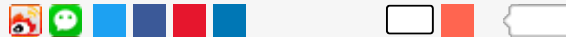


Journey from the West

By Zhang Yiqian Source:Global Times Published: 2013-8-18 18:33:01



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American Lesley Delapaz (center) in front of her grandfather's home with surviving members of his family. Photo: Courtesy of Lesley Delapaz

It wasn't until 20 years after American Lesley Delapaz' grandfather passed away that she finally understood what kind of person he was.

She remembered his house in the Dominican Republic looked different from other homes whenever she went to visit. There were decorations that looked Chinese, but he had been a quiet man and seldom shared his past with her or anyone else.

But she finally had a chance in April to learn about him. With the help of Huihan Lie, founder of My China Roots, a Beijing-based private organization that helps people with Chinese ancestry trace their roots, Delapaz visited her ancestral village and met her surviving relatives.

"Things make a lot of sense now, and I understood why certain things were so important to my family," Delapaz said. She also felt she understood her grandfather better, what kind of person he was and why he acted certain ways.

Delapaz isn't the only one living overseas with Chinese ancestry that has reached out to Lie. Since he started his business in 2012, seven people have contacted him, asking him to help find their ancestors. Other organizations are also helping people to find their roots and better develop a sense of identity.

Delapaz started her journey to discover her roots out of curiosity. Her mother immigrated to the US from the Dominican Republic in 1976. She had a lot of contact with her relatives on that side of the family, but has not had much contact with the Chinese side.

In 2011, her husband was relocated to China for work, and Delapaz came with him. She thought it would make sense to see her grandfather's birthplace before she left, so she found Lie through the Internet in 2012.

Lie had just started his business at that time. It grew out of his interest in history and his own experience searching for his family roots. He grew up in the Netherlands. Even though he is of Chinese origin, his ancestors lived in Indonesia for four generations.

"I had always been interested in family history. I asked my father and grandfather many questions about Indonesia as I was growing up," he said. "It wasn't until 2008 that I started digging into my Chinese side."

Detective work

After he found information from his family, Lie checked history books to see where the migratory waves were to narrow down the possible area, a technique he has applied to the research with Delapaz and others.

"People tend to migrate in waves to the same place," he said, explaining that as long as there are records of migrations, he can match it up with his clients' family history and deduce where they are from.

When Lie met with Delapaz, she didn't have much information about her grandfather. She had a copy of his passport, but no idea what place he came from. Then Lie dug in.

"The first report Lie sent me was mostly historical, talking about the region [my grandfather] lived in and what was going on at that time," Delapaz said. "There were also pictures included. It was in the rural areas in Kaiping, Guangdong Province. It was a huge migratory point."

From the mid-1800s to the early 1900s, there was mass migration in the Guangdong and Fujian areas. Many people saw the Dominican Republic as a stop between China and the States, where even more were migrating to as merchants or laborers. In 1920, Delapaz' grandfather left with his father, a merchant, to the Dominican Republic and ended up staying there after his father died.



Huihan Lie explains the tomb-sweeping ceremony to Delapaz and some of her relatives visiting from the US. Photo: Courtesy of Lesley Delapaz

Journey eastward

Delapaz isn't the only one searching for identity. Albert Cheng notices there's been an increase of interest over the years. He had just come back from a visit to Guangdong Province with a group of 10 young Chinese Americans.

Cheng, a fourth-generation Chinese American, co-founded the San Francisco-based Friends of Roots with the late historian Him Mark Lai in 1991. The group funds annual programs to help Chinese immigrants in the California area trace their family history and visit their ancestral villages.

Many young people with Chinese roots who grow up overseas have the need for an identity search, Cheng said. He gives an example of a boy whose American girlfriend broke up with him because the parents don't want her to go out with a Chinese. This was confusing to him because he considered himself an American.

The idea of organizing a group and holding programs began forming. Now Friends of Roots receives hundreds of applications annually, but it can only select 12 people a year to go on a trip to China.

"Some of them are ashamed of their origins, but after the trip, they learn about the history and they learn there's nothing to be ashamed of. Our

ancestors were merchants, they did business and were quite successful," he said.

Michele Lee, 24, had just come back from Zhongshan, Guangdong Province, as part of the 2013 Roots trip led by Cheng. Her grandparents moved to San Diego in the 1940s.

Growing up, Lee said it was hard to identify herself as Chinese because she didn't know much of the language or culture and had never seen the place her ancestors grew up in, so she signed up for the program this year.

Steven Owyang, current president of Friends of Roots and a 62-year-old fourth-generation Chinese American, said such trips help the young people understand the differences between cultures.

"I think it helps a lot of young people understand why their parents or grandparents acted in a certain way," he said. "China is a very different country, different culture, different political system. You can read about it but there is nothing like going to a place to learn what the people are like and what the society is like."

While he was in college in the 1970s, there was a period in the US history when lots of people were interested in their roots and wanted to find out about their history. The current wave is a continuation of that, he said. "I think especially for minority people in the US, like Chinese, it helps us get a much better sense of identity, maybe pride in what our parents or grandparents did."



Michele Lee with her newfound relatives in Guangdong. Photo: Courtesy of Michele Lee

The water's source

After locating the village, Lie's research on Delapaz struck a temporary dead-end.

"There's only so much you can do on the Internet and over the phone," Lie said. "So in her case, I just went there."

He spent a day in Kaiping, hiring a taxi driver who speaks Cantonese as guide. Together they went into the village and asked the local seniors whether they knew the name of the grandfather. One person led to another, and soon they found the surviving relatives of her grandfather.

In April, Delapaz went to Guangdong with her husband, mother and sister. What started as an intellectual root-seeking activity became emotional as she saw her grandfather's birthplace for the first time. "I now knew who [my grandfather] was and it was no longer just a blank."

She understood his actions better. When he supported her aunt for college, it was an action considered odd in the Dominican Republic. But education is highly valued in China, and now Delapaz understands where he's coming from and the puzzle pieced together.

Lee also felt completed. She compared her life to those of her remaining relatives in Zhongshan, who are farmers and didn't have nice housing or air conditioning, and it made her appreciate her grandfather more.

"My dad would talk about how hard they worked to get here and how lucky I am to grow up in the US. I didn't know that before," she said.

Some of the projects Lie has on his hands are tough. Right now, there are two Indonesians whose ancestors migrated from Shanghai six generations ago. It's tough to trace their families. But Lie said he understands their desire.

"People everywhere want to feel connected," he said.

No matter how long ago people's ancestors migrated, they will always have a desire to seek that connection, Cheng said.

"This is what we are trying to do. As the old Chinese saying goes, yinshui siyuan - drinking water, thinking of the source," he said.

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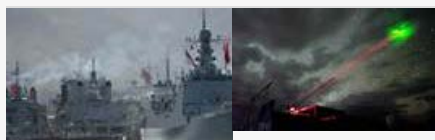
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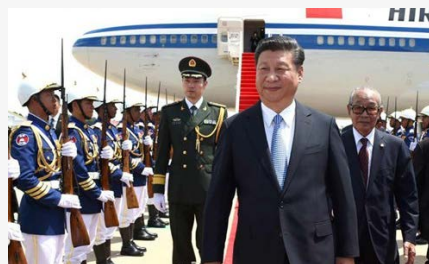


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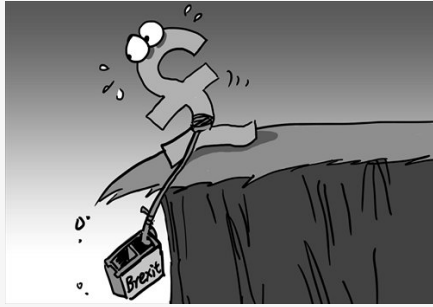
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