

Ancestral longings

As China rushes forward, more people seek their roots

A tech billionaire's quest exposes gaps in Chinese genealogies



Print edition | China >

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WHEN Richard Liu asked for help in tracing his family history, thousands of people offered suggestions. Little wonder: Mr Liu, the founder of JD.com, a popular online mall, is worth about \$10bn. There are more than 65m people in China who share his surname—some would love to connect their family branches to his bountiful tree. But constructing an accurate lineage could be tough, not only because of the huge number of Lius. In a country that in recent decades has seen the biggest movement of people in history away from their ancestral homes, genealogical records are patchy.

Veneration of ancestors is part of Chinese culture. Traditionally this required the scrupulous updating of genealogies by family elders. These were recorded in books known as *zupu* that listed members of each generation—though typically only the men. *Zupu* were often kept in ancestral shrines (such as the one pictured, dedicated to a clan surnamed Li in the southern city of Guangzhou). But war and migration in the past two centuries have complicated matters. Under Mao, the Communist Party tried to stamp out ancestor worship. Many *zupu* were destroyed. Mr Liu was born in Jiangsu, an eastern province, and can trace his heritage back to a branch of the Liu family in the central province of Hunan. There the trail goes cold because the relevant *zupu* is missing, say local media.

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In the West, people trying to trace their lineage often consult websites that provide data from sources such as census records and church registers. Such sites enable users to link their trees with others. But in China there is little in the way of official historical records that contain genealogical data and are open to commercial databases. Local gazettes often provided information about members of prominent families, but were silent about the masses.

Yet not all is lost. Over the past couple of decades, clan associations have re-established themselves and worked to compile records again. *Zupu* that were hidden in Mao's day, or taken abroad, have helped to fill in gaps. Some family elders have "put their collective memory down on paper", says Huihan Lie, founder of My China Roots, a genealogy service. The paucity of surnames in China—almost 85% of people share just 100 family names—is not necessarily an obstacle. Given names can also provide clues. They are usually made up of two characters, with the first one sometimes chosen from a generational sequence of names ordained by the recipient's clan. Mr Liu knows the sequence for eight generations in his family.

Websites are helping to make the search easier. My China Roots recently received private funding to build an online *zupu* database, starting with records from southern provinces where they are often more complete. Eventually the plan is to include Hunan, where Mr Liu's search is focused. With luck, searching for ancestors will someday be as easy as online shopping.

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