The Role of Technology in Chinese Genealogy

Chinese genealogy records Chinese family & clan heritage and lineages, a continuing tradition for nearly five millenniums.

As implied, Chinese American genealogy research has Chinese and Chinese American components. Chinese genealogy research in China is stable and does not change. But, Chinese genealogy research in countries, where 50 million overseas Chinese have settled, differs according to the country. The immigration process, and access to the documentation and archiving of records for Chinese emigrating to their country can vary considerably between countries, on the same basic Chinese genealogy foundation.

Is Chinese genealogy research possible without being Chinese literate?

Yes, **technology** is what makes Chinese genealogy research not only possible, but, even successful. As an American Born Chinese (ABC), who cannot read or write Chinese, I successfully compiled my family lineage 148 generations over a span of almost 4,700 years.

What is your goal? The Chinese genealogy book that has your family or clan lineage and/or a visit to your ancestral village in China?

What is your surname? This might sound like a silly question to ask, but, until 1965, there were many Chinese in the United States that did not have their own true Chinese surnames. There were known as "paper sons or paper daughters". With the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Chinese were not allowed to come to the United States, Chinese that wanted to come to the US, bought documents that illegally allowed then entry into the US or identified them as US citizens.

This became even more pronounced with the San Francisco earthquake & fire of 1906, where the records of city hall were destroyed and authorities had to provide documentation to over 50,000 Chinese, who claimed they were US citizens and then went to China for a visit. After about a year, one of them would showed up at the American Consulate with an infant that he claimed was his son and received a US birth certificate for the baby, who was not his child, but, a child borrowed from a family in the ancestral village. Then, years later, this US birth certificate for a son that was around 16 years old and it was sold to somebody that wanted to come to the US as a citizen – usual payment was one hundred dollars for each year of age. In 1965, there was a "Confession Program" that allowed Chinese with a "paper son" surname to confess and was allowed to get a US citizenship with the real surname so the rest of the real family could come. Some people never went through this Confession Program and their families still carry surnames different from their true surname. There are cases where people did not even know they

descended from a "paper son". Usually, being a paper son was kept a secret because, this information could be reported to the government and the paper son deported.

Where is the family genealogy book? If your family is fortunate enough to have one, you are very lucky. Then, the first thing to do is to scan the book and make a PDF document that you can make multiple copies of, so you can preserve, protect, and share this family treasure with family members and relatives.

Scanning also applies to all the immigrations records and other government documents, photographs and letters that you are able to find.

The use of scanner technology in conjunction with Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software not only copies the information but also converts the images of Chinese characters into actual Chinese character text that are searchable, and also translates the document from Chinese to another language such as English during the scanning process.

During China's Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976), the Red Guards were able to destroy most of the Chinese genealogy books in China that resulted from almost 5,000 years of compilation and update. The Chinese from Fujian & Guangdong provinces resisted this destruction by hiding them and because much of the overseas Chinese migrations originated from these two provinces, they had also carried copies of their family & clan genealogies with them when they left China to settle in countries throughout the world.

The Shanghai Library has a genealogy section with approximately 45 thousand Chinese genealogies with the FamilySearch Library having as many or possibly more Chinese genealogies. The rest of Chinese genealogies are found in Taiwan and libraries with universities in some countries.

With the recent resurgence in Chinese genealogy in Mainland China, many Chinese in provinces other than Fujian and Guangdong province are having quite a difficult time in locating copies of their family and clan genealogy books.

What is the name of your ancestral village and where is it located?

The ancestral village is important because this where it may be possible to find a copy of the village genealogy book that contains the names of your ancestors and family lineages. The Chinese government does not have this information. This also where the ancestral home is located, where the village relatives live, and where there might be an ancestral hall, and village cemetery.

The name of the ancestral village can be found in a family genealogy book, immigration and government documents, and in family letters & envelopes. Such information can also be found inscribed on the gravestones of ancestors. These inscriptions of Chinese characters

on a gravestone can usually include the names of the province, county, and village. Gravestone inscriptions became a universal trait for most first generation Chinese buried overseas.

Online databases with images of gravestones provide people with the capability to identify their ancestral village. In many cases, people just take a clear photo of their ancestor's gravestone.

Another very useful online database is the "Village Database" used to identify and locate ancestral villages in the SiYi region of Guangdong province, where over 90 % of all Chinese in North America up to year 1965 originated from. Over 55% of this 90% came from Taishan county. This database is organized by family surname and villages. Most villages in this region are predominantly comprised of a single surname. This database is also useful for research by overseas Chinese in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, and Australia because these are the other countries that Chinese from the SiYi region emigrated to.

Online map websites are a true blessing in locating ancestral village on maps. These applications search according to Chinese characters, Pinyin romanization, provide geographic coordinates of the village and other nearby features, or compute distances between points in different units of measure, or identify routes between places and indicate how long it takes to walk between places.

Chinese language? A formidable impediment in performing effective Chinese genealogy research is the Chinese language, however, much of this difficulty has been mitigated by modern technology.

There are various software applications on cameras, smartphones, iPads, notebooks, laptops, and computers that can do the needed tasks of addressing Chinese language issues. One application is copying and converting images of Chinese characters into actual Chinese character text as part of a scanning system or for standalone applications.

The conversion between traditional and simplified Chinese characters is important because while traditional Chinese characters are usually found in manuscript Chinese genealogy books, recently published Chinese genealogy books have just simplified Chinese text. The difference in Chinese characters between traditional and simplified versions is significant because many online applications do not recognize traditional characters, but, when the search is done with the simplified Chinese characters – then, there is a match.

Most of recent online applications only recognize simplified Chinese characters, however, the applications can toggle between traditional & simplified Chinese characters and even provide the official Pinyin romanization.

There are software audio applications that will pronounce Chinese words in Mandarin and Cantonese. While modern technology has reduced much of the Chinese language impediment, there may still be the need to hire translators.

Free genealogy software to document Chinese genealogies, some like the free software Family Tree from FamilySearch than has the capability to draw Chinese lineage charts. I have even watch drone technology uses around ancestral villages in China to gain amazingly different high resolution perspectives.

The present focus is on technologies for enabling Chinese genealogy research, specifically, Chinese American genealogy research, while also learning how to perform Chinese American genealogy research effectively.

Where can I learn more about how to perform effective Chinese genealogy research?

The FamilySearch Library has one of the largest collections of Chinese genealogies and materials. Beyond serving as one of the largest repositories of Chinese genealogies and materials, the FamilySearch Library is applying avant-garde digital technologies to the collection, organization, cataloging, access, and retrieval of Chinese genealogies in the easiest, fastest, and by the most effective ways.

During the past three years there have been some ad hoc Chinese American Genealogy Workshops held in San Francisco, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, New York City and even in China. There is an increasing interest among the organizers and attendees of these workshops to establish a Chinese genealogy research community to promote Chinese American genealogy research, education, and sharing of Chinese research and information.

Henry Tom
Henry.Tom@Cox.net
+1 480 980 8715