

History

Taiwan residents in quest to find mainland roots

People are studying their family trees and age-old stories in the hope of reconnecting with long-lost relatives. **Zhang Yi** reports from Xiamen, Fujian.

On June 9, Huang Ching-hsiung woke at about 3 am in his hotel bed in Xiamen, Fujian province. He was too excited to sleep. At daybreak, he was one of a group of 11 members of his family that set out to visit Pujin, a village two hours from downtown Xiamen by road.

The settlement has the same name as Huang's home village in Lugang town, Changhua, Taiwan, and most of the residents are named Huang.

The Huangs on Taiwan are direct descendants of settlers who arrived on the island centuries ago. Several batches of Fujian residents moved to Taiwan during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) in the hope of making their fortunes, and those who were members of the same family banded together as they fought to make new lives. They named the places they settled after their hometowns and retained the customs they had brought from the mainland.

Roughly 80 percent of Taiwan residents share blood ties with people from Fujian. About 110 settlements on either side of the Taiwan Straits that share the same village and family names have established official exchange programs, according to the Fujian-Taiwan Compatriots' Association.

In the 1980s, the descendants of those early settlers started visiting the mainland to discover their roots, inspired by family histories passed down through generations.

"Place your feet on the land our ancestors came from," Huang's father told him, shortly before he died 12 years ago.

That wish weighed heavily upon Huang for many years, while a growing need to discover his origins prompted the 72-year-old to start a quest to trace his roots in the mainland, accompanied by a few items related to Pujin that were carefully stored in a plastic bag, including a map, a family tree and a newspaper story.

Family history

The name "Pujin," which was carved on his ancestors' tombstones, and the stories passed down from the time of his great-grandfather were all Huang knew about his family history.

During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), several groups of Pujin residents crossed the Straits and many settled in Lugang, which was a busy port on Taiwan's west coast.

They named their village Pujin in honor of their home. Initially, they worked as porters, but gradually a few started businesses, shipping commodities to the mainland.

They had good heads for business, and founded several well-known brands. Their village is a now tourist attraction featuring a number of vintage stores that display examples of their prosperous past.

One of the best-known companies was Jinyuan, which was founded by Huang's great-grandfather, the first generation of the family to live on Taiwan. The name is derived from "Jin," referring to Pujin, while "Yuan" means "origin."

"It means we come from Pujin," Huang said. "Another Jinyuan store in Quanzhou, on the mainland, was run by my great-grandfather's brother."

The practice of tracing one's family history and understanding its origins embodies the traditional Chinese virtue of filial piety, and people are taught to respect and worship their ancestors from a young age.

"When my grandfather was age 4, my great-grandfather took him to visit Pujin in the

mainland. Later, the families lost contact, but grandfather often told us that we came from Pujin," Huang said.

"All his life, my father regretted that he had never visited the mainland. His health was always poor as a result of injuries he sustained during World War II (when he was forced to serve in the Japanese army), and later in a car accident. But he repeatedly told me to visit, and not to forget our roots," he added.

"My desire had to be suppressed for years because I was a civil servant on Taiwan, so I was not allowed to visit the mainland," he said. In addition, his salary was low and he had four children, so he was unable to afford the trip until he retired and his children had left home.

"As I got older, the desire to know where I came from grew stronger. I felt an urgent need to figure it out and fulfill my father's dying wish before it was too late. If I didn't, my descendants would never know about our origins."

The search begins

When his father died in 2006, Huang, the eldest son, inherited the ancestral tablet his great-grandfather had brought from the mainland.

Ancestral tablets, which usually comprise a flat piece of wood inscribed with the names of previous generations, are placed on household altars or in ancestral temples where they are worshipped.

Huang noticed six Chinese characters carved on the back of the tablet, and although no dates were given, he believed they represented the sequence of family generations.

"My plan was to visit Pujin in the mainland and compare the list on the tablet with the genealogy of the Huang family in the village. If they matched, it would mean I had found my mainland roots and relatives," he said.

He began preparing for his adventure by printing out an online map and carefully marking the village, a nearby airport and a hotel — a plan of action that alarmed his family.

"My father was very serious. He planned how to get to the village and where to stay. We knew no one there, so the family tried to dissuade him from making the journey at his advanced age," said Huang Hui-chun, his daughter.

Undeterred her father continued to conduct research online. One day, while reading a news story about the historical ties between the two Pujins, he was intrigued by an appeal and a phone number: "If you want to discover your roots in (mainland) Pujin, please contact Huang Chi-tung."

The pioneer

More than 20 years ago, Huang Chi-tung was as anxious as Huang Ching-hsiung to unearth his roots in Pujin. He was the first Huang from Taiwan to visit the mainland village in many years, and his journey was arduous.

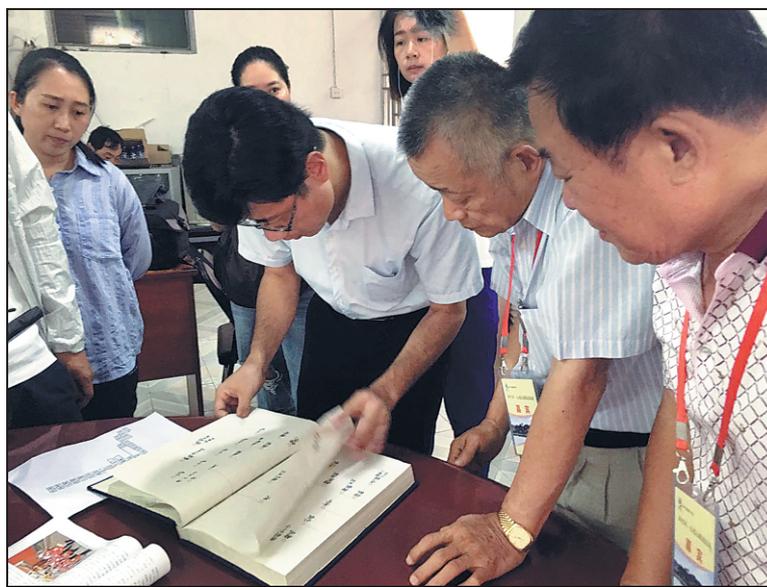
"I was curious about the word 'Pujin,' which I had seen on tombstones since I was a child. At college, I spent a lot of time in the library reading about Quanzhou. Also, family stories made me yearn for the mainland," he said.

In 1990, he traveled to Quanzhou alone and rented a car and driver.

"At the time, the roads in the mainland were terrible, and I didn't have a map or any information about the village. I went to several villages, asking 'Is this Pujin? Do you know a village where the Huang family lives?'" he recalled.



Huang Chi-tung (front left) and members of his extended family pray in the Huang ancestral temple in Pujin, Fujian province. LU JUNJIE / FOR CHINA DAILY



Huang Ching-hsiung (second from right) examines genealogical records related to his family in Pujin. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



More than 80 people with the surname Zhang traveled from Taiwan to Xiamen, Fujian, in August to discover their roots. WANG WENJUN / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

"Eventually, after searching from sunrise to sunset, some seniors pointed me to a place at the end of a muddy lane. It was hard to drive along the lane, but I was very excited when I saw some houses with the name 'Huang' carved on them. After talking with some villagers, I confirmed it was the place my ancestors came from."

Since then, the 59-year-old has organized several trips for family members from Taiwan.

"Over the years, I have seen great changes in the mainland. When I first visited Pujin, the farmers were busy preparing to start their own clothing factories, and now it's a very wealthy village," he said, adding that he

has business connections with several companies in the mainland.

"It's wonderful to see more people on Taiwan are taking their children back, and the Huangs in the mainland have also visited us on Taiwan in recent years," he said, "We are getting old, but exchanges between the two sides must continue. We cannot forget our roots."

Homecoming

When the Huangs from Taiwan arrived at Pujin on the morning of June 9, they were greeted with banners, balloons and firecrackers.

Huang Ching-hsiung im-

mediately recognized a striking similarity in speech patterns. "The moment I heard the Pujin villagers speak, I recognized the accent — it was the same one my father and grandfather had, even though they grew up in Lugang," he said, noting that Lugang residents have the strongest accent on Taiwan.

By checking records in the village he discovered that the six characters on his ancestral tablet matched the local family's genealogy almost exactly, with the exception of one small difference in the sequence.

"It could be the result of missing or damaged parts of the genealogical record. So I do not know exactly which Huang

FIRST PERSON

Promoting a sense of belonging

Lan Honglin, head of the Lan Family Association in Zhangpu, Fujian



Compiling genealogies and building ancestral temples are Chinese traditions. They connect people who have the same family roots and promote their sense of belonging.

Genealogies, or family trees, are the best resources for discovering family histories, because they can answer the philosophical question of where we come from.

To some extent, genealogies are like "identity cards" for families. They contain excellent information, including the names and deeds of each generation.

One significant practical function of genealogies is to help those who have moved away from their hometowns to trace their roots.

Every family establishes a temple where their ancestors are enshrined and worshipped. Traditionally, when a family member dies, a tablet that embodies his or her spirit is made and placed in the temple.

Most people in Zhangpu village, Nantou, Taiwan, have the Lan surname. Their ancestors were soldiers from Zhangpu, a county in Zhangzhou, Fujian province.

During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), three generals — all members of the Lan family in Zhangpu — were sent by emperors successively to suppress rebellions on Taiwan.

Most of the soldiers who accompanied the generals were also members of the Lan family. When the fighting ended, many stayed on the island because the land was fertile but the population was small.

About 56,000 people on Taiwan are descendants of the original Lan family. They are proud of their family histories and help each other.

In the 1980s, they started returning to Zhangpu and the ancestral temple. They bring their genealogies and ancestral tablets so they understand which generation they are.

No matter what job they do, whether they are rich or poor, successful or not, when they visit the temple they all kneel and pray before their ancestors and they recite the family maxims that have been passed down for centuries.

Lan Honglin spoke with Zhang Yi.

sub-branch my family belongs to, or who our closest relatives are," he said.

However, one villager told Huang Ching-hsiung that his features were familiar, which added to his conviction that his roots lie in Pujin.

"A man named Huang Shubiao, who is two years younger than me, told me that his great-grandfather ran the Jinyuan store in the mainland during its heyday," he said.

"The story of Jinyuan has also been passed down in his family. He told me that my great-grandfather was very successful and he once returned to his home village to plant a garden and build a

study hall. They are still there. Now I have a close relative in the mainland, and I will bring my family next time I visit."

He and Huang Shubiao prayed together in the ancestral temple, where the family maxims — including thrift, loyalty and honesty — are written on the walls and their history is carved into the pillars and plaques.

His daughter, Huang Hui-chun, who accompanied him on the visit, said, "It was an amazing journey. Now I understand my father's heart and his tears of joy."

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