

10-2014

New Uses of Family History in China: Economic Development and Political Unification

Cecilia Chien

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, cchien@wcupa.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_facpub



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), and the [Genealogy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chien, C. (2014). New Uses of Family History in China: Economic Development and Political Unification. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_facpub/22

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact wccressler@wcupa.edu.

UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL

COSTA RICA

WEST CHESTER UNIVERSITY

PENNSYLVANIA, USA

MEMORIA ELECTRÓNICA

III CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL DE EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR

6-10 de octubre de 2014

Heredia, Costa Rica



**NEW USES OF FAMILY HISTORY IN CHINA:
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND POLITICAL UNIFICATION**

Cecilia Chien, West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Knowledge Crossing Borders Conference

Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica

October 2014

[Slide 1] As an American-born Chinese, I have long been interested in my roots, which has led to my exploration of family and regional history in China. The fastest growing region of China today is the Yangzi River delta on the southeast coast. The rise of this region may arguably be traced to a 10th century kingdom called Wuyue 吳越 [Slide 2], located in present-day Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Fujian provinces [Slide 3]. The great Tang dynasty (618-907) had fallen and China was politically divided. Wuyue was the most prosperous, stable, cultured, and populous kingdom in China at the time. I happen to be descended from Wuyue's founding king, Qian Liu 錢鏐 (859-932), on my paternal side. In my research into the Qian clan ("Chien" is the old, Wade-Giles romanization of the same character), I have discovered renewed interest in family history in China. The country's recent promotion of "surname culture to establish a harmonious society" sheds light on her economy, state, and culture.

FAMILY HISTORY AND GENEALOGY

China has a long tradition of kinship study, including the compilation of genealogies [Slide 4]. Genealogies delineate the history of a lineage as well as promote it [Slide 5]. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), however, Mao Zedong (1893-1976) burned genealogical records and destroyed ancestral temples because they glorified individual families and harkened to the “feudal” past. Since China’s reforms from the 1980s, this has been transformed.

This summer in China, I obtained seven volumes of the 2013 edition of the genealogy of our branch of the family. Qian is a relatively small surname ranking #92 of common surnames in China. In absolute terms, though, Qians around the world number around 2.7 million, more than Smiths in the US. The historical significance of Qians is reflected in their #2 rank in the 100 Surnames, a classic of surnames listed in political order by the Song dynasty (960-1279) in which Qian was second only to Zhao, the surname of the Song emperor.

Family histories traditionally traced only male descendants from a common ancestor [Slide 6]. Recently, however, a mini-revolution has taken place with women figuring more prominently in such records. In 1996, it was announced that the family tree of Confucius would now include female descendants and use the same size font for female descendants as for male. In the latest Qian genealogy, I am thus listed for the first time, as a 38th generation descendant of King Qian.

Most genealogies begin their self-identification with a mythical origin. The earliest figure from whom the Qian clan traces its descent was known as Pengzu 彭祖, or “Ancestor from Peng,” a semi-legendary individual. He was renowned for his

healthful living, eating, and exercises so that he lived to the ripe old age of 800! According to Biographies of the Immortals, at age 767, Pengzu's face still looked young [Slide 7].

FAMILY HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

The renovated Qian ancestral hall in Linan, birthplace of King Qian, has become a focal point of the clan to pay its respects [Slides 8, 9] The museum inside the compound includes an illustrated history of Qian Liu from birth through his exploits as king [Slides 10, 11]. A family tree is displayed on the wall [Slide 12]. A contemporary distribution map of Qians in China shows the greatest concentration in the area of the original kingdom [Slide 13].

In 2003, I was invited to the first of a series of international conferences in Linan on the history of the Qians [Slide 14]. Every participant was a descendant of King Qian from around the Chinese diaspora—as an American, I had come the furthest. We introduced ourselves by generation number: I met a woman younger in age but several generations older, she half-jokingly requested that I address her as Grandma.

The opening ceremony of the conference featured star entertainment at a university stadium. The organizers gave us the red carpet treatment at a groundbreaking ceremony for a Wuyue Cultural Park, with speeches by local government officials. [Slide 15] The PLA band played [Slide 16], martial artists performed a dragon dance [Slide 17], confetti showered down. Inflatable red decorations read “Promote Wuyue Culture,” “Create a Vacation Wonderland,” “Construct an Ecologically Sound City” [Slide 18]. We were given police escorts whenever we boarded our buses, and allowed to run every red light along the way [Slide 19].

It turns out that local government officials, academics, and private entrepreneurs in the region are collaborating on a massive project to create a major tourist attraction centered on the life and times of King Qian. They plan to make his tomb a major historical site in South China. The tomb itself is one of the best preserved in Zhejiang. The total cost, on the order of hundreds of millions of *renminbi*, is to be funded through the market by business investment.

Linan, population 500,000, is trying to position itself as a holiday destination, using Qian family history. On the arch at the King Qian's tomb, officials hung a banner with the wish, "Have a Good Conference and Create a Vibrant City, a Famous City, a Tourist City" [Slide 20]. At the entrance to a public park, giant decorations stated, "Gather at the Native Home of King Qian" and "Seek the Source of Wuyue Culture" [Slides 21, 22]. The King Qian Hotel in glass and concrete is the finest hotel in the city, smoke-free, with bowling, sauna, exercise room, conference rooms, and other amenities [Slide 23]. It is part of the Zhejiang King Qian Group of hotels and includes a shopping mall. A nearby billboard displayed New York City's Twin Towers in the background as a prime symbol of modernization (though they had been toppled by then): "King Qian Credit Union: Let Us Hold Hands to Create a Beautiful Tomorrow Together" [Slide 24].

Even the 800-year old mythical Pengzu has become the center of a major ecotourism initiative at the heart of a nature preserve near Linan [Slides 25, 26, 27]. There, medical researchers are running a snake farm, milking the venom for anti-venom, and using snake organs for health and beauty products [Slide 28]. As part of a sales pitch, a handler tossed dozens of writhing poisonous snakes upon a woman who lay motionless inside a glass case [Slide 29]; this did not encourage us to buy.

The clan has also entered pop culture. A 28-part TV series entitled “King Qian of Wuyue” [Slide 30] is available on DVD in stores and on VCD online. The period drama combines history, romance, action, tragedy, and humor. One of the stars, a Qian descendant, was deemed too young to take on the role of the king; a major star was cast instead.

And, the Qians have turned to the Internet for publicity to reach a global audience. On their website are 90 digital album collections with thousands of images of Qian clan cultural activities. Even if one cannot be physically present to participate in events, the family still recognizes and is proud of its connections.

FAMILY HISTORY AND UNIFICATION

One key reason the state and local government are interested in the Qian rulers is the context of present-day objectives for re-unification with Taiwan. King Qian and his successors are lauded by historians for putting the welfare of their people and land first, and ultimately surrendering to Song dynasty unifiers without military conflict, thus paving the way for reunification and development of the region. The government today has explicitly made the Wuyue kingdom a model for peaceful reunification with Taiwan.

In the city that King Qian made his capital, they have built a vast ancestral hall on the shores of West Lake. One enters through a series of stone archways, on which are inscribed on various patriotic tributes: “As great as the wind and clouds, like dragon and tiger,” “He recruited the honest to benefit the people,” “He emphasized the civil and excelled at the martial” [Slides 31, 32, 33].

In the 1990s, Qian Liu’s tomb was declared one of 10 great patriotic centers in the area for the education of young people [Slide 34]. In 2001, the State Council

declared the tomb a national cultural treasure. The calligraphy on the memorial arch was inscribed by Qian Qichen, former Foreign Minister (1988-98) and Vice Premier (1993-2003). An exhibit in the tomb complex shows photographs of representatives of the Qian clan from Taiwan visiting the mainland to celebrate the 1,150th anniversary of Qian Liu's birth.

The exhibit concludes with a series of plaques of eminent 20th century descendants of Qian Liu, including the "Three Qians" as they were dubbed by Premier Zhou Enlai (1898-1976): Qian Xuesen (1911-2009), Qian Weichang (1912-2010), and Qian Sanqiang (1913-1992) were top scientists vital to the development of China's missile and space programs, aeronautics, and computers in the 1950s [Slide 35]. The calligraphy of Qian Weichang, who studied in North America in the 1940s, graces the introduction to the newest edition of the genealogy: "To seek one's roots and identify with one's ancestors is to contribute to the country." In 2012, I attended a funeral for Qian Sanqiang's wife, a top physicist in her own right. This ceremony entailed the unveiling of a bronze statue in honor of the couple and was prefaced by speeches of government officials as well as of their children. The funeral was broadcast on the news that evening.

The genre of family instructions laid out strict expectations regarding the individual, the family, the society, and the country, exhorting descendants to work for the sake of the public good. Research institutes across China have reprinted the Qian Family Instructions in color on glossy paper and distributed them as posters suitable for framing. In line with this concern for the greater good, a giant bronze bell weighing 500 kilograms (1,102 pounds) was cast in honor of the king [Slide 36]. Housed under its own pavilion, it bears an inscription honoring the accomplishments of the Wuyue

kingdom in protecting the welfare of its people. Strike it once and enjoy good health. Strike it twice and ensure your career. Strike it three times and become rich. Strike it 108 times and all the worries of mankind will be eradicated.

In conclusion, family history in China has been transformed in various ways. It goes far beyond merely documenting a lineage along the paternal line. It intersects with and is a prime reflection of China's social change, economic development, environmental conservation, pop culture, heritage preservation, and nation-building. Given the importance of the family as the cornerstone of Chinese society, this may actually be old wine in new bottles. I am most curious as to how family history works in other global cultures and welcome your comments and questions.

REFERENCES

- Kuhn, Philip. Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008.
- Qian, Dafang and Qian Hong. “Wuyue Qianshi wenhua gaikuang” [An overview of Wuyue Qian family culture]. Wuyue Qianshi [Wuyue Qian clan], No. 8 [August 25, 2012]: 59-61.
- Qian, Zhiren. “Qian Wusu wang: Wuyue fanrong de zunjiren” [King Qian Wusu: founder of Wuyue prosperity]. Wuyue Qianshi [Wuyue Qian clan], No. 6 [June 25, 2011]: 7-11.
- Shu, An. “Calligraphy.” Wuyue Qianshi [Wuyue Qian clan], No. 1 [February 25, 2009]: i.
- Wu, Guanjun. The Great Dragon Fantasy: A Lacanian Analysis of Contemporary Chinese Thought. Singapore: World Scientific, 2014.
- Zongyang Qianshi Zongpu Bianzuan Weiyuanhui [Zongyang Qians genealogical compilation committee]. Wuyue Qianshi Zongpu [Genealogy of the Wuyue Qian clan] (Hefei, Anhui Province: Hefei Xinglu yinshua, 2013).