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Chinese billionaire Richard Liu makes public appeal to help trace family history

Some on social media predict tycoon's unusual request will draw plenty of enthusiastic responses from 'long-lost relatives'

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One of China's richest men has made a public appeal for help to trace his family history, hoping that some of the millions of people who share his surname will be able to shed light on his ancestry.

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Richard Liu Qiangdong, founder and CEO of online retail giant JD.com, announced he was on a mission to find his family's origins – at the request of his father – on his Weitoutiao social media account on Tuesday.

Liu, who has been dubbed the “Jeff Bezos of China”, said in the post that he wanted to hear from other Lius who lived around Xiangtan county in the central province of Hunan if they had any information that could help him piece together his family tree.

Liu was ranked China’s 16th richest man on the Forbes list last year, with a net worth of around US\$11.6 billion. JD.com confirmed that Liu had made the post.

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Liu wrote that prior to the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, his family had lived in Xiangtan – which was at the time a much bigger county.

His great-grandfather and grandfather were born there, but the family eventually moved to Jiangsu province in the east. But information on the family before the move was sketchy and Liu said he knew only that his family tree went back to the Zhongling Hall branch of Lius from Xiangtan.

He added that his family had a string of Chinese characters from which they were to name their offspring down the generations. These included *qiang* for those from his generation, and *zhi* for his father’s generation.



As one of China’s most popular five surnames, Liu is estimated to be the family name of more than 65 million people, according to the country’s last census in 2010.

Liu’s appeal highlights the cultural importance Chinese people place on tracing their ancestry, although the 43-year-old billionaire’s public request is unusual.

His post was quickly circulated on Chinese social media, with some predicting Liu would be inundated with emails.

"I guess there will soon be an army of people approaching Liu claiming to be his relatives," one user of microblogging platform Weibo wrote.

Another said: "How about I change my name to Liu Qiangxi? Is it too late to do that now?"

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But others praised Liu for observing Chinese tradition and valuing his family history.

"It's part of the Chinese culture to complete and amend one's family tree when you achieve success and are qualified to bring glory to your ancestors," one internet user wrote on news website 163.com.

A Weitoutiao user wrote that he respected Liu's efforts: "People should recognise their ancestors. As the Chinese saying goes, even a tree that has grown thousands of inches high should not forget its roots."

And another Weibo user said: "It's a good thing to find out who your ancestors are so that you know where you're from."



Local authorities in Xiangtan said they had not received a request for assistance from Liu but they were willing to help.

Liu was born to a poor family in a village in Suqian, a backwater in Jiangsu. He studied sociology at the prestigious Renmin University in Beijing and started a business selling consumer electronics in the late 1990s, before he moved into online retail in 2004.

In November, he told an internet conference in Yiyang, Hunan that he was actually from Xiangtan.

"I was always confused as to why I love spicy food," he was quoted as saying by news portal lkanchai.com. "Then my father told me that my grandfather came from Xiangtan, so my ancestry is in Hunan."

Liu was referring to the belief that Jiangsu people tended to have milder taste in food. He added that his great-grandfather had been wealthy but the family was forced to move to Jiangsu after their property was seized, without elaborating.

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Tracing family histories is a big business around the world, with companies such as Ancestry.com – which maintains the world's biggest online database of genealogical records – offering DNA tests to identify genetic markers to help people locate distant relatives.

It is also popular in China, and companies such as Beijing-based My China Roots, which was set up in 2012, has a network of experts and partners worldwide. It charges about US\$2,000 for a successful case.

Additional reporting by Celia Chen

This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as: Billionaire seeks help in tracing family tree

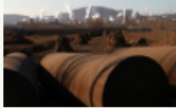
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