

# My China Roots and the poser for the diaspora's ancestry sleuths

By Lucy Hornby [Author alerts](#)



History man: Huihan Lie, founder of My China Roots

When Adam Liu decided to research his family roots, he had no problem tracing his grandmother's family back to Ireland and England from his home computer in Sydney, Australia. But he soon hit a wall with the great-grandfather who left China to seek his fortune in Singapore in the 1890s.

He decided to hire a tiny start-up called My China Roots based near Beijing's Confucius Temple. It offers bespoke ancestry searches for overseas Chinese seeking insight into where their forefathers came from, and what drove them to leave.

"You want to have a real, tangible connection to where you stand in the context of history," says Mr Liu, who first became curious about his roots when he was assigned to draw a family tree in school.

The Chinese diaspora numbers 50m whose ancestors settled the trading posts of southeast Asia over the past 200 years but also voyaged to places further afield, such as Manchester, home to Britain's largest Chinese community, and the crowded streets of New York's Lower East Side.

"The overwhelming majority left for non-pleasant reasons. Whether poverty or political it was never pleasant," says Huihan Lie, My China Roots founder and the descendent of Dutch-speaking Indonesian Chinese who moved to the Netherlands after Indonesia's independence.

Ancestry.com reported revenues of \$540m last year selling services to North Americans, Australians and others researching their roots. Businesses focusing on European ancestry are basically data providers, offering electronic searches of material from Ellis Island or centuries of marriage, death and census records.

Chinese ancestry research, by contrast, is "hard to scale up", Mr Lie discovered.

Chinese families record their births and deaths in the *jia pu*, or ancestral book, which can stretch across centuries. Most are maintained by the clan or temple in the ancestral village, not by any public authority, which makes it hard to compile digital databases. Many vanished during a century of war and attacks by early communists, including the fanatical Red Guards.

"There's a lot of personal history that's so easily destroyed," says Mr Lie, who tries to make his clients' ancestors "come alive" with descriptions of their surroundings and the political context of their lives.

Some online ancestry websites offer advice for overseas Chinese – for instance, by explaining the limited online databases of *jia pu* and other records – but few sell search services. And those records are inaccessible for people such as Mr Liu who do not read Chinese.

The task is complicated by the short list of Chinese family names (the top 100 account for about 85 per cent of all Chinese, compared

with about 25,000 relatively common British surnames) and the unwillingness of many emigrants to confide in their assimilated children.

Most *jia pu* fail to record the full names of wives or daughters, in effect limiting most searches to the father's line.

My China Roots's small team of researchers act like detectives, identifying villages through local historical associations and interviewing elderly residents to determine how the family has fared since the client's ancestor left home. When the team visited Mr Liu's ancestral temple in inland Jiangxi province, they discovered a lineage that stretched back 3,000 years.

To expand, Mr Lie is training a network of promising young provincial researchers.

It is a race against time. Mr Lie traced his mother's roots to a village near Zhangzhou, the silk-trading city in China's southern Fujian province that they left seven generations ago. But like much of China's heritage, the 500-year-old clan temple that protected the family records during centuries of war and revolution is about to fall victim to an even more implacable force – economic development and the wreckers' ball.

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