



IMPERIAL FAMILY: *Qingyudie*, a family tree of the royal family of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), is displayed at the Liaoning Archives on May 2



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Rediscovering History

The recompilation of lost family trees is gaining popularity By Yin Pumin

Fifty years after the old family tree of the Sun family in Guiyang, southwest China's Guizhou Province, was burned as "feudal garbage," a new version of the family tree was released to the descendants of the Sun family in Guiyang in early May.

"The idea of recreating the family tree was conceived in 2004," said Sun Weihong, a major contributor to the project. "Over the past decade, all living generations of the Sun participated in the compilation. The common aim for us is to rediscover the family history of the Sun and to carry forward our family traditions."

Traditionally, Chinese families maintained family trees in the form of a book, tracing the genealogy, listing male members' achievements and setting out family rules.

However, over the course of history, especially during the wars and conflicts in the early 20th century and the devastating "cultural revolution" (1966-76), many such records were lost or destroyed. The Sun family in Guiyang had not stopped keeping their family tree until

1960s, when the "cultural revolution" began. "I remember there were many ancient artworks in my family, including calligraphy and paintings. But with the surge of the 'anti-feudalist movement' in the 1960s, those treasures were burned," Sun said.

After a series of investigations, the Sun family tree traced back to Sun Qingyan, a local official of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) in Chenggong, southwest China's Yunnan Province.

"It shows that people have realized the importance of knowing their ancestry," said Chang Sixin, former Vice Chairman of the Chinese Folk Literature and Art Society. "Morally corrupt people are not qualified to be inscribed into family trees," Chang said. "People are urged to have good virtues and behavior."

Xiao Fang, an ethnography professor with Beijing Normal University, said that family trees provide a form of cultural identity. "They can arouse a sense of belonging in a time when big families have disintegrated into nuclear families

and the concept of family is fading from the modern society," Xiao said.

Tracing roots

In order to revive this nearly lost tradition, some families around the country have started reconstructing their family trees. Compilers include not only senior family members but also many younger ones.

"Traditionally, the older generation would pass family stories down to the younger generation so they would become part of their family spirit," said Zheng Yuguang, Vice Chairman of Shanxi Social Psychology Association.

However, urbanization has separated family members: The old are in the countryside and young are in the cities. "This cuts the connection between generations," Zheng said.

Han Bing is one of the younger generation who is trying to discover his ancestors. Fifteen years ago, he came to Beijing from his hometown in central China's Henan Province. After

EXQUISITE CRAFTSMANSHIP: Workers show an example of a family tree made by Zhang Dewen, a renowned family tree artist, using traditional printing techniques



four years of studying in Tsinghua University and five years of working at a multinational company, he bought his own apartment in 2008 and became a Beijing resident.

"However, after all these years in the city, I still don't feel settled. My parents and sisters live in my hometown. I feel I'm drifting away from my family every day," he said.

Han said he remembers one day when his five-year-old son asked him what his great-great-grandfather's name was. "I had no idea. It surprised me when I found that my father didn't know either." Han decided to make a family tree by himself.

After six months of intense research, including reading files and visiting relatives, Han completed the basic structure of his family tree, covering five generations of the Han family with more than 100 members.

Some young people have also uploaded their family trees onto the Internet to attract more people with the same surname to help contribute.

"The Internet can bring more people with the same surnames together and push forward the compilation of family trees," said Shi Aiwu, a manager of business development at Wojia.com.

Launched in 2008, Wojia.com is arguably the largest online resource for Chinese family histories. It provides subscribers with an extensive collection of digital historical records, based on cooperation between the Shanghai and Hunan libraries and the Shanxi Academy of Social Sciences.

It serves as a family network where people can build their family trees and generate their own content, such as photos and written stories, to continue the genealogy.

<http://www.bjreview.com>

"We not only want to satisfy people's curiosity about the lives of their ancestors, we also encourage them to preserve and share their stories with their families and relatives via the Internet. And the records people are keeping now will become a source of inspiration for their descendants for years to come," Shi said.

A delicate art

At the library of the National Palace Museum, two sets of family trees made with traditional handicrafts always attract people's attention. The family trees were made by Zhang Dewen, a farmer from Shitang of Feidong County in east China's Anhui Province.

Zhang uses a technique inherited from his ancestors who lived during the late Qing Dynasty. With his traditional skillset, he can bind family trees into delicate artworks.

Zhang's workshop is in Shitang. Recently, his workshop made a set of 800 books for a local family surnamed Zhou. The job was undertaken by Zhang's family, including his 80-year-old father, who did everything by hand.

"It took us several months to complete the job," Zhang said, adding the whole process was done manually. Zhang supervised almost every step of the process from typesetting and proof-reading to plate making, printing and binding.

"Traditional handicrafts are favored by people because they have their uniqueness," Zhang said. For example, the paper used to make family trees has to be *xuan* paper, which was used for brush painting and calligraphy in China. "*Xuan* paper is very soft. It cannot be put through a machine, so manual printing is the only option," he said.

Furthermore, ink used for the traditional

method is water-based. This kind of ink, unlike the oil-based ink used in modern printing, permeates into the paper. "The ink we use guarantees the printing quality and makes them long-lasting," Zhang said.

Zhang's grandfather and his father's generation had kept the traditional techniques alive.

An opportunity to revive it came in the early 1990s, when a businessman came to Zhang's family to request they help him make his family tree into a book. The first book made by Zhang was for a family surnamed Song. The book was printed with traditional movable type printing. The book was picked up by a collector from Hong Kong later.

With more well-off businessmen and overseas Chinese coming to him to make family tree books, Zhang's name gradually spread across the whole country.

In early 2012, the Pei family in Anhui planned to revise their family tree. They contacted Zhang and in a few months, a new Pei family tree came out from Zhang's workshop.

Due to its precious historical value and exquisite craftsmanship, the book was acquired for the collection of the library of the National Palace Museum and the Capital Library of China later that year.

"Today, many crafts and traditions have been lost to history. I will carry on the traditional technique of my family and make more high-quality family trees for people. I hope the technique can help further promote China's family-tree culture," Zhang said. ■

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