends in the United States, based on strong ties in their home districts.

Three of the translated letters deal with orders and returns of merchandise; it seems that handling of business, of ordering stock, paying suppliers, and determining shipping and delivery was done mostly by letter. The use of personalized stamps in company

¹¹ “Chinese Gamblers Are Taken in Raid,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, 14 December 1913, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=CR19131214.2.35>.

¹² US Census Bureau, 1920 US census population schedules, Chico, Butte County, California, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/2594654:6061?tid=&pid=&queryId=61703473aeef3067c0d51d0919810289&phsrc=kLm186&phstart=successSource>

¹³ “Police Asked to Search For Missing Chinese,” *Chico Record*, 23 December 1922, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=CR19221223.2.9>.

names specifically for letters (on two of the letters below) also supports the impression of regular correspondence between companies. The ability to read and write, or have someone on staff who could, was essential. The language of the letters is a dense and difficult mix of unpunctuated classical Chinese, Cantonese expressions, and merchants' jargon. The letters often use specialized epistolary vocabulary, which could have been copied from popular letter writing manuals with templates. Document 4 has good calligraphy, and may have been written by a professional scribe. Letter-writing was an established profession in China and in Chinese communities, for those who couldn't write or who wanted more literary flair from someone who had been educated; in this case, it may have something to do with professionals transmitting messages by telegraph (the use of 電 *dian*, meaning telegram, is a tantalizing clue). All of the authors use formal styles of address with the honorific use of 兄 *xiong* "elder brother" and 弟 *di* "younger brother," although this does not necessarily mean the correspondents are consanguineous siblings. Numbers are mostly marked using a variant of "Suzhou Numerals" (*suzhou mazi* 蘇州碼子), a now largely obsolete positional notation system used by merchants as an accounting shorthand.

The letters and especially the four envelopes are illustrative constituent fragments of a diasporic network across continents and oceans, that one Chico merchant could tap into. One of the envelopes was mailed from an address in the town of Heroica Matamoros in Tamaulipas, Mexico, on the Rio Grande across from Brownsville, Texas, 20 miles from the Gulf of Mexico, where many Chinese people had settled along the border. Two envelopes are postmarked from two neighboring villages of Tikhoi 荻海 and Chikhom 赤坎, both within modern Kaiping City 開平市 in Guangdong Province in China. The area around Kaiping today is known for its spectacular fortress-mansions (*diaolou* 碉樓) in eclectic Sino-Western styles, built with funds from residents like Huang Shuzi who traded abroad or sent remittances home.¹⁴

The most unique and personal missive is Document 2, which details the letter-writer's trials fighting for the Chinese statesman and revolutionary Sun Yat-sen and in the aftermath. Sun Yat-sen himself toured the United States twice to raise funds, and in 1915 Chico hosted Lin Sen 林森, former speaker of the Chinese Senate and overseas organizer and fundraiser for Sun Yat-sen and the Kuomintang, and Wong Bock Yue, editor of *The Young China* in San Francisco, on their tour campaigning against the military coup of Yuan Shikai (see Document 2 foreword). Wong Pock Yong, president of the Chico branch

¹⁴ See: "Kaiping diaolou," <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1112/>

of the Chinese Nationalists League of America, vowed to help fund the fight.¹⁵ Document 2, with its reference to supplies of weapons and request for money, shows how involved another Chico resident was with military matériel. Political events in China continued to be active, and personal, areas of concern for Chinese people overseas..

Given the difficulty of both the cursive handwriting with many non-standard character forms, the specialized commercial jargon, and the highly contextual nature of this correspondence, we emphasize that both our transcriptions and our translations are in places very tentative. Those wishing to undertake further study on this topic should consult the original documents. Nevertheless, we hope that our rough rendering of these letters might throw a narrow beam of light onto the history of Chico and Butte County, into the lives of Chinese migrants in early twentieth century California, and into the vast trans-American and trans-Pacific networks that united them all.

¹⁵ “Big Revolution to Start in Few Days, Say Chinese Here,” *Chico Record*, 28 December 1915, <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=CR19151228.2.102>

Document One and Envelope: Commercial Letter from Quong Tai Lung to W. Sang Leung

Envelope:

The designation of “Japanese Lacquerware” may simply refer to the type of import

store. Handwritten:

W. Sang Leung, 667 Grant Ave, San Francisco, Cal.

煩交 華生隆大宝号收入

Trans.: Please give this to the great company *Huashenglong* [= *Wa Sang Leung*].

Stamp 1:

Quong Tai Lung / Chinese Bazaar / 148 Broadway / P.O. Box 445 / Chico, Cal. 日本漆器/
主咕埠/ 廣泰隆

Trans.: Japanese Lacquerware / Chico / Broad, Peaceful, and Flourishing [= Quong Tai Lung]

Stamp 2:

Chico / Dec 29 / 1 AM / CAL. / 1911

Letter:

茲將回貨列：

绣花男衲仔壹件四元

绉纱绣花富家袍壹件

8.25元色细鹤花女绣袍一件3.5元

色细光身富家袍一件

11元 3.5尺绉纱其庄记壹件16.5元

合共回貨該良43.25元

茲由总付上貨壹箱，請務照收。此貨色，如长短不合，該項入回来 / 数[][]。舍伴出埠再取便是。上次回袍二件25元合共， / 勞公抄总单付來可也。是日接由花咕惠來貨一箱如数 / 妥收請勿錦介

，並付來銀幣值一佰元，請祈照收可 / 也。

(【小字】：昨九日將招牌改換，因万兴菜记生意股份出滿，以是改廣太隆再填股份，非为 / 別意。昨學植出埠忘记，不曾說寶號知也)

財安

華生隆大寶號也

辛十一月初十日 弟 頓

印章：主咕，廣泰隆書柬

I list below the returned goods:

Men's inner clothes embroidered with patterns, one item, 4 dollars

Crêpe embroidered nobleman's robe, one item, 8.25 dollars

Finely colored crane-flower women's embroidered robe, one item, 3.5 dollars

Finely colored patternless nobleman's robe, one item, 11 dollars

3.5 feet of *qizhuangji* crêpe, one item 16.5 dollars

Total value of returned goods: 43.25 dollars

Thus I have transmitted all of the above in a single box, please take receipt. If the appearance of the goods, for instance their length, is not suitable, please add this item to the amount returned [*two characters illegible*]. When my colleagues leave the port they will take them according to their convenience. Last time you returned two robes, valued at 25 dollars total; I trouble you to make a copy of the invoice and send it. Today I received a box of goods from *Huaguhui* according to the [agreed] amount; this has been received, and there is no need for concern. I have also enclosed a check for a hundred dollars, please accept this.

([*In small characters:*] Yesterday on the ninth, I changed my brand name, because the stock [under the name] *Wanxing caiji* ["Mark of the Ten-Thousand Arising Viands"] had all been issued, and therefore I have changed the name to *Guangtailong* ["Broad and Great Flourishing"], and issued more stock, there is no intent other than this. Yesterday when Xuezhi was leaving the port I forgot to inform you of the news about changing the title.)

Peace and prosperity,

The great company *Huashenglong* ["Chinese Rise to Flourishing"].

With prostrations from your younger brother, on the tenth day of the eleventh month of the *xin* year [= 29 December 1911].

[Stationary stamp]:

Chico, Quong Tai Lung business correspondence.

Document Two: Personal Letter from Cheng Sen to Huang Shuzi

In 1911 China's Manchu Qing dynasty was overthrown, and the Republic of China was established. The fragile democracy was ruptured in 1915, when Yuan Shikai (袁世凱, 1859-1916), general and president of the Republic, proclaimed himself emperor at the head of a restored dynastic state. Although Yuan Shikai died less than a year later, his coup ushered in decades of disunion and violent conflict among warlords. The entire period was characterized by widespread banditry and social breakdown; importantly for the story below, many villages formed local militias (bingtuan 兵團 or tuanlian 團練) that were themselves often predatory.

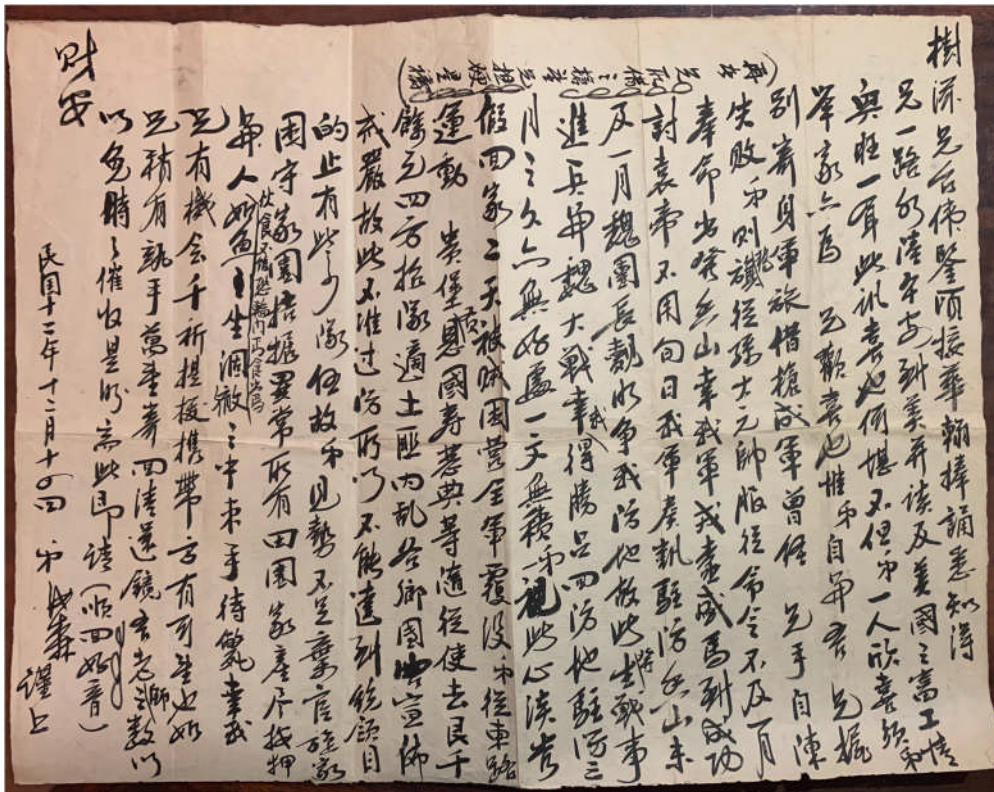
This letter, dated to 1924, consists of a request for money by one Cheng Sen,¹⁶ Huang Shuzi's "younger brother" (the language of "brotherhood" in these letters implies familiarity and respect, but does not necessarily mean literal consanguinity). The letter details Cheng Sen's participation in the National Protection War (huguo zhanzheng 護國戰爭, 1915-16) against Yuan Shikai, during which he claims to have fought under the banner of the famous statesman and revolutionary Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan 孫中山, 1866-1925).¹⁷ Cheng Sen claims that his troops achieved initial success in actions around the Pearl River delta in Guangdong, but suffered from lack of support, as well as infighting against a "Commander Wei" (probably Wei Bangping 魏邦平, 1884-1935).¹⁸ Cheng Sen and his comrades contributed personal funds to organize another military force, but this effort was prevented by local militias, and Cheng Sen had no choice but to return home. His family wealth dissipated, Cheng Sen wrote to his "older brother" in America requesting help.

¹⁶ We read Cheng 成 here as a surname, but it's also possible that the letter-writer's full name should be Huang Chengsen.

¹⁷ For Sun Yat-sen's movements and political activities during this period, see Bergère, *Sun Yat-Sen*, 254-76.

¹⁸ See Wen, *Zuijin sanshi nian Zhongguo junshi*, 32-4, 44-6

Cheng Sen's account is frequently vague and superlative, and many details seem doubtful or unclear: Among other things, Cheng Sen never explains exactly how his original force was destroyed, nor why it took him eight years after the end of the war to write and inform Huang Shuzi of these events. Nevertheless, the letter is illustrative of the social and financial pressures placed on Chinese immigrants to America, and of the personal and political networks that connected them to the dramatic events taking place in their homeland. Interestingly, Cheng Sen's letter suggests that Huang Shuzi himself had once been involved in revolutionary politics, albeit unsuccessfully, and that he had at one point supplied guns for Cheng Sen's forces. Perhaps Huang Shuzi's original decision to leave Guangdong for California had something to do with this.



Letter main text:

樹滋兄台偉鑒：

頃接華翰捧誦，悉知得/兄一路水陸平安到美，并談及美國之富，工情/興旺，一聞此訊，喜也何堪，不但弟一人欣喜，須弟/舉家亦為兄歡喜也。惟弟自與吾兄握/別，寄身軍旅，借槍成軍，曾經/兄手自陳/失敗，弟則整旗從孫大元帥，服從命令，不及一月/奉命出發香山，幸我軍戎[]盛，馬到成功/討袁帝，不用旬

日，我軍奏凱，駐防香山。未/ 及一月，魏團長觀水，爭我防地，故此發生戰事/ 進兵與魏大戰，幸我得勝，占回防地。駐防三/ 月之久，亦無好處，一文無積，弟視此心淡，嘗/ 假回家二天，被賊困營全軍覆沒。弟從東路/ 運動貴堡恩貢、國壽、慧典等隨從使去良[=銀]千 / 餘元，四方招隊，適土匪內亂各鄉團[]宣佈/ 戒嚴，故此不准過防，所以不能達到統領目/ 的，止有些少隊伍。故弟見勢不足，棄官旋家， / 困守家園，拮据異常，所有田園家產，盡按押/ 與【小字：伙食不給，恐輪門丐食出焉。】如魚之坐涸轍之中，束手待斃。幸我/ 兄有機會，千祈提拔 攜帶，方有可望也。如/ 兄稍有執手，萬望寄回，請還鏡吾老師之數以/ 以免時之催收。是所高此，即讀（順回好音）

財安

民國十二年十二月十四回弟成森謹上

（再此 兄所借之槍望兄擔硬，是禱）

Translation:

To my respected elder brother Shuzi:

I have just now received the works of your flowery quill [i.e., your letter], which I held in both hands and intoned. From this I knew that, after a journey by land and sea, you have safely landed in America. You spoke also of the wealth of America, and the flourishing prospects of your business. When I heard this news, I was exceedingly overjoyed, and it was not only I alone, your younger brother, but my entire family rejoiced on your behalf.

Since we parted ways, I, your younger brother, have arisen and joined the army, gathered guns to form a brigade. Previously you, elder brother, yourself wrote to me that you had failed [in this task]; therefore I readied my banners and followed the great general Sun [Yat-sen]. Following his orders, within a month I was commanded to make an expedition against Xiangshan [County]. Luckily, our arms and [illegible] were abundant, and we made swift progress to success. We attacked the forces of emperor Yuan [Shikai]. Within ten days our troops were singing songs of victory, and we had occupied Xiangshan.

Not a month had gone by before brigade commander Wei crossed the waters and attacked our defensive position. A battle ensued - we advanced to engage commander Wei in a great battle, and fortunately our forces achieved victory, and returned to our defensive positions.

We were stationed there for three months, and did not receive any benefits for it, not accumulating a single penny. Seeing this, my heart was saddened. When I took leave to return home for two days, our camp was surrounded by bandits, and the entire army was annihilated.

Thereupon I betook my movements to the eastern route. En Gong, Guo Shou, Hui

Dian, [?]¹⁹ and others from your own honored home county used up over a thousand *yuan* in silver. We set about raising troops in all directions, but because of the chaos and banditry all of the village militias had imposed martial law, and no one was allowed to cross their cordons. Thus we were not able to achieve our command objectives, having only a few paltry brigades.

Seeing that the conditions were not sufficient for victory, I resigned my commission and took my banner home. I was confined to our courtyard, extremely short of money, for all of our fields, orchards, and other property, had all been pawned away to others. ([*Small characters*]: Without provisions, I fear that I shall have to set out begging from door to door.) Like a fish stuck in a drying wheel-rut, my hands are tied, and I can only await my death.

If happily, older brother, you have the chance, I beg you to support and raise us up - only in this way will we have hope. If you have any extra money, we beg you to send it back. Please return the amount you owe to teacher Jingwu, in order to avoid its urgent collection later. I would value it if you read this promptly (?). (Safely return good news!)

Wishing peace and prosperity,

Your humble younger brother Chengsen, on the fourteenth day of the twelfth month of the twelfth year of the Republic [of China] [January 19th, 1924].

[*Written horizontally at top*]:

(PS: As for the gun[s] that you lent, I pray that you can endure this [loss].)

Document Three: Commercial Letter from [Huang] Shusen to Huang Shuzi.

This letter details commercial transactions and settling of accounts between Huang Shuzi and his elder brother Huang Shusen. In this case, the shared character shu (meaning “tree”) in their names indicates that the two writers were indeed probably consanguineous brothers. Unfortunately, the contents of the letter are entirely commercial, and we do not learn anything about the relationship between the two brothers, or even where Huang Shusen was located. The letter gives a date in February 1924.

We should note that our translation of this document is especially tentative: The handwriting is difficult, the language both elliptical and filled with jargon, and many statements refer to transactions not explained in the text. The collocation kaijue 開爵 appears several times within the short missive, without obvious meaning; we read this as a personal name, but other readings may be possible.

¹⁹ The meaning of this passage is unclear to us; we choose to read these as names.

Letter main text:

樹滋弟台鑒：

今接家函，當即呈上也，閱也。惟吾所看，修改書祆遲 / 日整妥大約[]禮拜六日，準于洪信舖寄上，應用就是。但係昨日所列，補 / 茶在開爵賬身上計，祈為列也。今將零星數冊及[]開爵也。已賒交款 / 項尚餘存63.15元，祈為列，並札計列

後：旧歲壽吉廿?日斜汗衫一件1.75元

[元十六來去 1百元] 桑刀

一件6.5毛書信皮三札1.5毛

元月初七日葯材

共、5毛代買罩衫

一件、5毛

另代支整番祆式

条、2元另代支實開

爵賬、14.25元元月

吉??日?、十元

代支酒、11元

煙絲??5

包?、7.5

毛朱中幻

8寸 38毛

十香丸

[]、2.5毛

總共該

支、37.65

元

安好十三年元月十七日 樹森字

To my respected younger brother [Huang] Shuzi:

Today I have received a letter from home, and I am forwarding it onward to you, as I have already read it myself. Only the mended decorated clothing over which I have oversight (?) will be delayed roughly until [*illegible*] Saturday. The items will be mailed out from the Hongxin Store, ready for use. But according to the amount listed yesterday, the amount of tea to be restituted is listed in Kaijue's bill; the figures are attached in the list. Now I have [given?] the account book with the remaining amounts [*illegible*] Kaijue. 63.15 dollars remain from the amount already given as credit, and are attached as a list. The figures are given below:

[Your?] old birthday, the twentieth of the month, one slanted shirt, 1.75 dollars.
(Around the sixteenth day of the first month, one hundred dollars) one
vegetable knife, 6.5 cents. Three packets of envelopes for letters and
documents, 1.5 cents.

On the seventh day of the first month, total medicinal
substances, 5 cents. One *zhuo* shirt, purchased on behalf
of another, 5 cents.

Purchased on behalf of another, two full *fan* robes, 2 dollars.
Purchased on behalf of another, in truth Kaijue's account
(?), 14.25 dollars. On the seventh day of the first month,
10 dollars.

Alcohol purchased on behalf of
another, 11 dollars. Tobacco leaf, 5
packets, 7.5 cents.

Zhu zhong huan [Meaning unknown, may be a brand name], 8 inches, 38 cents.
Ten balls of aromatic substances
[illegible], 2.5 cents. Total: 37.65
dollars.

Best wishes,
The 17th day of the first month of the 13th year [of the Republic of China] [=
February 21, 1924]. Written by [Huang] Shusen.

Document Four: Commercial Letter from Cuitai Co. to Huang Shuzi

The letter details commercial dealings between Huang Shuzi and San Francisco-based trading company called Cuitai 萃泰號. The phrase taidian 台電 suggests that the letter text may have been the transcription of a telegram.

Letter main text:

永生和大室號台電敬啟者即承來書，諸節 / 備聆，并赤紙一張。值良捌拾七元，當照收妥之法。/ 室號來取貨項數，箇人蒙顧。各貨經照執 / 備共裝五箱，即由 (【小字】：三和白酒一坛共計六件) 慢車寄上，茲將價並箱口 / 並及起貨紙夾呈安步，請為照收 高發 / 是荷。示謂上次欠小位生海一寸，今照執回一寸，由裝 / 貨箱內補上。請照可也。切燭例無畫龍，故以花燭 / 付上。尖地魚亦無貨，故亦以鱮魚仔補款，諸希 / 原諒，感甚，餘為不敘即候。

財安

萃泰字頓 丁十二月章：

金山正埠，萃泰號書柬

To the respected recipient of this telegram at the main establishment of the Wing Sang Wo company:

I have received your letter and all the details were carefully considered, along with the one sheet of red paper. Its value in taels is at eighty seven dollars, it should be received according to the [usual] methods. As for the quantity of goods that your company will come to pick up, we are each thankful for your patronage. All the goods have been prepared and packed into five boxes according to your order. They will be posted by slow car [train?] ([*Small characters*]: Altogether six articles including one jar of Sanhe Rice Wine). We have entrusted the price, the packages, and the delivery documents to the courier, please receive these accordingly, and we are thankfully obliged to this lofty delivery. You notified me that last time you were owed one inch of *xiao wei sheng hai* [*meaning unclear*], and now according to this amount I return one inch, included in the packages together with the goods. Please approve this. Of *ren* candles we do not usually stock “painted dragons,” and so we have added decorative “flower” candles. We also do not have *jiandi* fish, and so we have made up the order with baby tilapia. We hope that you will forgive all of these circumstances, and we appreciate it greatly. I do not write further, and await [your reply].

Peace and prosperity,

With obeisance from the company Cuitai, on the eleventh day of the twelfth month of the *ding* year [=1917, 1927, or another year ending in 7].

[*Stationary stamp*]:

San Francisco, California, Cuitai business correspondence.

Envelope One: Yee Sang Tong to Wing Sang Wo



Front:

Yee Sang Tong 865 Washington St. San Francisco Cal., U.S.A.

金山 / 正埠 / 裕生堂參茸藥材

Trans.: Gold Mountain - Main Port [= San Francisco], Fulsome Life Hall, Verdurous-Ginseng Apothecary

Wong Sang Wo Co.

706 New Chinatown

Chico Butte Co. Cal.

請交永生和昇

Trans.: Please give to Wing Sang Wo [*sheng?*]

Stamps:

Calif. Industries, Exposition, San Francisco,
001.7-27 1922 San Francisco Calif. Sep 20 /
2-PM / 5 / 1922

Back:

幸首暑塗產县[阜?][*illegible*]

Trans.: [Meaning unclear.]

Wong [sic] Sang Wo, #706 New China town, Chico, Calif. U.S.A.

寄美國 / 黃樹滋[]收 / 从護粵 楊橋附

Trans.: Mail to America, to be received by [illegible] Huang Shuzi. From Huyue, with attachment by Yang Qiao.

Stamp:

Chikhom 赤[坎] [*date illegible*]

Envelope Three: Chung Lee to Huang Shuzi

Stationary:

Chung Lee: Calle de Matamoros, No. 29. H. Matamoros, Tamps., Méx.

Handwritten:

Wing Sang Wo Hop Kee: 708 New China Town, Chico, Butte Co., Cal.

煩交與黃樹滋收

Trans.: Please transmit this to Huang Shuzi.

Stamp:

Servicio / 151[] / 21 July 2[]2[] / 151[] Ambulan[...]

Wing Sang Wo, #706 New China Town, Chico Calif.

寄美国主咽埠黃樹滋先生收

Trans.: Mailed to America, Chico, Mr. Huang Shuzi.

Stamp:

Tikhoi 荻海 [*date illegible*]

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