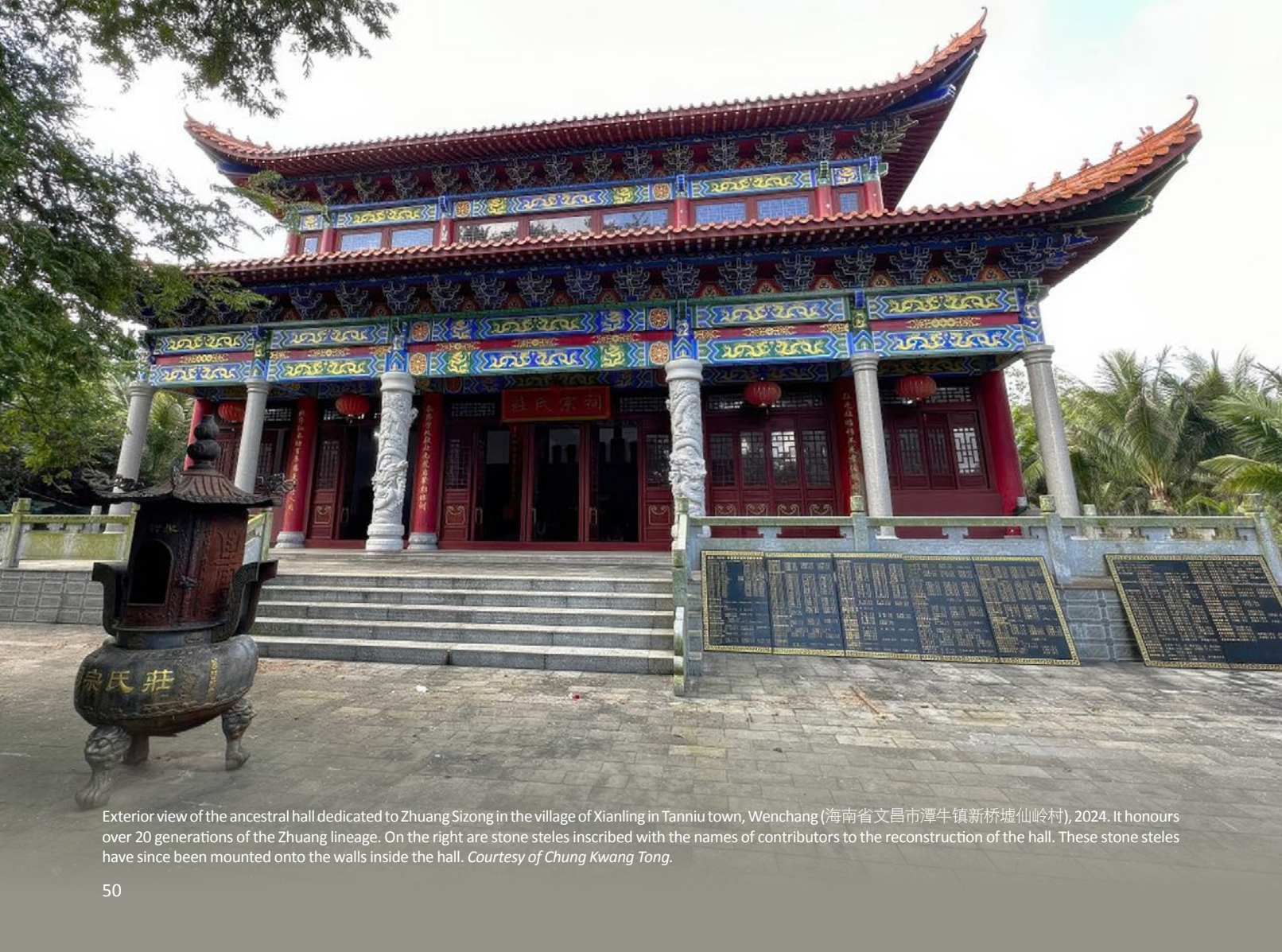


AN 800-YEAR-OLD FAMILY HISTORY

Thanks to his ancestry book (*zupu*) and a lot of persistence, a practising Taoist priest was able to trace his ancestry all the way back to 1195.

By Chung Kwang Tong



Exterior view of the ancestral hall dedicated to Zhuang Sizong in the village of Xianling in Tanniu town, Wenchang (海南省文昌市潭牛镇新桥墟仙岭村), 2024. It honours over 20 generations of the Zhuang lineage. On the right are stone steles inscribed with the names of contributors to the reconstruction of the hall. These stone steles have since been mounted onto the walls inside the hall. Courtesy of Chung Kwang Tong.

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One afternoon in the mid-1990s, when I was around 12, I found myself flipping through a book that my grandfather had pulled from his drawer. It was our family's *zupu* (族谱), the genealogical record that traces the Zhuang (庄) lineage through generations. My mother turned to a page and ran her finger down the rows of names. "There you are," she said, pointing at the Chinese characters of my name. I saw my father's name above mine, followed by my grandfather's... My mother moved her finger further up the page. "That's your great-grandfather... and your great-great-grandfather..." she continued.

A sense of wonder stirred within me. Who were these people? Where had they lived? What were their lives like? My family's genealogical record awakened a curiosity within me and a deep desire to understand where I came from.

Just then, something caught my eye. Above my name, there were stickers and pen markings – something wasn't right. Looking closer, I realised a glaring error: I have been mistakenly recorded as my uncle's son instead of my father's. My grandfather had manually corrected the error in his copy of the *zupu*, but the official records remained wrong. I remembered feeling a surge of frustration. What's the point of fixing our copy but not in the original record? Isn't that wrong? I was just a child in primary school then, who would even take me seriously? The desire to correct the mistake in the *zupu* never truly left me though.

Over the years, my parents would often take me to visit our ancestral village Dayou (大有村) in the town of Huiwen in Wenchang city, Hainan province (海南省文昌市会文镇), but we never managed to connect with the people in charge of the *zupu*. Our relatives there weren't sure who oversaw the updates and with each visit, the possibility of setting the record straight seemed to drift further away. Yet, deep down, I held onto the hope that one day, I would find a way to uncover and preserve the true story of my family.

Who Am I?

Even as I grew older, my curiosity about my family's past never faded. During my teenage years and early adulthood, I turned to the internet hoping to find answers about my ancestry. Who was the first Zhuang to arrive in Hainan? Where did he come from? Did he flee from war, seeking refuge on the island? Or was he an ambitious traveller in search of business

opportunities? Perhaps he was just an ordinary man looking for work, never imagining that generations later, his descendants would be asking about the fateful journey that he had made so many centuries earlier.

I asked my parents, but they didn't have many answers. They had heard some stories from my grandfather – fragments of memories passed down over the years. They knew my great-grandfather had been a tall man, but no one could describe how he looked. His final resting place, they said, was on a hill behind the village. That was all we knew.

When my grandfather passed away in 2008, my father took his copy of the *zupu* as a keepsake. About a year later, I flipped through its pages, pausing at the foreword. That was when I made a discovery that left me in awe – the first Zhuang to settle in Hainan wasn't just an ordinary migrant. He was an imperial official during the Song dynasty!

His name was Zhuang Sizong (庄嗣宗), with the courtesy name of Zhuang Fang (庄方). He came from Putian, Fujian, and was a scholar who had successfully passed the imperial examinations during the Chunxi era (1174–89) of the Southern Song dynasty.

In the first year of the Qingyuan era (1195), he arrived in Hainan, not as a refugee nor a tradesman, but as a Prefect of Qiongzhou, or Qiong Prefecture (琼州知府), and Pacification Commissioner (安抚都监) – a high-ranking official

A selfie in front of the ancestral hall dedicated to Zhuang Sizong, 2024. Courtesy of Chung Kwang Tong.





(Above and left) The interior of the ancestral hall dedicated to Zhuang Sizong, 2024. The largest tablet in the centre bears the inscription: "Zhuang Sizong and wife, first ancestors to migrate to Hainan during the Song dynasty." His tablet is flanked by those of his sons and grandsons. Courtesy of Chung Kwang Tong.

tasked with governing the region and maintaining order. Qiong Prefecture, as it was called then, is what we now know as Hainan province.

Reading those words, I felt a surge of pride and amazement. The questions I had carried for years – how my ancestors ended up in Hainan and why – finally had an answer. It wasn't just a journey of survival or opportunity. It was a duty, a mission, a legacy that had unknowingly shaped the generations that followed.

According to the records, Zhuang Sizong completed his tenure as Prefect of Qiong Prefecture and chose to retire in Hainan. He had two sons: one returned to their ancestral hometown of Putian, Fujian, while the other remained in Hainan, planting the roots of our family on the island.

Generation after generation, our lineage continued. And now, 23 generations later, here I am – a descendant of Zhuang Sizong.

My grandfather was the one who left Hainan, venturing to Singapore in search of better opportunities. He worked hard, built a life here and eventually decided that this island, so different from the one our ancestors once governed, would be his home.

Compiling the Zupu

My journey to reconnect with my family's history took an unexpected turn when I became acquainted with the Zhuang Ancestral Hall in Dayou village. This connection came through Chuang Tsu Li, the president of the Singapore Chuang and Ngiam Clansmen's Association.

While Tsu Li and I came from different Zhuang lineages – his ancestors had arrived in Hainan at a later date – there was a twist of fate. Tsu Li has a cousin that he was in touch with and who lives in Dayou village. That cousin, in turn, introduced me to Zhuang Gengli in March 2022, the person in charge of compiling the Zhuang *zupu*.

It was through this introduction that I made a surprising discovery: Gengli and I were related. Gengli's wife was from my ancestral village, making him my uncle by marriage. He shared with me that they were in the midst of a major revision of the Zhuang *zupu*, a rare opportunity to set things right. Minor revisions – adding names of those born and those who passed on – are made every 10 years. Major revisions, where they conduct a comprehensive update, are done every 60 years.

The first-ever compilation of the Zhuang *zupu* was completed in 1418 during the Yongle era (1402–24) of the Ming dynasty. The last major revision was made in 1934 during the Republican era (1912–49). A separate revision for my specific lineage, the Zhihuan branch (执环公), was carried out in 1992 and that was when my grandfather added my name to the *zupu* (wrongly!)

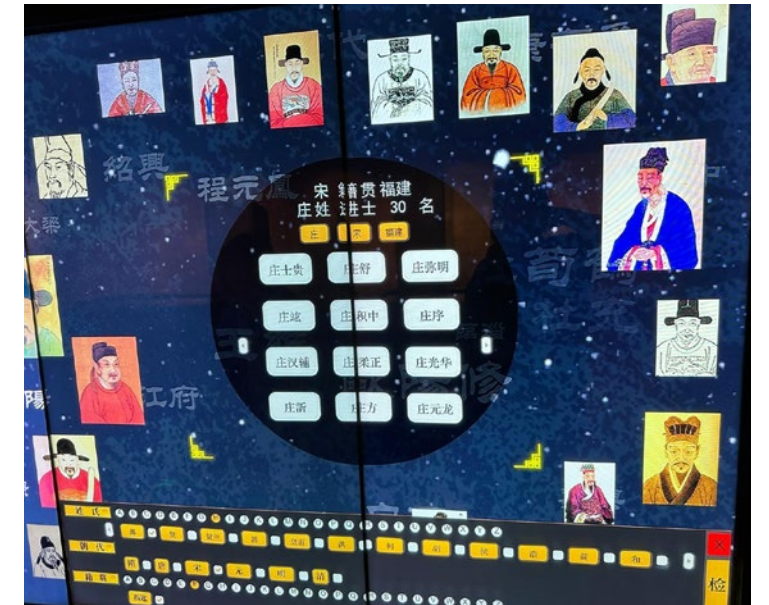
Just in Time

By sheer luck and timing, I managed to reach the Zupu Revision Committee (族谱续修理事会) just before the publication deadline in mid-2022.

The team had begun work on the revision back in 2021, but they had struggled to contact Zhuang descendants living outside of China. They were surprised when I reached out to them via WeChat – a connection they hadn't expected. And just like that, after all these years of searching, I found myself in direct contact with the very people entrusted with preserving our family's history.

When the Zupu Revision Committee learned that I was a practising Taoist priest with a strong understanding of Chinese customs and tradition, they invited me to join the committee as a vice-chairperson. I could read and interpret Chinese local gazetteers (地方志), which are historical records compiled by local governments in imperial times.

My role is to facilitate the compilation of records for Zhuang descendants who had migrated abroad, particularly in Singapore and Malaysia,



An interactive booth at the Nanjing Imperial Examination Museum, Jiangnan Examination Hall (江南貢院), displaying the list of all *jinshi* (進士), the highest academic degree in the Civil Service Examination System, 2023. The Jiangnan Examination Hall was the largest imperial examination hall in ancient China. Courtesy of Chung Kwang Tong.

where many of our forefathers had settled over the generations. It was an unexpected yet deeply meaningful responsibility – one that not only allowed me to reconnect with my roots but also to ensure that future generations of our lineage would have a clearer record of where they came from.

In September 2023, I attended an international forum in Jurong, not the town in Singapore but Jurong (句容) city in Jiangsu, China. Since I was already in the region, I took the opportunity to stop over in Nanjing and Yangzhou for a couple of days.

One of the most fascinating places I visited was the Nanjing Imperial Examination Museum (南京中国科举博物馆). This museum was the former Jiangnan Examination Hall (江南貢院) – the largest Imperial Examination Hall in ancient China. Since its establishment in 1168, during the reign of Emperor Xiaozong of the Southern Song, the hall had been the place where countless scholars took their imperial examinations (科举) in the hope of securing an official post.

As I walked through the historic halls, a thought struck me – there was a high chance that my ancestors had taken their imperial examinations right here!

One of the most exciting features of the museum was an interactive digital archive where visitors could search for the names of scholars who had passed the imperial examinations – records dating all the way back to the Sui dynasty, when the Civil Service Examination System was first introduced in 605 CE. I searched for Zhuang Sizong under his courtesy name,

Zhuang Fang. His name appeared in the archive! But that wasn't all – I also found another name, Zhuang Jing (庄敬), a fifth-generation ancestor who also sat for the imperial examinations.

Excited by this discovery, I shared it with the Zupu Revision Committee. We had been regularly exchanging new findings from local gazetteers and historical records. Every piece of information brought us closer to understanding our past, and this was yet another confirmation of our lineage's deep roots in history.



Reflections

After many years, my record in the *zupu* has finally been corrected. Even more meaningful was the fact that I also managed to include my children in the family lineage.

But what truly stood out in this latest *zupu* revision was a progressive change: for the first time, daughters were included. In the past, traditional family genealogies recorded only male descendants, as lineage was strictly traced through the paternal line. This exclusion had been the norm for centuries.

Now, that tradition has evolved. This shift acknowledged the significance of daughters within the family, ensuring that their names and contributions would no longer be overlooked. It was a small yet powerful step towards a more inclusive way of honouring our ancestry – one that reflected not just where we came from, but also where we are headed.

After travel restrictions were lifted following the Covid-19 pandemic, I finally had the opportunity to visit Hainan again in January 2024. This trip was more than just a homecoming – it was a chance to reconnect with my roots in a way I had never done before.

(Left) My grandfather and his brother, after working in Singapore, remitted funds back home to rebuild this ancestral house in Dayou Village. Courtesy of Chung Kwang Tong.

(Below) The Zhuang Ancestral Hall in Dayou Village dedicated to the Zhihuan branch of the Zhuang lineage, 2024. A school was later built adjacent to it. Despite visiting the village several times with my parents, I was previously unable to locate it as it was “hidden” within the school compound walls. Courtesy of Chung Kwang Tong.



One of my first stops was the Zhuang Ancestral Hall, now located within the premises of the village school. Walking into the hall, I was filled with a sense of awe and belonging, surrounded by the generations who came before me. I met with relatives and members of the Zupu Revision Committee, who had worked tirelessly to preserve our family's lineage.

What happened next was something truly special. As we drove through the village, they stopped at various graves, pointing them out one by one.

“That's the grave of your great-grandfather.”

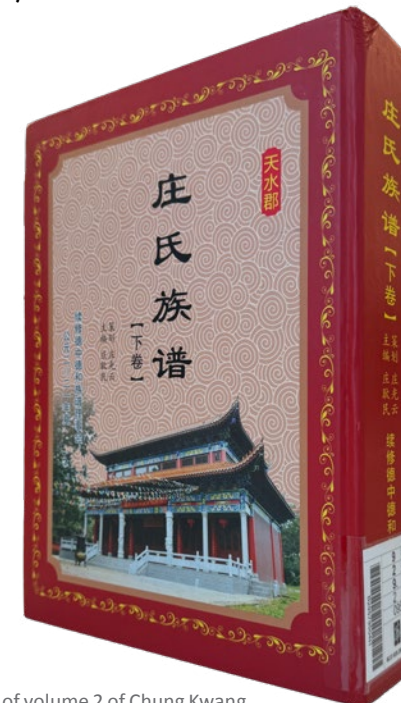
“And over there – that's your great-great-grandfather's resting place.”

Each stop along the way was like turning the pages of a history book, except this time, it was real – etched in stone, standing on the very land where my ancestors had lived and had been laid to rest.

What struck me the most was how deeply intertwined everyone in the village was. In this town, everyone was connected somehow, bound together by shared ancestry, history and stories passed down through generations.

Our fifth-generation ancestor, Zhuang Jing, played a pivotal role in preserving our family's history. In the foreword of the first compilation of the *zupu*, he left behind a message that still resonates today:

“新天子登位竟欲于选举之中再精拔其有贤德者，我愈愤志读书，留心简册，適开科取士，我又复中秋闈，现补教授。则上可对诸祖宗，下可劝诸孙子。” (“I strived to study hard to become a scholar in the imperial examinations to serve the country, and in doing so, I can face my ancestors with honour and also encourage my descendants.”)



The front cover of volume 2 of Chung Kwang Tong's family *zupu*, 庄氏族谱: 天水郡. From National Library Singapore (call no. RSEA 929.20951 ZSZ).



Photograph taken after a family dinner with my brother (right) and our families in Singapore, 2025. Our children represent the fourth generation of the Zhuang family in Singapore. Courtesy of Chung Kwang Tong.

These words reflect Zhuang Jing's unwavering dedication to education and duty. He saw the imperial examinations not just as a path to personal success, but as a means to serve the nation and uphold the family's legacy. His efforts were not only for his own achievements, but also to honour his ancestors and inspire future generations to pursue knowledge and virtue.

Reading Zhuang Jing's words centuries later, I felt a deep sense of connection. His values – hard work, scholarship and responsibility to both family and country – are the very ideals that continue to shape us today. I will be sure to pass on these values to my children and descendants. ♦

On 21 September 2024, the National Library Board (NLB) and the Genealogy Society Singapore (GSS) signed a memorandum of understanding to jointly promote interest in genealogy among Singaporeans by organising talks, workshops and exhibitions. GSS members donated seven *zupu* (族谱; genealogy books) to NLB, which included Chung Kwang Tong's *zupu*, 庄氏族谱: 天水郡 (volumes 1 and 2). Singaporeans are encouraged to donate their *zupu* to NLB for permanent preservation. By making these books publicly accessible to scholars, it will benefit researchers and anyone else interested in tracing their family history.