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## All in one's roots

By MARK GRAHAM in Beijing



Lie Huihan set up the Beijing-based My China Roots in 2012 after discovering that there was a lack of companies providing services for Chinese who want to learn more about their ancestral backgrounds. (MARK GRAHAM / For CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY)

As a child growing up in the countryside of the Netherlands, there were few opportunities for Lie Huihan to make contact with other ethnic Chinese people. He did not speak, read or write the language and had little interest in finding out more about his Chinese ancestry.

But as an adult, Lie became intrigued about his Chinese roots and, ultimately, immersed himself in tracing his family tree. Today, he runs a business, My China Roots, which helps fellow overseas Chinese discover more about their ancestral origins.

"Every project is different, which is why I love doing it," says 35-year-old Lie of his company's mission. Now based in Beijing, he regularly makes forays to rural parts of China.

He explains some of the factors that led to the Chinese diaspora in the past: "In some cases you have the combination of big historical events and a personal story, of family members going to different countries. Others left because of tragic reasons, war or famine or hunger, and had to find a way to make money overseas — working on the railroads, or in the goldmines in the United States."

In the case of Lie's great-great-great grandfather, moving from China to Indonesia in the 1840s afforded him better economic opportunities. Lie's grandfather then moved to the Netherlands — Indonesia's former colonizer — in the 1950s for essentially the same reason, the pursuit of a better life.

"Growing up, everything was Dutch apart from the color of my skin," says Lie. "But you grow up knowing you are Chinese."

But curiosity made him want to learn more about his ethnic origins. "I spent a year in New York and Amsterdam. When I moved to bigger cities like these I ran into Chinatowns, which were new to me, because growing up everything was white and Dutch and Christian."

By the time Lie was in college, China had become "a fascination" for him. After he graduated he decided to move to Beijing to take an intensive course in the Chinese language, later working in the trade section of the European Commission, followed by a spell as a senior executive at a wind energy firm.

"Our roots are not the past. They are an inseparable part of ourselves, our parents, and our

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children, whether or not we choose to give them any thought," Lie muses on his company website.

"Walking around in my ancestral villages in Fujian and Jinmen, on the same sandy paths that six generations ago my ancestors walked ... gave me a feeling of being at ease and being connected."

Colleagues and friends were intrigued by the young executive's efforts to search for his Chinese roots. Their enthusiastic reception convinced Lie that there could be a business opportunity to explore.

Two years ago, My China Roots was founded, with an office located in an atmospheric hutong (alleyway), near the Lama Temple in northern Beijing. Its initial client list was modest — but business steadily grew, mostly through word of mouth or the Internet.

Lie explains how his company started: "The seed of the idea came when I was researching my own family history and was amazed that there was no company, or institution, doing a job, let alone a good job, in providing a service for overseas Chinese to learn more about their family history."

The words emblazoned on the company website may well sum up the goal of My China Roots: "We help you trace your ancestry, put your roots in context, and visit your ancestral village in China."

The company charges a basic fee of around \$500 to get started on a project for someone trying to trace his or her roots in China. If the undertaking is successful — with the client successfully connected to the extended family — then the total amount charged usually starts at around \$1,500.

Genealogical research involves a lot of arduous travel, often to dusty, out-of-the-way locations, for Lie and his assistants.

Local knowledge can be vital for a project's success, given that so many family names are similar. A village elder's distant memory might provide the missing link the modern-day Sherlock Holmes and his assistants are looking for, identifying which subclan grew from the main clan and when.

Lie says all the projects his firm has undertaken so far have had some degree of success. "Even when we came up against a brick wall, then we gave the client a couple of things that they did not have before they came to me."

One of his company's most satisfying projects to date involved Dominican-American client Lesley Delapaz. Early in the last century her Chinese grandfather moved to the Dominican Republic, where he worked as a chef for the police, and later met and married a local resident, before relocating to the US.

Delapaz knew little of her grandfather's backstory, and a posting to China several years ago made her keen to find out more about her ancestry. Then My China Roots came into the picture, with a brief to locate the village and, if possible, facilitate a reunion.

The research culminated in a visit by Delapaz and her mother to meet their estranged, extended family in southern Guangdong province. There was, recalls Lie, some initial hesitation and awkwardness on both sides.

Lie remembers that moment when Delapaz and her mother got off the bus that took them to the village.

"I was picturing people in shock and crying, especially as the mother was very emotional and passionate. You would think tears, but the opposite was true," he recalls. "It was drizzling and raining, and the Chinese side of the family were all standoffish and very cold from a Western point of view."

But on the second day, the people started to warm up to their guests. "And then there were tears," says Lie.

"Everyone has their own way of dealing with it. You need time for people to feel comfortable with each other."

Another client, from Australia, was less keen to make any kind of direct contact and content just to have the facts about the family's origins in southern China's Hainan Island. In the end, curiosity overcame him and there was a reunion of sorts with his Chinese kin.

"We ended up finding the two villages of this Australian customer's great-grandfather and great-grandmother; they were in the real countryside," says Lie.

Using a webcam, the client saw what his forbears' villages were like, which made him very curious about his origins. A Skype call set up by Lie and his team enabled him to talk to his extended family.

Lie is now thinking about the next phase for My Roots China and its future prospects.

“What I am really looking into is to build an online platform to lower the threshold for people who are interested in finding out more about their ancestry,” he explains. “We are looking at cooperating with universities in the south and student networks that can travel to the little villages and do the leg work. In the immediate term, we would work with the clients, and in the longer term, we would filter the students and function as a mediator.”

In future, webcams and Skype will play a larger role in the My China Roots business plan, saving clients the time and resources needed to make the journey from the US, Europe or Australia to China.

In the meantime, Lie wants to make sure his and his Irish wife’s newborn son, Sami, will grow up with a keen sense of his own background and, like his father, be able to move seamlessly between the Chinese and Western worlds.

“I would say an open mind is the most important thing for him. When you learn more, you find there are so many similarities between different cultures,” says Lie.



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