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Researching and Building Chinese Family History and Genealogy in Curriculum

Sheau-yueh J. Chao

Historians, sociologists, ethnologists, and even non-specialists have long been interested in the study of people's past human behavior on social and historical evidence relating to a family or clan. Historically speaking, a central part of Chinese family tradition has been to revere ancestors, and this tradition is still observed today by many Chinese families. Chinese American families have generally kept their genealogical records, thereby certifying their pedigrees. The preservation of other evidence relating to their past, such as photos, videos, diaries, awards, property records, obituaries, birth certificates, immigration records, marriage licenses, military records, household registries, and so on has also been important to these families. Chinese families have a strong sense of their origins and have carried on their genealogical traditions for centuries. Respect for the elders and ancestors is considered one of the outstanding virtues of Chinese culture. The importance of this trait is recognized in the record-keeping traditions and clan genealogies fostered for centuries within the context of Confucian philosophy.

While searching for their cultural identities, Chinese Americans have also striven for achievement in the United States.¹ The country has become home to some 500,000 people each year, claiming them as legal immigrants since the 1960s, and the number increased dramatically each year². A large percentage of these immigrants are ethnic Chinese in origin. Chinese immigrants first came as laborers, merchants, preachers, diplomats, and scholars, and worked in industry, business, religion, politics, and education, as well as in many other fields. These immigrants, who came from a culture that traditionally put great emphasis on family rules and traditions, were at first reluctant to reveal their personal histories. Many of them were facing the problems of struggling to survive, fear of political persecution, and, most importantly, the inquiries of immigration authorities that led them to shun exposure to media and the public³. Although some personal histories have been lost over the years to assimilation by interracial marriages, as well as through the loss of ethnic culture, language, and memory, younger generations have a renewed interest in the past. More politically involved than their ancestors, new generations of Chinese Americans have become conscious of finding their origins and reviving their histories.

Perceptions regarding the importance of Chinese family history and genealogical research have changed tremendously, especially in recent years. Scholars are now studying Chinese genealogies to supplement their research in areas such as history, geography, economics, social science, demography, religion, migration, ethnology, and the history of Overseas Chinese. Aside from contributions to the academic field, Chinese immigrants and their descendants find this research extremely fascinating and rewarding. For some of them, researching family history and records often uncovers prominent ancestors in their own families, leading to increased pride in their clan origin. Books, newspaper articles, workshops, conferences, and family visits to China or other foreign countries are the logical results of this heightened heritage awareness. They want to trace their family histories and openly discuss their historical backgrounds through active participation in family history associations, genealogical societies, conferences, blogs, and online forums relating to Chinese genealogies or *jiapu* (家譜).

BUILDING CHINESE FAMILY HISTORY IN CURRICULUM

There has been the revival of interest in the study of family history and ethnic genealogy since the 1970s. The revival first began in the United States with “the quest for personal origins” and later became extremely popular as “a social phenomenon.”⁴ A catalyst for this genealogical revolution was Alex Harley’s best seller book *Roots*, which burst upon the national consciousness and signaled the emergence of a new cultural context as a potentially important benchmark in U.S. race relations. Harley’s book embodied a major transformation in the American culture of genealogy, promoting new interests in cultural diversity. Over time, the use of family history assignments in teaching evolved, becoming integrated in curriculum among college institutions and high schools. Unlike other fields of American history, Asian American history presents challenges to the teaching and building of courses in curriculum. There are fewer records in archives devoted to Asian American history than there are for other ethnic genealogies because the primary sources used for historical research are either scattered across the United States or simply do not exist. Additionally, other materials collected by research institutions have restricted use or are in foreign holdings. Studies have also found that many undergraduates are not interested in historiography or Asian American history.⁵ Instead, they are more interested in learning and gaining a broader understanding of their personal or family histories. Instructors have to make more creative use of their students’ time in the classroom by applying various approaches, including family history questionnaires about immigration experiences, history of settlements for their parents and grandparents, and their adjustments to the American life, as well as detailed family history projects using census materials and original genealogical sources found in family history libraries and genealogical centers.

A review of current literature in this field shows that there are case studies and examples of teaching methods or experiences that could make an impact on students, instructors, and readers interested in teaching and building the Asian American history, genealogy, or immigration studies into the curriculum.

A college professor in Massachusetts explored his teaching methods through blending the history of migration with students’ personal experiences by having them conduct oral history interviews with their immediate family members in order to make connections between their personal lives.⁶ He also encouraged students to concentrate on themselves and write about their lives as Asian Americans. For the non-Asian American students, the assignment required that they interview an Asian American and record and reflect upon this other person’s life.

At a public school in Maryland, a new history course was introduced to the students that consisted of three interesting exercises for the study of immigration history, especially for the period between 1870 and 1920.⁷ The first exercise involved having the students either visit a cemetery where relatives were buried or select some grave sites that they found unusual or interesting, and then having them record their findings, such as compiling family charts, tables, drawings, and photographs, or any pertinent information found on the gravestones. In the second exercise, students were instructed to use census materials at local public libraries, historical societies, or by request from the National Archives in Washington, D.C. For the third exercise, the students filled out a pedigree chart for three family generations. Finally, students were

required to present their family histories with oral presentations and slides about their origin, family members, immigration history, cultural traditions, and so forth.

In Los Angeles, a college professor adopted the family history exercises in an undergraduate course on the sociology of a family.⁸ She applied her teaching approach to focus on developing awareness in culturally diverse college classrooms. In the class, students were asked to write a paper based on the data gathered through interviews with family members and the analysis of family documents.

With collaborated efforts, three college professors in Arizona described their teaching experiences in writing.⁹ They admitted that the inclusion of writing about family helps students to develop their critical thinking skills and to see the relevance of writing to their lives outside the classroom. The writing courses provided opportunities for students not only to engage in primary and secondary research, but also taught them the research and rhetorical skills necessary to collect stories of the family and the community that otherwise might be lost.

Yet another professor uncovered her teaching experiences and the challenge of integrating the teaching of writing and other skills into the family history programs.¹⁰ She described families as “an emotionally charged and highly mythologized subject,” and therefore, most students or teachers find it hard to examine family history without favorable or unfavorable comparisons to their own family memories and ideals. She also provided some critical analyses on the subject matter and offered experimental ways to engage with students based on the variations of their ethnicity and cultural backgrounds.

For background readings, *America's Multicultural Families* includes histories and anthologies of Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latinos.¹¹ The bibliography consists of reading materials suitable for people interested in teaching the family history subject.

The autobiography of Him Mark Lai provides a sample of excellent reading about a prominent figure in Asian American history.¹² Lai shared the moving story of his life in collecting, cataloging, and preserving historical sources and opened the field of Chinese American history to future scholars and researchers.

Audiovisual materials open another knowledge base to teaching assessment. For instance, *Becoming American: The Chinese Experience* is a film series narrated by Bill Moyers.¹³ The program presents intimate portraits of new Chinese Americans who faced having to lose certain family traditions in order to embrace their adopted American culture. It is a great tool for teaching immigration history and Asian American experiences.

DEFINING FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH

There are numerous kinds of history, such as social, economic, medical, statistical, and biographical. One of the more unique forms of historical research, however, is the biography that explores the records of an individual during his or her lifetime. Family history examines the

records and traits of a group of individuals connected by blood ties and attempts to establish the lineage and patterns of family organizations through common ancestry. In order to accomplish these tasks, family history research often requires the knowledge and skills of historians and genealogists.¹⁴

The study of Chinese family history follows the patterns established in Chinese historical research, from basic approaches, methods, steps, and techniques that are identical with those of general historical research to the more specific analysis of its origins, evolutions, merits, and achievements. Genealogy, in contrast, emphasizes the relevance of history and traces the descent of an individual or a family from particular ancestors. It is a chronological record, often in chart form, which lends its techniques and knowledge of sources to the study of genealogical records or *jiapu*. In other words, based on the narratives provided through family history research, genealogical study will be the logical step to follow by tracing a family's line of descent or lineage, from the current generation to the previous one and leading toward the history of earlier generations.¹⁵

CONDUCTING FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH

To start with the research process, the family historian recommends collecting the primary and secondary sources, organizing the information, interpreting the collected documents, and finally compiling the materials in genealogy to facilitate the archiving, preserving, and sharing of the resources with family members or readers with similar interests.

To facilitate the process and locate the resources precisely, sources to be used for researching Chinese family names and genealogical records are identified.¹⁶ In the United States, the Family History Library of the Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU) maintains thousands of Chinese genealogies and local histories preserved on microfilm and available for public use online in what is known as the FamilySearch database.¹⁷ Materials can be requested from its main library in Salt Lake City, Utah, and over seven hundred branch libraries located through a worldwide network of family history centers. Users may also check out the printed volume of *Chinese Genealogies at the Genealogical Society of Utah: An Annotated Bibliography* to obtain information about the individual family and genealogical records.¹⁸ The bibliography contains the annotated descriptions of 3,140 Chinese clans and lineage genealogies and other genealogical materials collected from after the Tang dynasty up to the Republican era.

In academic institutions, Columbia University's C.V. Starr East Asian Library owns more than 400,000 volumes of Chinese language materials and maintains over 1,200 Chinese genealogies collected from China, Taiwan, and Japan, as well as extensive holdings in Chinese literature, history, local gazetteers, and rare books and documents. The complete collection is searchable through Columbia Libraries Online Catalog (CLIO).¹⁹ The Harvard-Yenching Library at Harvard University has more than 830,000 volumes in its Chinese language collection and is the largest of its kind in North America. Its *Catalogues of the Harvard-Yenching Library, Chinese Catalogue* is an excellent tool to locate materials on classical Chinese literature and ancient Chinese family history books, rare documents, and genealogies.²⁰ Harvard University's

library collection in Chinese family history and genealogy is the second largest in United States after Columbia University's C.V. Starr East Asian Library.

In China, the Shanghai Library is renowned for having the largest Chinese-family history and genealogical collection in the world.²¹ Its *Shanghai tushuguan guancang jiapu tiyao* (Abstracts of the Shanghai Library's Chinese Genealogy Collections) and *Zhongguo jiapu zongmu* (The General Catalog of Chinese Genealogy) are essential tools for researching Chinese surnames and genealogical records.²² The Shanghai Library holds a collection of 110,000 volumes of genealogies, including the genealogical history of individual lineages or family, biographies of the ancestors, the origin of the progenitor, family honors, deeds or merits, family settlements, marriages, births and deaths, and the enlightened family members in a clan. The majority of *jiapu* in the collection were compiled in late Qing and the early Republican period, though there are some rare books dating from the Song and Ming dynasties.

There is a wide variety of genealogical resources available in the United States relating to the Chinese heritage and their ancestors in published literature. The materials can be found in different shapes and formats. They include documents in Access to Archival Databases (AAD), census records, immigration records (such as ship passenger lists), birth and death certificates, land records, naturalization records, military service records, vital statistics, community and ethnic records, ethnic newspapers (may cover marriage and obituary announcements), cemetery and funeral records, other local records found at city or county levels, libraries with genealogical collections, family charts, and some records abroad in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other countries.

Another important method for family history research is to conduct oral history interviews.²³ These interviews are generally conducted with relatives or people who observe past events in their memories and perceptions to be kept as records for future generations. Oral histories preserve documented research study from different perspectives for information that cannot be ascertained from written resources.²⁴ However, the researcher should be reminded that oral history can be helpful as a basic source but is not to be substituted for or relied on as a single and unsubstantiated source for the complete family history research. Some printed sources and original manuscripts should be consulted and combined to the research process as well.

TURNING FAMILY HISTORY TO GENEALOGY

Once the researcher has collected all available information and data, the next step is to begin writing and compiling the genealogy. Unlike Western genealogies which could be arranged in topical form according to areas of interest, Chinese genealogies are generally organized chronologically containing genealogical data. Prior to beginning the writing process, the compiler should first consult the formats and contexts in *jiapu* for the appropriate style suitable for producing family charts and the narratives. For instance, *In Search of Their Asian Roots: Genealogical Research on Chinese Surnames* details the history and origin of Chinese surnames and provides the genealogical analysis of over five hundred popular Chinese surnames found in *Bai jia xing* (Surnames of a Hundred Families).²⁵ *Basic Guide to Chinese Genealogy* provides the background of genealogical research, including chapter topics on the history of Chinese

genealogy, the purposes and values of *jiapu* research, setting goals and objectives to start tracing Chinese roots, how to track private family history records, and planning for the publishing of the genealogy.²⁶ *Asian American Genealogical Sourcebook* combines the historical data and practical genealogical advice for beginners in researching their Asian American heritage.²⁷ *Know Your Ancestors: A Guide to Genealogical Research* provides the principles of original research in American genealogy and gives fundamental instruction on methods for tracing ancestry and compiling family history, including the outlines of family research materials in public and nonpublic records, land records, federal records in the National Archives, church records, immigration records, internal migrations, and research sources in the principal states from where the ancestors migrated.²⁸

One of the most important parts in the narratives is the introduction. It is the place where the compiler establishes the family's historical background and attracts the reader's attention. Record the names, aliases (such as literary names, *zi* 字 and *hao* 號), birth and death dates, birthplace, name of spouses, and siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Connections, patterns, and developments should be clearly identified within the narratives. Look for information about ancestors, prominent or nonprominent, original settlements, village maps, property records, personal identifications, and family albums, and write down everything that has been found so far. The compiler should try to comprehend the historic events and their significance as they relate to the family and convey that understanding through the narratives of the family history.²⁹ Many Chinese-Americans have been settled in this country for several generations. Gaps with the home country may exist. At this point, research may be broadened to include possible record sources beyond the United States as well.

The format of a Chinese genealogy varies and it is usually organized chronologically in the form of a historical essay or a book. Some general sections may include a preface, family charts and images, an introduction to the clan genealogy, generational orders, ancestry and genealogy on family origins, ancestor names and their ranks, distinguished family members, a chronological list of family members in lineage from earliest to current generations, and an epilogue or conclusion.

After the genealogy has been completed, checked and proofread, consult with relatives and family members for additional comments or suggestions. It would be a good idea to have it copyrighted before sending it out to the bindery. Make several copies of this valuable document and send copies to the local public library, historical society, the state archives, or the Family History Library of the Genealogical Society of Utah for archive and preservation.

THE TAISHAN GEE FAMILY ZUPU (台山朱氏族譜)

The Chinese in Guangdong have a long tradition of migration. As a coastal province, Guangdong provides easy access to Southeast and South Asia, where many Chinese merchants opened commercial routes beginning in the Qin dynasty (221–206 B.C.E.).³⁰ Throughout the centuries, Guangdong has been the location for several excellent seaports, attracting commercial merchants for trade and becoming a great hub for international business and overseas emigration. During

the mid-nineteenth century, news came of the discovery of rich deposits of gold in California. The subsequent opportunities in the new continent, commonly known as Jinshan (金山; Gold Mountain) soon attracted thousands of Chinese, growing from 2,716 in 1851 to 20,026 in 1852.³¹ Besides mining, there were a large number of Chinese laborers who were employed by the Central Pacific Railroad Company as construction workers. By 1882, when the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act ended Chinese immigration, there were about 300,000 Chinese in the United States.³²

The primary issue that caught the attention of immigration officials during the enactment of the law was that Chinese, and Taishanese in particular, refused to accept the terms of the exclusion laws and persisted in coming to the United States. To survive the scrutiny of immigration authorities, Chinese had to systematically produce identities for people eligible to enter the United States and the supporting evidence for each paper identity. Today, the descendants of paper sons and daughters are still trying to uncover the truth by researching their past. The Wong family was one of the thousands who made up paper identities with fraudulent documents using false names.

William Gee Wong (朱華強), seventy-two, who grew up in Oakland's Chinatown and is a retired journalist in California, embarked on a long journey of tracing his family roots back to Taishan. Wong's father, Gee Ghee Gheng (朱箕鏡), was born in Taishan, Zou Village (鄒村), Jun Zi Hang (君子杭) in 1896. He immigrated to the United States in 1912, lived in Oakland until 1919, revisited his native village four times, and eventually returned to Oakland. In November 1933, he brought his family, including his wife and three daughters, to permanently settle in Oakland. He had several small businesses in Oakland's Chinatown, and died and was buried in Oakland in 1961.

Wong's family history was that his father Gee Ghee Gheng was the real son of a Chinese-American citizen, who immigrated to the United States with siblings, two of whom were using false identities. One was a girl who was claimed as a paper sister and later became his wife while living in the United States. Due to the fear of deportation by immigration officials, the couple never legally married. Wong's father, whose surname was Gee, arranged a marriage between his wife and a Taishanese whose surname was Wong. Nearly a century has been passed and the Wong family has grown into seven members, with William ranked as the seventh and youngest children in the Wong (Gee) family.

According to historical documents, the Gee surname (pronounced *Zhu* in Mandarin) was derived from the name of the state of Zhu (邾), which was bestowed on Cao Xia (曹俠) in the Zhou dynasty. The state of Zhu was located in present-day Zhou County (鄒縣) in Shandong Province. During the Spring and Autumn Period, after Zhou Xian was defeated by the state of Chu (楚), members of the Zhu family escaped from their homes and relocated elsewhere. Some family members settled in the state of Pei (沛), present-day Suixi County (濰溪縣) in Anhui Province. The descendants prospered in Pei District and later migrated to other parts of the country. From the Sui dynasty to the present, the Gee clan grew into eleven branches with nearly ten million descendants. The majority of family members lived in Shandong Province in Gusu

(姑蘇; ancient Wu Jun 吳郡), Luling (廬陵), Poyang (鄱陽), Jianyang (建陽), Chujian (曲江), Nanyang (南陽), Jizhou (冀州), Bianliang (汴梁), Yangzhou (揚州), and Puyang (濮陽).

The origin of the Gee family can be traced to Duke Wenhuan (Wenhuan Gong; 文煥公) of Taishan, Guangdong Province, in the Song dynasty. According to the historical documents, Duke Wenhuan belonged to the lineage of the prominent scholar Gee (Zhu) Xi (朱熹). Wenhuan was followed by Duke Shaodi (Shaodi Gong; 少弟公) of Guanhai (廣海) in the Hongwu regnal period of the Ming dynasty. The Gee family history was documented in the *Taishan Gee Family Zupu* (台山朱氏族譜). Its family generational poem is presented here.

De ye kai shi ze	德業開世澤
Ying liang qi yi chang	英良啟裔昌
Ji qiu you si yuan	箕裘由嗣遠
Pei guo jia sheng chang	沛國家聲長

Yan wu xiu wen jia	偃武修文家
Ji ye ru du zhi	繼業儒篤志
Cun ren mu yi dao	存仁募義道
Zong guang zhe liang tu	宗光哲良圖



Figure 1. Cover of Taishan Gee Family Genealogy (台山朱氏族譜)

COLLABORATION, DOCUMENTATION, AND PRESERVATION OF HISTORICAL RECORDS

As increasing numbers of Chinese Americans have become interested in tracing their roots and family origins, it would seem to follow that libraries should develop genealogical collections and welcome family history researchers. Based on the *Guidelines for Developing Beginning Genealogical Collections* prepared by American Library Association's Genealogy Committee from the History Section of the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), "libraries have a responsibility to serve the needs of patrons interested in genealogical research by providing basic genealogical reference materials and how-to-do-it books and by providing access to additional genealogical research materials through ILL or referral." The following are some recommendations for coordination and resource sharing in Chinese genealogy.

1. Promoting collaboration between U.S. and Chinese institutions.

2. Building institutional research centers to facilitate documentation and research on family history and genealogy.
3. Pulling expertise together through joint collaboration and sponsorship of international conferences, online forums, scholarly publications, and institutional exchange programs.
4. Sharing knowledge via blogs, wikis, webinars, distance learning, document delivery, and interlibrary loan services.
5. Posting academic works online via open access institutional repository by making your work freely available online and more findable by Google and Google Scholar.
6. Collaborating on international projects, seminars, exchange programs, and training.
7. Providing resource sharing via bibliographic access using search engines, discovery tools, and online platforms.
8. Establishing a scholarly databank to facilitate the dialogue among peers with the possibilities of coordination and collaboration to build subject-specific resources on Chinese family history, genealogy, and Overseas Chinese studies.

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