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RESEARCHING YOUR ASIAN ROOTS FOR CHINESE-AMERICANS

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Introduction

Situated at the busiest mid-town Manhattan, Baruch is one of the senior colleges within the City University of New York that consists of twenty campuses spread over the five boroughs of New York City. Its intensive business curriculum attracts students from all over the country, especially those of Asian-Pacific ethnic background, which encompasses nearly 45% of the entire student population at Baruch.

As a librarian at Baruch College, the City University of New York, I have encountered various types of questions when serving at the reference desk. Generally these questions can be solved one by one without major difficulties. However, beginning about seven years ago, a unique question was referred to me repeatedly when each new semester began. It was “How can I find a reference book that would trace my Chinese last name?” or, “Is there any resource in English that could help me to find the origin of my Chinese surname?” It turns out that these questions came from a Speech Class offered by the English Department as a pre-requisite class for incoming Freshmen. My fellow American colleagues tried to locate genealogical research books on the topic without much success and turned to me for help with the question. It was from this time that I began to get interested in Chinese genealogical research.

In fact, Chinese genealogical sources are abundant on the market. However, nearly all of these materials are written in Chinese and may not be easily accessible to the Chinese-American students and academic communities. In addition, further research is often time-consuming and labor-intensive. After extensive bibliographic research on various library catalogs, including the Online Computer Library Center’s (OCLC) WorldCat Database, the collection at Columbia University’s East Asian Library, and the Harvard-Yenching Library at Harvard University’s Catalogues of the Harvard-Yenching Library, Chinese Catalogue [1], my determination to write and compile a book to trace Chinese surnames finally took shape. In 1996, the annotated bibliography of over two hundred English and Chinese books and articles, based on my two years reading and researching at the Columbia University’s East Asian Library was published in the Journal of East Asian Libraries [2]. Three years later, In Search of Your Asian Roots: Genealogical Research on Chinese Surnames was completed and published. The present article was revised from my lecture presented at the American Library Association’s Annual Conference, in the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) of the Local History Section in San Francisco in June 2001.

History of Chinese names

The use of a family name or surname by the Chinese people has remote origins. Family names were created and used by the Chinese people about 2,800 years ago before the Three Dynasties, Xia (ca. 2200-700 B.C.), Shang (ca. 1700-1122 B.C.) and Zhou (ca. 1122-221 B.C.) [3]. According to legend, the Chinese surname system was established by the legendary emperor Fu Xi 伏羲 (2852-2737? B.C.). After the accession of the emperor Fu Xi, all Chinese were required to have a family name. Its purpose was to distinguish among families and to prevent marriage between persons of the
same family name. From the time of the emperor Fu Xi until the Zhou dynasty, two categories of family names were in use, the first called shi 氏, being a hereditary title from the father’s side created for the clan given by and held at the pleasure of the emperor, king, or lord. This class of name was used to address the constituents of the clan and the male. The other class was called xing 姓, to indicate origin of birth from the mother side. This second class was used to address the female.

A major shift of status becomes evident during the Warring States (Zhan kuo 475-221 B.C.) Period. At this period, the establishment of an agricultural society marked the shift of power from woman to man, plus the Chinese adopted their names (shi) predominantly from their feudal territory during that period. Thus shi became more important than xing. From the Zhou dynasty to the succeeding Qin (221-206 B.C.) dynasty, Shi Huangdi 始皇帝 pursued an aggressive policy directed against the remaining feudal states. After he had assumed full control of his government, with the weakening of the power of the nobles, the difference between xing and shi became less and less prominent. After the Zhou dynasty, the classes of shi and xing became identical, and only surnames or family names were used.

Scholars also consider other possibilities such as the legendary emperor Huangdi (2697-2597? B.C.) and early Chinese matriarchal societies as possible sources of Chinese family names. From an anthropological point of view, the totems of the ancient Chinese people also had a great impact on the Chinese family names. In all, the family names of legendary emperors, the family names of the ancient matriarchal clans, and the totems of the ancient people fostered the evolution of Chinese family names.

Gu Yanwu 顧炎武, a prominent scholar in the Ming (A.D. 1368-1644) dynasty, stated in his Book of Daily Records (Ri zhi lu 日知錄): "When people were discussing family names (xing), they based their arguments on the Five Emperors, including Shao Hao 邵昊, Chuan Xu 頓顼, Di Ku 帝嚳, Tang Diyao 唐帝堯 and Yu Dishun 廣帝舜. There were twenty-two surnames found in the Spring and Autumn Annals (Chun Qiu 春秋). After the Warring States Period, people identified the shi with the xing, thus the xing, which had existed from the age of the Five Emperors, disappeared." He also said: "Generally speaking, people of the Warring States Period still used a clan (shi zu 氏族) designation which people of the Han (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) dynasty period usually called xing although the shi zu designation continued . . . the xing shi designations have been mixed as one and the same since the time of the Grande Duke of Tai (Taishi gong 太史公), or Sima Qian 司馬遷." At present, though xing and shi are mixed as one and the same, their function is not even slightly diminished. Today people who bear the same surname, though not of the same ancestry, still largely identify themselves as having a clan relationship.

Types and functions of Chinese genealogical records (jia pu 家譜) [4]

According to the documented history of Chinese literature, genealogies before the Sung (A.D. 960-1679) Dynasty were quite simple in content and primarily used for the purpose of recording personal and family history or data. From the Ming (A.D. 1368-1644) to the succeeding Qing dynasty (1644-1911), genealogy compilers put greater emphasis on family traditions, marriages, merits or deeds, rewards, and so on. Thus, the functions of family history books became diversified and various
types of genealogical records prospered. Generally speaking, the great majority of Chinese
genealogical records and documents emerged during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Each volume of
the genealogy contains the following typical types or formats of records:

1. **Gegenealogical preface (pu xu 譜序):** Printed at the beginning of the genealogy, pu xu
   describes the reasons and purposes of writing the family genealogy book. This practice is
   especially important for large clans that made frequent modifications to their family genealogies.
   From generation to generation, pu xu plays an import role in passing down pertinent information
   sources to its descendants and other followers. (See Figure 1)

2. **Gegenealogical rules (pu li 譜例):** A well-written genealogy book generally provides specific
   family rules listed in front pages as written policies. The information may include the
   genealogy’s writing style, family rankings or orders, and the family’s naming system of
   generational orders. Pu li offers important facts for reference by the following genealogy
   compilers and descendants. (See Figure 2)
3. **The clan’s origin (shi zu yuan liu 氏族源流):** This section describes and traces the history and origin of the family name, relocation history, the reason or reasons for the change of surname, marriages, and so on. Shi zu yuan liu is one of the most important parts in the genealogy because it contains detailed information about the family ancestry and the clan. (See Figure 3)
4. Genealogical chart or pedigree chart (shì xì biao 世系表): Shi xi biao was used to draw the ancestral line and its peripherals. Each family has its own genealogical record, giving the origin of the family, its collateral lines, names and ages of the members, records of marriages, births and deaths, including a brief history of the men in the family. There are four major styles that were adopted and used in the Chinese history: a) Ouyang style genealogical chart (Ouyang shì tu pu 歐陽式圖譜) invented by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, a prominent scholar in the Northern Song dynasty. Each chart records the family history of five generations only. A new chart will be created after the compilation of the fifth generation in a family. (See Figure 4).
b) *Su style genealogical chart* (*Su shi zong tu pu* 蘇氏宗圖譜) invented by Su Xun 蘇洵, also a prominent scholar in the Northern Song dynasty. This style emphasizes the importance of siblings following the genealogical transitions from one generation to another. Horizontal and vertical lines were used to connect between various levels of siblings or generations. The chart will expand from top to bottom and then right to left, in that order. (See Figure 5)
c) Pyramid or umbrella style genealogical chart (bao ta shi tu pu 寶塔式圖譜). The person who invented this style cannot be traced. This style was used popularly in the Southern Song dynasty. Due to the limitation of following one straight ancestral line, it was not convenient to use for large families with numerous branches. (See Figure 6).
d) *Genealogical chart in plain written form* (tie ji shi xi biao 脨記式世系表). This chart uses plain words to describe the ancestors' merits or deeds, pen names, literary appellations, designations or titles, posthumous names, births and deaths, spouses and children, burial sites, and other matters. Because of its simplicity and flexibility to use, the style has been widely adopted and became popular after the Qing dynasty. Today, many people still follow this method of genealogy writing style. (See Figure 7)
5. **Records of honors or merits (guang rong shi ji tu 光榮史蹟圖):** Everyone is proud of his ancestor’s merits or deeds in light of the family’s history. It is essential for members of the family to document the ancestor’s merits in the family genealogy book. The practice has been popular since the Han and Tang dynasties. Anyone in the family who has received official rewards, educational achievements, promotion to higher official titles, literary achievements, has had an honorary title bestowed by the emperor, or even great longevity is entitled to be documented in the family genealogy book. Throughout Chinese history, numerous examples can be found of a person changing his family name because of the above reasons. For example, the surname of the emperor’s own family was given as a reward of merit or honor. It was generally bestowed upon worthy statesmen, councilors, or warriors, etc. who had made great contributions to the country. (See Figure 8).
6. **Map of family residence (gu ju tu 故居圖):** The residence of a family is also very important and should be recorded in the genealogy book as well. Examples can be found in the genealogy books that appeared in the Ming and Qing dynasties. In general, not only a map of the family residence, but also the details of family relocation history, interior designs, rooms used for book collections or entertainment, and family gardens are all included. Each piece was drawn nicely and neatly on the map. (See Figure 9).
7. **Ancestral hall (ci tang 祠堂):** Ci tang is a place or an organization which records, edits and preserves the history and genealogy of the family. The system has probably been in place since the Zhou dynasty. However, the earliest documentation that can be traced dates from the Ming dynasty. The ancestral hall functions as the place to preserve the family history and records of the memory of its ancestors. The surrounding areas are also popular places for family gatherings on such occasions as group discussions for improving or promoting family’s community relations, friendships among neighbors, mutual collaborations on community projects, and educational programs for children. (See Figure 10)

![Figure 10](image)

8. **Biographies for family records (jia zhuan 家傳):** In ancient times, genealogies (pu 譜) and biographies (zhuan 傳) were recorded separately. It was not until the Ming dynasty that both were included in the *Standard Histories (Zheng shih 正史)* and biographies became an accepted form of historical writing. The groups of biographies (lie zhuan 列傳) for the family members can also be classified into internal biographies (nei zhuan 內傳), external biographies (wai zhuan 外傳), and extended biographies (lie zhuan 列傳). For the most part, historical biographies were usually arranged in groups and based on the various categories of commemorative and social writings. The internal biographies recorded the achievements of children in the family, external biographies documented the merits of married women or chastity of widows in the family, and the extended biographies were used for the filial conduct of men and their loyalty among officials. In general, portraits of the highlighted family members were drawn and included in the biographies as well. (See Figure 11).
9. **Dynastic literary bibliographies (Yi wen zhu shu 藝文著述):** In the Ming dynasty, publications written by prominent family members were cited in the family genealogy book. Examples include bibliography of literary works (Yi wen zhi 藝文志), collected works on literary phrases (ci yuan ji 語源集), and books about the Classics (jing 經), history (shi 史), philosophy (zi 子), and collections (ji 集), etc. (See Figure 12).

![Figure 11](image1.png)

10. **Family instructions (jia xun 家訓 or jia gui 家規):** These are rules to be followed by the descendants of the family. In the Qing dynasty, genealogy books also included other types of documents, such as household population chart (ren kou biao 人口表), irrigation works (shui li chi 水力志), and examination rosters (ke ju biao 科舉表). (See Figure 13).

![Figure 12](image2.png)
From previous examples it should be clear that Chinese genealogies were used not only to record family history and data. They also reflect contemporary politics, economics, literary traditions, and social changes of the period. Chinese genealogies provide live reflections of ancient Chinese society and its people and should be highly praised for their historical and research value in the study of ancient China.

**Research problems in Chinese genealogy [5]**

Pursuing their genealogical history is not an easy task for Chinese-Americans. Because the majority of Chinese immigrants have arrived within the past century, many of the American records and techniques that applied to people from other parts of the country or continent may not apply to the Chinese. One of the most difficult problems is the language barrier. Hampered by the language
problem, without a sense of direction as to how to begin and lacking information about records and procedures, many new immigrants regard genealogical research as a daunting task. Their efforts to discover their heritage, family history, and themselves may start with enthusiasm only to fade out later. Chinese-American genealogical research requires a person to be educated in the Western tradition and also to be knowledgeable about Asian traditions. A proficiency in both English and Chinese languages is necessary in order to conduct original research in Chinese materials.

Succeeding generations of Chinese-Americans were generally educated in English language schools and lacked the motivation and commitment to learn their parents’ languages. It was common to have gaps between the generations. As a result, dealing with local ethnic sources as well as those abroad is usually beyond their concerns. This is one of the main reasons that scholars need to put more energy and research effort on ethnic studies and translate more of the Asian sources to make them available to the later generations.

Another related problem is the romanization of character-based languages. There are several romanization systems, as well as several Chinese dialects with varying pronunciations for identical characters. Consistency in pronunciation and spellings is hard to maintain. In Taiwan, the Wade-Giles system has been used for more than half a century. In China, Hanyu Pinyin has been practiced for transliteration in writing since 1958. The United Nations also adopted the Hanyu Pinyin system in 1986 as its official romanization system. In the United States, the Library of Congress used Wade-Giles from the beginning of its services but switched to Hanyu Pinyin in 2000 as the standard for transliterating Chinese characters in American bibliographic records. Efforts have been made for libraries to convert earlier records into Hanyu Pinyin via global changes, but some records with Wade-Giles still need manual corrections. The major barrier lies in the tonal aspects of the language that still make conversion extremely difficult.

Because Chinese language is tonal with four different tones or sounds (1.flat sound, 2.upper sound, 3.curved sound, and 4.lower sound), research is quite difficult unless one knows the original characters. For example, the word da¹ 搭 is a verb, “to catch” something, da che 搭車 means “to catch the bus”; da² 答 is also a verb, “to respond or answer”, huei da 回答 means “to respond or answer” someone; da³ 打 is a verb, “to beat or strike” someone, da ni 打你 means “to beat or strike you up”; and da⁴ 大 is an adjective, means “big.” The conflict over whether to use Wade-Giles or Hanyu Pinyin system when searching Chinese bibliographic records has caused great confusion and frustration not only for users but also for librarians as well.

Because most new immigrants struggled with English, errors were sometimes made in completing English forms on City or State official documents. Other types of errors may come from immigration officials and state or federal workers while doing their paperwork or transcribing Chinese names on official records.

Another problem is the lack of library materials on the subject. Since most of the personnel conducting library acquisitions efforts are of American, British, or other European origins, their efforts toward collecting materials of genealogical and family history value have generally focused on American, British, or European origins instead of on minority or ethnic groups. In many cases, lack of library materials published on the subject in English is also a contributing factor. There are abundant Chinese genealogical sources on the market. However, nearly all of these materials are
written in Chinese and may not be easily accessible in neighborhood libraries. In fact, there are simply not enough existing English sources that libraries could collect especially on the subject of Asian-American genealogies.

While Westerners are concerned with their various lines of descendants, the Chinese view of genealogy is to see it branching from a common ancestor. Chinese genealogy books include only male succession, with women in only a peripheral role. Generation order and linkage ties are of primary importance whereas the relationship with female lines is secondary. Considerable research efforts must be made in the field so that quality information resources may be made available to the following generations.

**How to conduct a typical Chinese-American genealogical research**

In compiling your genealogy, always begin with what you know. You start with your family history research by recording what you know from personal knowledge. Record the names, addresses, birth and death dates and places of your siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Find facts and information by talking to other family members and seeking out stories about the family history. Look for information about your ancestors, prominent or non-prominent, original settlements, village maps, property records, personal identifications, and family albums, etc., and write down everything you find. Cite the source of your information so that if you ever want to go back and check a fact, you can check your citation at the same time.

Once you have exhausted the supply of the most readily available information, you can continue to investigate for evidence of ancestors in written records and also in the memories of living relatives. To record your conversation, take notes or use a tape recorder so that all pertinent information will be kept for future verification purposes.

Chinese-Americans have settled in this country for several generations, and gaps with the home country may exist. If so, at this point, research must be broadened to include possible record sources in the United States and Hawaii. Documented sources may include:

**Vital records** – Vital records are the so-called “delayed birth certificate” created in the 1890s for immigrants and children in Hawaii. Records are available in the following locations: For pre-1896 records, they are available in Hawaii State Archives, from 1896 on, records are available at the Hawaii State Department of Health or available on film through 1903 at the Family History Library of the Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU). A collection of over 3,140 Chinese genealogies and local histories were preserved on microfilm and available for public use in the GSU main library in Salt Lake City, Utah, as well as in over 700 branch libraries through a network of family history centers.

**U.S. census records** - A few Chinese appear in the U.S. census beginning from the 1850s and increase more and more in later years. Census records are useful for identifying the location where the family resided at the time in the United States.

**Immigration records** – Records are available from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services.

**Community and ethnic records** – These records are generally available from ethnic societies or associations based in Chinatown areas.

**Ethnic newspapers** – These newspapers generally covered their respective communities in depth, such as Shi jie ri bao 世界日報, Xing dao ri bao 星島日報, Qiao bao 僑報, Zhong bao 中報, and Zi you shi bao 自由時報.

**Cemetery and funeral records** – These types of records include tombstones, inscriptions, and cremation with exhumed bodies returned back to their native villages in China. Information such as birth and death dates, ages at death, sometimes specific places or birth and even biographical information are included. Funeral homes may have kept records of cremation and burial and even some personal records of the deceased.

**Local records** – Some of the local types of records may be found at city or county level, federal and state courts, such as criminal and civil judgements, military records, land records, wills, sales, settlements, adoptions, marriages, agreements, and many other court or legal cases.

**Libraries with genealogical collections** – Always seek for help from local libraries or Chinese historical societies with genealogical collections. For example, in New York City, you may consult the collections at Columbia University’s East Asian Library, the New York Public Library’s Local History and Genealogy section, and the GSU’s New York Family History Center of the Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints. Many large cities in the United States have extensive genealogical or historical collections in their libraries, academic centers, historical societies, and museums.

**Family history chart** - Make sure to use the genealogy data form or pedigree chart to assist you in keeping track of your ancestors’ records. List your direct ancestors and begin an individual file on
each member of the family you identify. Make copies of original documents for safe-keeping and future reference purposes. Work with copies and store the originals in a safe place.

Records abroad in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong - Most of the Chinese in Taiwan are the offspring of immigrants, including both those who fled the mainland during and after the Civil War (1947-1950) and those who have lived on the island for several generations. Some of them were able to flee with records, including genealogies or copies from originals left at their former mainland homes. After fifty years under Japanese occupation from 1894-1945, Chinese household or family registers are similar to those used in Japan to record changes in the status of family members. Family registers, begun in 1896, contain information on births and deaths, marriages, children, relocation history, occupation, education, or military service records. Similarly, Hong Kong's genealogical records reflect British methods. Vital records are maintained by the Registrar General's Department of Hong Kong and include birth and death records from 1873 and marriage records from 1946. In China, record preservation has some limitations. Some records are preserved well for several generations while research beyond certain points requires entirely different approaches. Rather than going to government offices to find traditional sources, searching in the village where the ancestors came from may be necessary. In many cases, genealogies can only be obtained by asking door-to-door.

Traditional Chinese sources – There are two major features of these sources. First, Chinese historical records are written using classical Chinese. It is not the same as the present colloquial style and translation can be difficult sometimes. Second, dates are calculated using the lunar calendar and you will need to figure out the Western equivalent.

Other types of records – These include genealogical registers, biographies, ancestral tablets which were kept on household altars and in clan temples or ancestral halls, academic or other official certificates, personal identification cards, and so on.

Summary

In summary, a beginning researcher can do independent research and need not to be an expert in this field or a historian. The most important thing is to check and trace back the genealogy as far as possible. The process is occasionally frustrating and requires infinite patience to move forward. Researchers will find it helpful to have some background in Chinese history and classical literature that will assist them in the research process. Even though proficiency in both English and Chinese if often necessary in order to conduct original research in Chinese materials, you should not be frustrated when you encounter these difficulties. Some Chinese Americans may succeed in their research process with limited Chinese language abilities. They can seek language assistance or public help, and gain enough knowledge to make this process much easier than it once was. While no comprehensive resources are available to them, a general research guide or bibliography should offer directions enough for beginning researchers. If more Chinese genealogical documents and records could be transliterated or compiled in English or other Western languages, they would play a significant role in Chinese historical and genealogical studies as well as benefiting numerous Western researchers in their research studies. It is to be hoped that Chinese genealogical research will become an important field as the world becomes more universal with people living in global
communities. Once the problem of language barriers is gradually diminished, the door for genealogical pursuit will be opened for future generations!

References


