

# My day: Genealogist Huihan Lie

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Huihan Lie traces families back through multiple generations

**Born in Amsterdam to ethnically Chinese parents, Huihan Lie runs the company My China Roots in Beijing, which traces family histories and**

## tries to put them in the context of the time.

The alarm goes at 07:30. That's my girlfriend's fault, because she has to be in the office at 09:00 - for me, a pretty early hour. So we basically wake up at the same time. I guess I get out bed around 08:00, shower, breakfast. Usually muesli.

Between 08:30 and 09:00 I walk to the other side of the apartment to my office.

Every day is quite different, because my business is still in the start-up phase. But in general, I usually get onto the client work as quickly as possible. We have six clients that we're working on now.

Technically, I'm a genealogist, someone who works to trace family histories. However, my company, My China Roots, tries to explore beyond the names and the dates of the past.

A major aim is to bring life to a person's descent by complementing the more traditional genealogical research with a complete picture about the times and environments that shaped that person's ancestors.

How were their ancestors' actions intertwined with major events of world history such as the industrial revolution and China's century of humiliation? But also, how did their ancestors live their daily lives? What were their schools and their weddings like?

And, as my clients are mostly overseas Chinese, why did their ancestors choose to start a completely new life in an unknown world?

### Mixed heritage

I was born in Amsterdam and when I was five, we moved to the countryside. A completely Dutch upbringing. My parents were born in Indonesia but they were raised in Holland.

I came to China out of curiosity and I stayed because of my fascination with developments in society. I'm ethnically Chinese but my family had never been to China. No one at home spoke Chinese growing up, so China was always a very

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### My day: Casino croupier

### My day: Tug master

distant, mysterious country to me.

In 2004, when I was 26, I visited China for the first time. I decided to start with a two-month course at the most common university where everyone goes to study Chinese in Beijing. After that, I worked at the European Delegation for a bit.

A couple of years after, I made the decision to stay. I started digging into where my ancestors were from. When did they leave China? Why did they leave? Where did they live on the mainland?

I found out that most of it took place seven generations ago. It was a hobby to feed my own curiosity about my ancestry. That then evolved into other thoughts: if I'm interested and there are no other companies that help people doing their own research, why don't I help others?

For example, one client is American-Chinese, in her mid-30s. Her mum was born in Beijing and they have an extremely complicated family history in China.

Her mum's mother, that's who my client wants to focus on. She was from Guangdong, from Jiangmen, to be precise. It's about 100km from Guangzhou. They were there for many generations.

The grandfather of the maternal grandmother, we're talking around 1900, he was supposed to have close links with the Japanese. He did business with the Japanese. His son, my client's great grandfather, was high up with the opposite side, with the Kuomintang, or the KMT.

In the 1930s, when there was a civil war, the family moved to places like Nanjing, Shanghai and Beijing. Places that played an important role in the fighting that was going on in those days. What I think makes it interesting is this family conflict, the Japanese versus the KMT, father against son.

So in 1949, the KMT, the army general's family, they were obviously in a bit of a difficult position because the communists were winning. The army general and his wife and three of his four kids went to Hong Kong, as many did in those days. However, his oldest daughter, who is my client's mother, was given to her aunt for adoption. So, her aunt and my client's mother went to the US.

Bottom line is that the family got separated. One part of the family went to

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## Huihan Lie, genealogist

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- Born in Amsterdam but is ethnically Chinese
- Came to China out of curiosity
- His company, My China Roots, tries to trace a person's genealogy and add context to the time that his ancestors lived in
- Says that building trust is important in his line of work

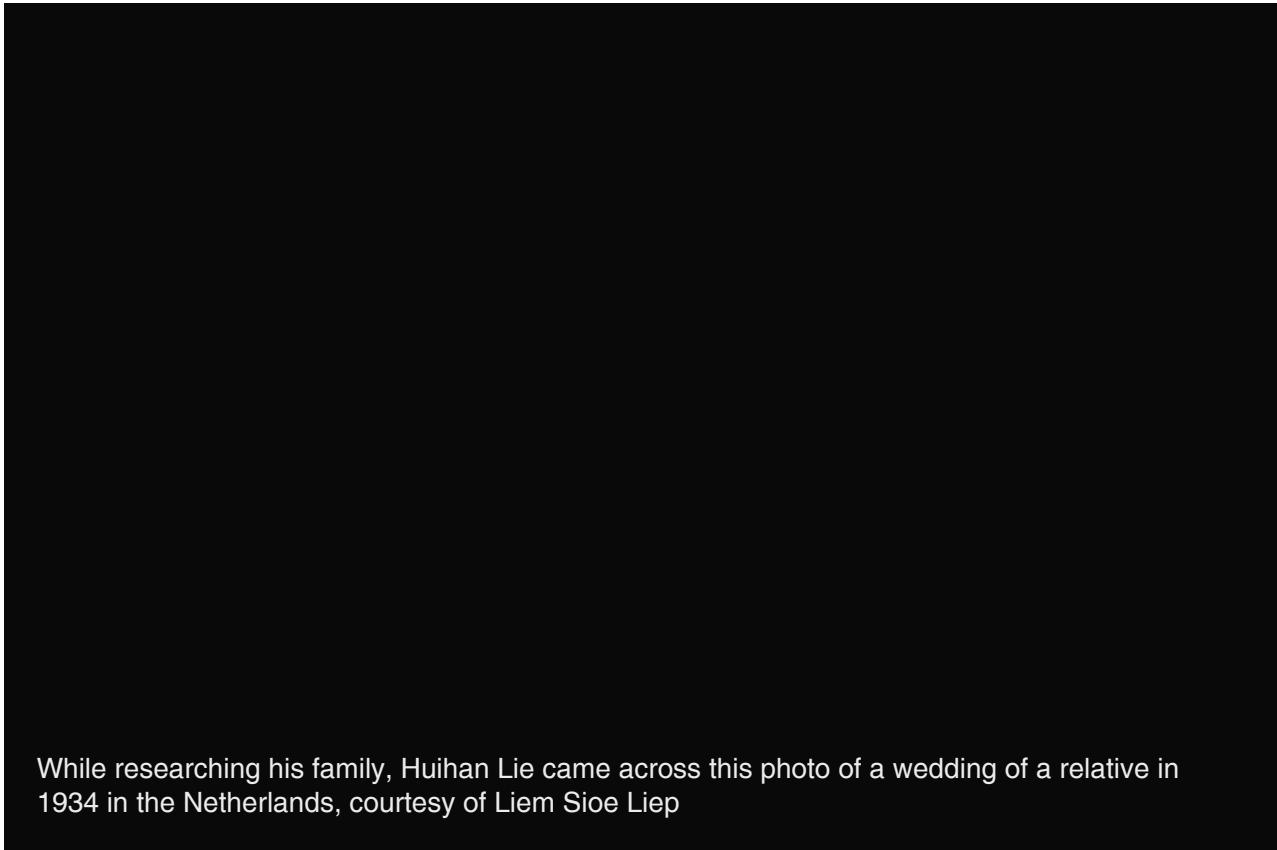
Hong Kong and my client's mum went to the US. She never heard from her biological siblings or her parents again. In this particular instance, we're still in the middle of finding out why, but it's very common in the first generation of movers.

## Limited information

We've all probably read about these conflicts, the Japanese versus KMT, the KMT and the communists. But to really go into personal stories and see how each of those big events have impacted people like you and me, that's what makes it interesting.

More often than not, people move for unpleasant reasons, like poverty or wars, leading them to prefer not to talk about their history.

If you get the second generation, which is exactly the case here, the daughter is the one who wants to find out about her history, precisely because her mother would never talk about it.



While researching his family, Huihan Lie came across this photo of a wedding of a relative in 1934 in the Netherlands, courtesy of Liem Sioe Liep

My work really depends on the phase of the project that I'm in. It starts with contact with the client, sitting down with the person who wants to know more about his or her history. It starts with what they already know and what their family knows. Because quite often, the accumulated knowledge within a family is more than people think.

I also ask clients to search for old pictures or old documentation, old passports, old photos with things written on the back.

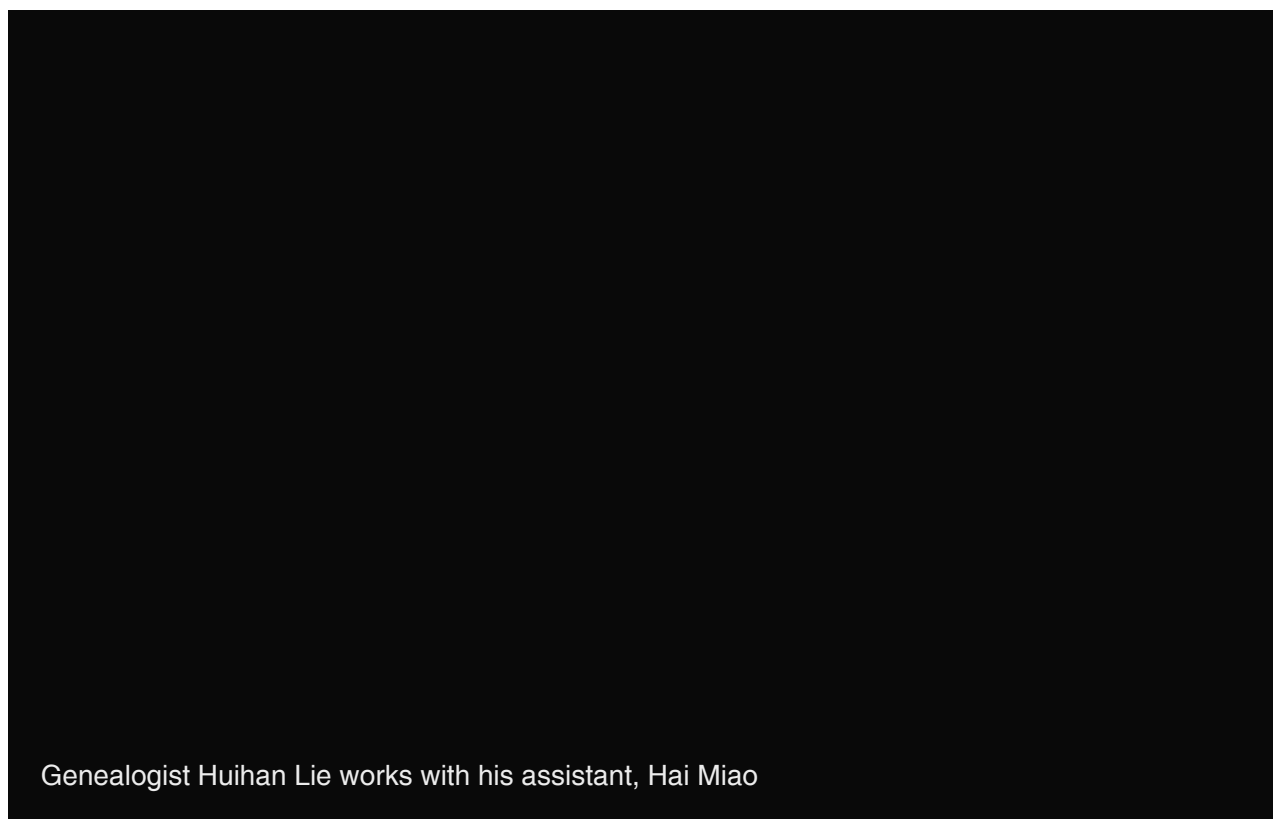
I ask Chinese clients to search for tombstones because quite often, in Chinese traditions, especially those who went overseas, they often had the name of the original ancestral village written on their tombstone in their new immigration destination.

I would hope to get big packets of documents in the mail from clients, but usually I just get short emails, saying "My aunt doesn't know anything".

Entering the family's names into Baidu (a Chinese search engine) is a couple of minutes' work, so we do that. It doesn't often turn up that much, but we do it anyway. Internet research can give you a broader context about immigration flows and other people that have moved from A to B, but if we want to get specific, then it gets personal and we have to call up people and meet people.

## Building trust

First, we try to locate the village because the ancestral documents in traditional China were maintained by clans and clans lived in villages. That's how villages started, with family clans.



Genealogist Huihan Lie works with his assistant, Hai Miao

If you know a bit about Chinese immigration history, then very often with the pieces of information that the client gives you can figure out where the village is located.

For example, if you know that the client's family worked for the American Transcontinental Railroads, you know that they probably moved to the US in

the 1860s and the biggest part of the people who moved to the west coast at that time came from four counties in Guangdong province.

Then, because we've built up a network, we can call people at the country level or city level overseas associations. They are Chinese-government funded by officially non-government organisations and they tend to be very helpful.

At least, they can tell us, "Okay, if you're looking for a Wang family in a specific part of Fujian province, these are the counties where there are a lot of Wangs." They'll give us telephone numbers or they'll reach out directly to the villages. That's how things start rolling.

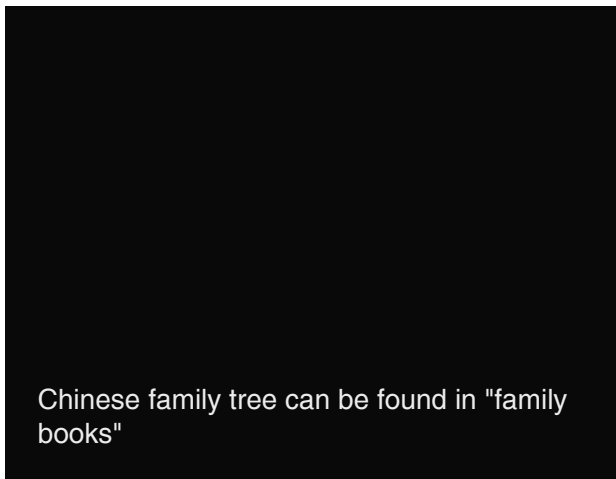
We make a lot of phone calls and then at some point, we do have to go there. That's the next step.

Recently, Hai Miao, my colleague, went to Fujian and I went to Guangdong for different types of projects. That phase is the most important one - probably because most information is still kept with older generations.

People who don't use the internet and don't like to give information over the phone. You have to look them in the eye and build trust.

When we get to the area, one of the main things we're looking for is an ancestral temple that often holds a "family book", a book in which the family tree is recorded and a lot of biographies of the main people in the family tree.

We also look for graves and houses that were built with money made overseas. Often the main reason people left China was to earn money to send back to build a house that they one day planned to use. Reality showed that most people stayed in the place where they moved to, but that was the mindset with which people left.



Chinese family tree can be found in "family books"

I also spend time writing reports. For example, after my trip to Guangdong for a client, I have to write a report. That takes time because it's not just a report in bullet points, but I'm mixing my findings and putting in a general historical context.

These interim reports sometimes help to give clients' families a little push to help them to remember things. In this case, we're hoping the mother of my client, who is more than 80 years old, will start to remember details. Also, we

need to document the information we find and make sure it's not lost, since that's why we're doing this research in the first place.

It's very difficult to say when I actually finish my work day because even when I finish dinner, I usually sit with my laptop and keep working on things. That's the danger when you work for yourself.

The best thing about my job is that every project is its own little jewel. With every project, you find things you weren't expecting to find and the client wasn't expecting to find. Really, every person has their own little quirks and personal stories.

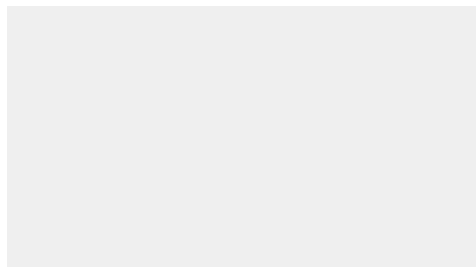
To a large extent, it's also a process that takes place within the client. They discover their roots and their Chinese connections are a lot closer to them than they had previously thought. It's that mix between emotional, psychological, cultural and historical elements that really make me love my job.

*Huihan Lie was talking to the BBC's Celia Hatton in Beijing.*

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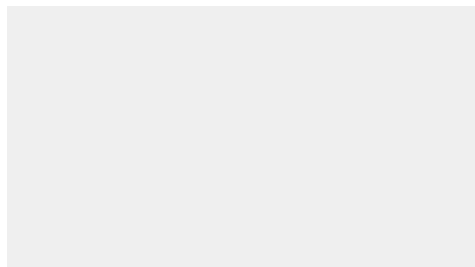


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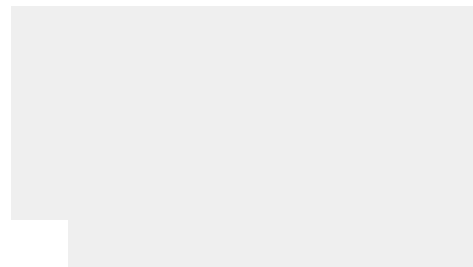
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