The Transformation of Newly Compiled Chinese Genealogical Functions in the New Era

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The cultural customs of compiling genealogy for 5,000 years are an integral part of the Chinese civilization. During the new socialist era, compiling new genealogy is a continuation and development of old genealogy, a cultural phenomenon adapting to social and public needs. The paper examines how Chinese genealogies transformed, and then explores how new genealogies have the new cultural function of serving the socialist era. The paper concludes with comments on how new compilations play a positive role in the construction of a harmonious society.

Keywords: new genealogy, cultural function, transformation

Introduction

Chinese genealogy has a long history and its origin can be traced back to the late period of the primitive matriarchal clan society. Compiling genealogy is a fine cultural tradition worth inheriting and carrying forward. However, despite broad agreement among researchers on the necessity of compiling genealogy, our knowledge on the value of developing and researching genealogies as well as the functional transformation of new genealogies during the new socialist era is limited. In light of this gap, this paper aims to explore the cultural functions new genealogies serve as China enters a new era with socialist characteristics.

Genealogy is a general term for titles such as family genealogy, clan genealogy, patrilineal genealogy, family record, general genealogy, generation chart, branch genealogy, etc. The term “jiā” refers to a certain consanguineous group and “pǔ” refers to the comprehensive and systematic arrangement of similar things. Therefore, when “jiā” and “pǔ” are combined, this means: “a description of the carrier of blood lineage”. Although genealogy has various names, multifarious content, manifold definitions, and myriad types, the briefest, most basic description of genealogy should be: “a description of the carrier of blood lineage”. Two things are important to note in this definition: It must refer to blood lineage, in a narrow sense because of the consanguinity of a family, in a broad sense because of clans, multiple kinship families, and large clans which have multiple branches from a progenitor. Secondly, there must be a pedigree. It can be simple and only detail

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several generations, such as the pedigree of grandfathers, fathers, sons, grandsons, etc. The pedigree can also be the generations that have descended from one progenitor, or the various branches that have been descended from one progenitor.

**Historical Transformation of Chinese Genealogy**

Based on the historical analysis of the compiling style, content, function, method, and other factors of genealogy which covers 5,000 years, the history of genealogy can be roughly divided into seven stages: origin, birth, prosperity, transformation, perfection, popularization, and new compilation.

**The Origin Stage: From Matriarchal Society to the Shang Dynasty**

Since genealogy is “the carrier of describing blood lineage”, its origin must be closely related to the formation of different blood lineages. It is well known that human beings in the early era of group marriages conducted sexual incest in a large and confusing scale, so there was no stable blood lineage to follow with certainty. Later, with the prohibition of marriage between parents and children, brothers and sisters, and even all the collateral relatives of the mother, human beings entered clan society based on blood relationship. Descendants of the same ancestor lived together, produced together, shared distribution, shared inheritance of property, shared sacrifice to ancestors, conducted joint revenge of blood clan, and were buried in the same cemetery after death, thus forming a clan group with common blood. The matrilineal clan society based on women appeared first and then gradually developed into patriarchal clan society based on men. Engels pointed out: “The clan is a primitive formation from human society based on blood” (Marx & Engels, 1975, p. 300). Marx said, “The function of clan name is to make clan members to remember the common lineage”. “Clan name itself is evidence of a common lineage” (1965, p. 172). Since the original clan society has formed a blood lineage and ranked seniorities by generations, it makes possible the germination of “the carrier of describing blood lineage”. Studies on paleoanthropology, sociology, and archaeology show that Chinese genealogy originated from matriarchal clan society, and its mark is oral genealogy as well as knotted rope genealogy.

In the Shang Dynasty, oracle genealogy carved on tortoise shell and animal bones and bronze genealogy engraved on bronze vessels appeared in China. Both oracle genealogy and bronze genealogy are physical genealogy recorded in writing, a step ahead of oral genealogy and knotted rope genealogy. However, the contents of oracle genealogy and bronze genealogy are simple, which only record the lineage of father, son, and brother, so they are not complete family genealogies in the sense of richer content and mature style. Oracle genealogy and bronze genealogy of the Shang Dynasty come together with oral genealogy and knotted rope genealogy and constitute the oldest and most primitive genealogies in China. In general, they belong to the budding period of Chinese genealogy.

**The Birth Stage: From the Zhou Dynasty to the Han Dynasty**

With the development of clan society, Xia and Shang Dynasties, primitive genealogy gradually broke away from primitive form and reached a new level of development in the Zhou Dynasty, which established patriarchal system based on blood relationship evolved from clan organization and set up inheritance system of the eldest son by the first wife. Under patriarchal system, the eldest son controls ownership of the land, country, and family, plays a dominant role in clan by hosting sacrifices and divinations, has the responsibility of uniting
clan, managing clan affairs, guiding armed forces of clan, and enjoys political and exploitative rights to other clan members. Based on the need of such strict hierarchy identity system, family genealogy of “establishing lineage and distinguish seniority” and recording blood relation far and near, legitimacy, concubine, and birth order had a considerable development in the Zhou Dynasty. Not only did each noble family inscribe their family lineage and activities on ritual wares and sacrificial vessel out of the need of respecting ancestral clan, but also various vassal states set up special officials to be responsible for the compilation and management of family genealogies of all noble families and established a perfect set of system of letting historiographers compile genealogies. The system has created a number of genealogists and the first batch of Chinese genealogical works. And the publication of genealogical works such as *Shi Ben* indicates Chinese genealogy has been separated from its original form, marking the official birth of Chinese genealogy.

The Prosperity Stage: From Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern Dynasties to the Tang Dynasty

Chinese genealogy was born in the Zhou Dynasty, developed in the Han Dynasty, and entered its golden age from the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties to the Tang Dynasty.

In the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, officials were selected by nine-rank system. Politically, aristocratic families monopolized official career and controlled government. Economically, the development of landlords and manors led to the expansion of clan power. Therefore, genealogy became a tool for families to protect their special interests. In order to meet the needs of compiling genealogies and maintaining family status, the state set up special genealogy bureau and genealogy officials, and genealogies were kept as important data in the bureau. In the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, compiling genealogies become such a common practice that a large number of genealogical books were written, and a large number of scholars engaged in compilation and research of genealogies.

The development of Chinese genealogy reached a new height during the Tang Dynasty. The ruler of Tang Dynasty was a new aristocrat group in Guanzhong, Shaanxi, and Longshan, Gansu; so in order to obtain social and legal recognition, new gentry with royal families as the core must write down their highest social position into genealogies. Therefore, from the beginning of the reign of emperor Taizong, while strengthening imperial examination, the government consistently used genealogy as a powerful tool to change the previous standard of family name measurement. Throughout the Tang Dynasty, according to the will of rulers, three official campaigns to compile genealogies were launched, i.e., *Annals of Surnames* during the reign of emperor Taizong, *Records of Surnames* during the reign of emperor Gaozong, and *Records of Surnames in the Great Tang Dynasty* during the reign of emperor Zhongzong. Through the above official campaigns aiming at “only respecting royal families of today”, genealogical works achieved the purpose of suppressing the old power and established the highest status of Li and Wu families.

While the compilation of official genealogies in the Tang Dynasty was large in scale, the compilation of private genealogies also developed rapidly. The practice of compiling private genealogies was very common, which gave birth to a considerable number of private genealogies and many famous genealogists. Unlike genealogists of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, those of the Tang Dynasty not only presided over the compilation of official genealogies, but also participated in that of private genealogies. The Tang Dynasty was a critical period serving as a link between past and future in the development of Chinese genealogy.
The Transformation Stage

In the history of Chinese genealogy, the Song Dynasty was an important period of reform and transformation, which extended to the Yuan Dynasty.

In the Song Dynasty, trends were totally different from that in Sui and Tang Dynasties: Firstly, official genealogy fell into desuetude. With the further implementation of the imperial examination system, peasant uprising during the late Tang Dynasty, and successive years of war in Five Dynasties, the aristocratic family system met a fatal blow. Official genealogy lost its practical value and significance of existence and faded away; secondly, private genealogy came into prosperity. Although greatly damaged by the continuous wars within Five Dynasties, it was supported by the government, followed with economic development, urban prosperity, the rise of large clans, and unprecedented development of the printing industry in the Song Dynasty. All these promoted gradual recovery of the compilation of private genealogy after emperor Renzong of the Song Dynasty and it became even more popular in the Southern Song Dynasty.

Compared with genealogies in Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties and Sui and Tang Dynasties, the reform and transformation in the Song Dynasty mainly shows in the following aspects: The first is in compilation purpose. Genealogy served the moral function of “respecting ancestors, worshiping patriarchy, and uniting clans” as well as “respecting the respectable and getting close to the amiable”. The second is in compilation form. During the Song Dynasty, the government no longer set up a genealogy bureau and no longer organized genealogy compilation, so it became a purely private activity. The third is in genealogy diagram. For genealogy lasting from ancestor to compiler before the Song Dynasty, there was no unified genealogy diagram. From the Song Dynasty, Ouyang Xiu and Sunxun created a five-generation diagram according to the principle of close relatives reflected in “five degrees of mourning attire” and “nine grades of relations”, which was basically adopted by genealogists in the Song Dynasty and later generations and it opened a new stage for genealogy diagrams. The fourth is in genealogy content. With the popularity of Song Dynasty’s private genealogy, the great change of its purpose, and the establishment of Ouyang Xiu and Sunxun’s genealogy diagram, contents of the Song Dynasty’s genealogy were more perfect and richer. The fifth is in genealogy renew time. Before the Song Dynasty, some genealogies had been renewed, but it was not common and renew interval was long. During the Song Dynasty, the practice of renewing private genealogy was prevailing. In particular, Zhu Xi, a master of neo-Confucianism, said, “it is unfilially not to renew family genealogy in three generations”, which further promoted its popularity after the Southern Song Dynasty.

The Perfection Stage

During the Ming Dynasty, Chinese genealogy gained new development and became mature and more perfect in style and content. It is also closely related to the politics, economy, and culture of the Ming Dynasty in the late period of Chinese feudal society.

After entering the Ming Dynasty, feudal rulers took filial piety as the rule of country, paid great attention to genealogy compilation, and took Zhu Xi’s ethical thought of “three cardinal guides and five constant virtues” as the tenet of compiling genealogy, which promoted new development of genealogy compilation in the Ming Dynasty in that its number was greatly increased and there appeared a large scale of joint family genealogies and general clan genealogies.
The Popularization Stage

In the Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China, the amazing number of high quality, rich content, and huge volumes of family genealogy can be regarded as the peak period of Chinese family genealogy.

Although in terms of style and content, the genealogy of Qing Dynasty and Republic of China had no breakthrough compared with that of the Ming Dynasty, it had a great development in terms of quantity. Most of the more than 50,000 species of genealogies in existence today were compiled in the Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China, when not only the Han people compiled genealogy, but also Mongols, Manchuria, Hui, Yi, Miao, She, and other ethnic minorities influenced by Han people did as well. Genealogies were compiled not only in mainland China, but also in overseas places where Chinese live. In the southern regions of the Yangtze River where the economy is developed, every village and family compiled genealogies constantly renew them, which becomes a cultural custom for all of the people.

The Contemporary Stage

During the past five decades, on both sides of Taiwan strait, and even in overseas places where Chinese people live, there has been a spontaneous upsurge in compiling new genealogy. New compilation is a continuation, development, extension, and innovation in the history of Chinese genealogy. In just a few decades, this upsurge of new compilation has been more powerful, numerous, and influential than any historical stage of Chinese genealogy.

Cultural Functions of New Compilation of Genealogies

Old genealogies served the ethical function of “three cardinal guides and five constant virtues”, while new genealogies have undergone essential changes. They have the cultural function of serving the socialist era, and now play a positive role in the construction of a harmonious society. The cultural function of new genealogies is shown in the following aspects:

(1) It can carry forward Chinese national history and culture as well as enhance national cohesion during the new era.

The Chinese nation is an ancient civilization with a history of 5,000 years. Compiling official history, local gazetteers, and genealogy are fine traditions of Chinese history and culture. There are several great civilizations in world history, but only the Chinese nation has survived for thousands of years, still stands in the east of Asia, and becomes an important member of the world. This has something to do with China’s cultural tradition of compiling official history, local gazetteers, and genealogy. Lu Xun pertinently pointed out in *Rites* that “the country of China is based on family” (1973, p. 351). Whether in patriarchal society in the past, or in today’s socialist society, family is the cell of society and family has always been the most “grass-roots” unit in society. Only when families are harmonious, civilized, stable, and prosperous, can social progress and prosperity have a deep and solid foundation. The new era has set a new historical orientation for the excellent traditional Chinese culture (Wan & Xia, 2019). If we say genealogy under the guidance of feudal thoughts played a certain role in consolidating the foundation of a feudal society, then today’s genealogy under the guidance of socialist thoughts not only can carry forward a long history and culture of a Chinese nation, but can also make clan members love their family, hometown, and socialist motherland more deeply by participating in compilation activities. For example, on June 7, 1986, a woman writer named Bing Xin wrote a preface to *Xie Clan Genealogy in Hengling*:
“Clan genealogy is family history connecting the past and the future. The attention and care to family history is the starting point of loving the motherland and the people”. Practice has proved that many places, via activities of compiling new genealogies, have indeed carried forward Chinese history and culture, and enhanced national cohesion and confidence.

(2) It can promote cultural exchanges across the Taiwan strait and strengthen cohesiveness of Taiwanese compatriots and overseas Chinese.

The mainland Chinese and Taiwan share common blood and cultural origins. In the past 30 years, the upsurge of compiling genealogies appeared on both sides of Taiwan strait, which is the result of the expansion of cultural exchanges between residents on both sides. With the continuous expansion of cross-strait genealogy compilation activities and the strengthening of root-seeking activities, it has further promoted and enriched various economic and cultural exchanges between the mainland and Taiwan, deepened mutual feelings and understanding, and strengthened the cohesiveness of Taiwan compatriots and overseas Chinese. Taiwan has been an integral part of China’s territory since ancient times. In the past 50 years, the mainland and Taiwan have been artificially isolated, but Taiwanese people want to return to the motherland soon. In growing activities across the Taiwan strait, family members with the same surname on both sides jointly set up a compilation committee, formulated compilation rules, collected information, and finally published genealogies. Such a whole process is also a process of people from both sides to identify with blood relationship and traditional culture of Chinese nation. It directly promotes and enriches exchanges between two sides in various aspects and will surely play a role in promoting peaceful reunification of the motherland at an early date, just as the preface of Rao Clan Genealogy points out,

Clan genealogy is the basis for Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao people as well as overseas Chinese to return to the mainland to search for their roots and ancestors, it is a token of their blood ties with their relatives in the motherland. So clan genealogy is also an important material for patriotic education, which plays an important role in promoting the reunification of the two sides of Taiwan straits and the unity of Chinese at home and abroad. (This is family genealogy compiled and printed by Rao Family for the family’s own use and is not officially published, preface)

(3) It can promote the building of socialist civic morality and enhance the affinity of family members.

Today, we should strengthen the construction of socialist spiritual civilization and socialist civic morality, but socialist morality cannot be built in a vacuum, just as Citizen Morals Construction Implement Outline (2001) points out, “we should inherit traditional virtues of Chinese nation that have been formed for thousands of years”. That is to say, we should absorb and transform traditional virtues of Chinese nation into an important part of socialist civic morality and an integral part of socialist professional morality, family virtues, and social morality. Civil moral construction project is the main content of moral construction in the new era (Zhao & Shang, 2018). At the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, General Secretary Xi Jinping (2017) proposed to further implement the civil ethics construction project, promote the construction of social ethics, professional ethics, family virtues, and personal morality, and encourage people to be good, filial to the elderly, loving relatives, loyal to the motherland and loyal to the people. In new genealogies of various regions, there are generally contents such as family virtues, family conventions, and civilization conventions that are absorbed from many positive elements of old family rules and laws. For example, the “statute” section of the Zhao Family Genealogy specially included the Social Morality Song which said,
“brocaded and embroidered China, polite state with rites, ancient and civilized country, erect in the east; a time of prosperity, reform to be strong, social ethics and morality, writer another new chapter; people in the society, enjoy work and company, pull together in troubles, respect themselves and others...” (This is family genealogy compiled and printed by Zhao Family for the family’s own use and is not officially published)

Four words in each sentence are catchy and easy to spread. It is inherited and developed from old family rules and laws under new conditions, which can also play a positive role in enhancing family members’ affinity and forming basic moral code such as, “patriotic and law-abiding, sincere and honest, united and friendly, diligent and thrifty, dedicated and committed”.

Conclusion

To sum up, Chinese genealogy is known as a cultural carrier, whose most core element is the blood lineage and pedigrees. And today, the activities that compile new genealogies and are carried out under socialist conditions are inheritance, reform, and innovation of old genealogies, cultural activities that appear in common folk to meet the requirements of socialist era, and assuming social functions of building socialist harmonious culture. It will play a positive role in moving forward with Chinese history and culture, to promote cross-strait cultural exchanges, enhance socialist civic morality, and build a harmonious society to continue to research more information about Chinese genealogy.

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