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Making ancient connections

Stories by STEPHEN NG

A genealogy enthusiast shares why it is so important to know where one comes from.

MOST visitors to Malaysia would opt to visit popular tourist destinations or savour local cuisines, but not retired US Government geographer, Henry Tom. He spent most of his recent visit in a cemetery.

Tom has an avid interest in genealogy so whenever he travels, he makes a beeline for the oldest Chinese graveyard he can find, in this case, Bukit China in Malacca. Yes, despite his very Western-sounding name, the 66-year-old is a US-born Chinese. His surname, Tom (**pic, right**), can be written in many Romanised forms, including Tam, Tham, and even Tan (in the Pin Yin) in some cases.



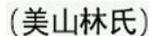
Tom participated actively in a US Chinese genealogy website (siyigenealogy.proboards28.com/index.cgi?board=names); this is where he and Malaysian genealogy enthusiast, Dr Philip Tan Chee Lin, 64, discovered each other.



The pair have been chatting over Skype for several months discussing, among other things, how the Pin Yin Romanisation of Tom's surname as "Tan" is different from Dr Tan's surname: the doctor's "Tan" is in the Min Nan (ie Hokkien Romanisation of the Chinese surname (**pic,left**) whereas his name expressed in Pin Yin would be Romanised as "Chen".

When Tom had to travel to Malaysia for work, he and Dr Tan made plans to meet and exchange notes about their families' genealogy. They were joined by Dr Tan's nephew, Stephen Lim Kee Soon, 54, another Chinese genealogy enthusiast who has traced his family line back to Mei San Lin (**below, right**).

Mei Shan Lin means "Beautiful Mountain", and is an old Lim clan name dating from the Sung Dynasty (960CE-1279CE) – to be able to trace his line back that far means Lim obviously knows what he's doing so he was made more than welcome by the older duo in search of ancestors.



Also, Lim has read deeply into his family's genealogy books (*Jiapu*), which are written in Chinese. His knowledge of Mandarin is definitely an asset because, interestingly, neither Tom nor Dr Tan can read Chinese.

This, however, does not hinder their passion for Chinese genealogy. In fact, as Tom puts it: "You don't need to know a lot of Chinese in order to learn about your genealogy. As long as you are willing to pay for the translation work, the job can be done."

"The cheaper way is to use websites, such as Babel Fish Translator (babelfish.yahoo.com/translate_txt), which provides free translation.

Haunting cemeteries

"The only secret I want to share with others who are pursuing their genealogy is that you will need a lot of perseverance. It is like a jigsaw puzzle that needs to be put together into a big picture."

Another trick to tracing genealogy explains Tom's habit of making his way to cemeteries, the older the better, whenever he travels: "In Chinese genealogy, cemeteries are an important source of information. In most



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ancient burial sites that I have visited in mainland China and the United States, information about the deceased, his birthplace, the name of his ancestral village, county, and province of birth is all engraved on the gravestones.”

And that, in turn, explains why he was furious when he saw one of the gravestones at Bukit China had been vandalised.

“Desecration of gravestones and the re-purposing of a cemetery for other land use is truly uncommon in the United States,” he says.

“There, once a piece of land is gazetted for use as a cemetery, it is deemed sacred, and it remains a cemetery forever. Because this is where future generations of historians and archaeologists will go to discover the past.”



The Bukit China Chinese cemetery in Malacca, the oldest in the country, is a treasure trove of information on ancestors. – A. MALEX YAHAYA / The Star

Tom urges local clan associations to get together to digitally capture information from the gravestones and then place the information on the Internet for research purposes.

The more information is available, the easier it is to trace one's genealogy, because knowledge is all important – as Tom demonstrates during his Bukit China visit.

For instance, to determine the age of a grave, one sometimes needs to decode the imperial calendar years indicated on some of the gravestones, and for that, a knowledge of Chinese history would help greatly.

“For example, we know the Emperor Qianlong ascended the throne in 1735 in the Gregorian calendar. Thereafter, you would have to start counting from the first year of Qianlong's reign in 1735,” he explains.

An understanding of a land's geography is also necessary to understand the bigger picture of what happened during a particular era and how families moved about.

“Pre-war (World War II) maps of China are not easily available these days but they are useful when you are studying Chinese genealogy, especially when you need to know how close each county was to another within the same province,” he says.

As he describes the location of his ancestral village, Cheer-ten-toon, in Bak Shui (White Water) in the district of Taishan, China, Tom's almost photographic memory of the ancient map he used to identify it is impressive.

“Yes, all three – geography, history, and genealogy – must go hand-in-hand,” he says.

Tom is, naturally enough, writing a book, and once completed, *Tan Genealogy: Heritage and Lineage* will help many a Tan around the world to trace his or her roots back to 1108BCE. That would be 72 generations back in their ancestral lineage beyond Tan Hong-zhi of Zhujixiang who is reputed to be the primogenitor of the clan in Guangdong, China.

The Tan name is today Romanised as Tom, Thom, Tan, Tam, Tham,

Taam, Tann, Tain, Tarm, Hom, Hum, Ham, and Harm.

Tale of the Toms

"We can go back to 1108BCE, so my grandson, Conor McCarthy, would belong to the 105th generation from the first Tom. This is how far back we have traced our roots," says a visibly excited Tom.

He began by tracing his own descent back to his grandfather, Tom Bak Fook, who had first gone to San Diego, California, during the American state's gold rush era in the 1870s. Bak Fook lost a hand due to blood poisoning and had to be sent back to China. He died in 1916 in Taishan.

Henry's father, Tom Sam Lee, who had just turned 11 at the time of Bak Fook's death, joined his elder brother, Tom Bak Ork, who was 16, and travelled to Calcutta, India. They later travelled around the world as ship's carpenters for 10 years.

At the age of 27, in 1932, Sam Lee jumped ship in New York. Being an illegal immigrant, he had to dodge American Immigration officials until he married Lee Suey Sim, a Chinese girl who had US citizenship.

"Automatically, my father was granted a permanent residence status," says Tom, who was born in 1942 and raised in Brooklyn, one of the city's five boroughs. He is married to Clara Ines Tom, 52, from Colombia, and the couple, who have three children and three grandchildren, now live in Washington.

"The rest of it was a matter of tracing old genealogy records in the ancestral village in China, and seeing how our family tree could be plugged into the county's genealogy," Tom explains.

"Besides the *Zupu* (clan records) and *Jiapu* (family records), there are still gravestones in the ancestral village that can offer a great deal of information."

Take pride in your origins

For Tom, as an overseas-born Chinese, the pursuit of Chinese genealogy provides an important connection with his Chinese origins and the country's heritage of some 5,000 years of history, civilisation, and culture.

"This is so we can feel that we are really 'Chinese'. To me, it reflects a changing awareness and self-image of myself and my family, a quest for our identity – who we are and what our origins are," he says.

"As Overseas Chinese, we need to understand how we have changed. It also provides a measurement of how far we have come, and survived, since our ancestors arrived in our adopted countries."

Tom urges Malaysian Chinese to trace their roots, too, to feel that connection with China.

"We have a very rich legacy. No Westerner would be able to boast of a genealogy like Chinese genealogy, which generally can be traced back to the Yellow Emperor some 4,000 years ago – it is believed that the Chinese people descended from this emperor, known as Huang-di or the Yellow Emperor, who reigned from 2697BCE to 2597 BCE," Tom says proudly.

Since he started researching his family history, Tom has spent at least US\$10,000 (RM31,000) on translation work alone, using a young college graduate in China. Then there was the cost incurred when, in May 2005, he led a group of 38 people on a tour of 16 cities in China over three weeks.

Is genealogy worth all this time, effort, and money?

"Why not?" he retorts. "We do not do it for ourselves. One's genealogy is a record of the cumulative influences that shape what and who we are today. It is the legacy of our precious heritage and should be preserved for future generations so that they will know their origins.

"What with the economic boom in China, there is going to be a resurgence of interest in the Chinese language even among the 45 million Overseas Chinese, or *Wah Kiu*. So, by tracing my genealogy now, I will be able to help my grandchildren someday to appreciate their rich

Chinese genealogy.”

Information about Tom (Tham) genealogy can be obtained by visiting Henry Tom’s website at mysite.verizon.net/vzepzau/index.html. Genealogy enthusiasts can also write to genealogymalaysia@gmail.com.

Misleading Romanisation

(譚)

Tom / Tham / Tam / Tan

(陳)

Tan / Chen

IN the study of genealogy, it is important to know the Chinese character for your family name so you can trace the correct family tree.

For example, two people having the surname “Tan” may not necessary belong in the same family tree. The key is to always go back to the Chinese character for the surname.

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