

Book Review: *The General Theory of China's Genealogy* by Heming Wang

HE Jun

China University of Petroleum-Beijing at Karamay, Karamay, People's Republic of China

Genealogies, alongside local chronicles and official histories, constitute a significant pillar in the development of Chinese historiography. Beyond their historical value, genealogies also serve as a primary means for overseas Chinese communities to trace their ancestral roots, rendering them invaluable documentary resources within contemporary global Chinese diasporas. This review aims to discuss the scholarly contribution and systematic advancement provided by Wang Heming's *The General Theory of China's Genealogy* to the field of Chinese genealogy.

Published by Springer in 2023 as part of the Translation Project of Chinese Fund for the Humanities and Social Sciences, *The General Theory of China's Genealogy* transcends a simple exploration of lineages. It delves into the rich cultural and historical significance of Chinese genealogies, offering a valuable resource for scholars and enthusiasts alike.

The book consists of three parts, two appendices, and a postscript. Part I serves as an introductory outline, laying the groundwork for subsequent discussions on definitions, types, history, and value of genealogy. Part II and Part III constitute the main body of the book, while the appendices include a list of genealogy websites and a table of Chinese dynasties. The postscript offers the author's reflection and summary on their involvement in genealogical research, particularly in the book's composition.

Part II (chapters 2-9) comprises chronological studies examining the developmental trajectory of Chinese genealogy from a vertical perspective. Chapter 2 delves into its origin stage, spanning from matriarchal society to the Shang Dynasty, analyzing primitive genealogical forms such as oral and knotted rope genealogies, as well as more advanced forms like oracle and bronze genealogies of the Shang Dynasty. Chapter 3 explores the birth of Chinese genealogy during the Zhou Dynasty and its subsequent development in the Han Dynasty. Chapters 4 and 5 examine the flourishing of Chinese genealogies, marking a golden age spanning from the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties to the Tang Dynasty. Unlike genealogists of earlier periods, those of the Tang Dynasty not only oversaw the compilation of official genealogies but also actively engaged in the creation of private ones. This pivotal era of the Tang Dynasty served as a crucial bridge between the past and future in the evolution of Chinese genealogy.

* **Funding:** This book review is supported by the Chinese Fund for the Humanities and Social Sciences (Grant ID: 18WZS022); *The General Theory of China's Genealogy* is written by Heming Wang, Singapore/Shanghai, Springer Nature/Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press, 2023, 495 pp. ISBN 978-981-15-6377-5 (eBook), ISBN 978-981-15-6376-8. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-6377-5>.

HE Jun, Associate Professor, School of Science and Arts, China University of Petroleum-Beijing at Karamay, Karamay, Xinjiang 834000, People's Republic of China.

Chapter 6 examines the significant period of reform and transformation in Chinese genealogy history during the Song Dynasty, which continued into the Yuan Dynasty. Chapter 7 contends that the Ming Dynasty witnessed the emergence of new developments in Chinese genealogy, characterized by increased maturity and refinement in style and content. Chapter 8 scrutinizes the popularization of genealogy during the Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China. Chapter 9 investigates the spontaneous surge in compiling new genealogies over the past six decades, spanning both sides of the Taiwan Strait and even extending to overseas communities of Chinese descent.

Part III (Chapters 10-16) consists of thematic studies exploring relevant topics on Chinese genealogy from a horizontal perspective. Chapters 10 and 11 focus on the style and content of Chinese genealogies, while Chapter 12 presents statistical data on genealogies. Chapter 13 examines family names recorded in genealogies, analyzing their origins, development stages, and characteristics. Finally, Chapters 14-16 analyze the illustrations and functions of genealogies, utilizing the historically rich genealogical practices of the Huizhou region as a case study. These chapters offer insightful perspectives on the philosophical underpinnings and practical manifestations supporting the continuous development and prosperity of Chinese genealogies, namely, the Neo-Confucian philosophy of Zhu Xi and the five-generation pedigree chart devised by Ouyang and Su.

The scholarly contributions of this book to the field of Chinese genealogical studies are profound. The book establishes genealogies as multifaceted documents, encompassing not just historical records but also a wealth of information on ethnography, sociology, demography, folklore, economics, family structures, religious beliefs, and local history. This interdisciplinary approach provides a holistic understanding of Chinese society across various historical periods.

Wang's groundbreaking contribution lies in his periodization of Chinese genealogical history. By dividing it into seven distinct stages—Origin, Birth, Prosperity, Transformation, Perfection, Popularization, and New Compilation—he offers a novel framework for comprehending their evolution. This approach sheds light on pivotal milestones in genealogical practices, from their rudimentary forms in ancient China to their contemporary adaptations.

Central to Wang's analysis is the elucidation of genealogy's definition, birth, transformation, popularization, and enduring value. He builds upon existing scholarship, offering fresh interpretations and insights into how genealogies have functioned within Chinese society. Particularly noteworthy is his examination of their evolving nature, highlighting how these practices have adapted and mirrored broader societal shifts and cultural dynamics throughout history.

Distinguished by its rigorous research, expansive scope, and lucid analytical framework, the book offers a nuanced understanding of Chinese genealogical practices. Wang challenges established notions and sheds light on previously overlooked aspects of China's genealogical heritage. By synthesizing diverse scholarly perspectives into a coherent narrative, he fills a critical gap in the field. The book provides a comprehensive overview of the historical evolution and contemporary significance of Chinese genealogies.

Another important contribution of the book is the examination of genealogical practices in overseas communities and their comparison with contemporary historiographical approaches. By situating Chinese genealogy within a global context, Wang highlights its unique features and ongoing significance in an interconnected world. Additionally, his analysis of genealogies from minority ethnic groups provides valuable insights into the historical evolution and cultural traditions of China's diverse communities, enhancing our comprehension of the nation's shared heritage.

In conclusion, Wang's work stands as a landmark achievement in the field of Chinese genealogical studies. Through meticulous scholarship, innovative framework, and insightful analysis, he has produced a work of enduring significance that will serve as a foundational text for scholars, historians, and enthusiasts for generations to come. By shining a spotlight on the intricate tapestry of China's genealogical heritage, this book offers a compelling narrative of resilience, continuity, and cultural identity in the face of historical change and social upheaval.

References

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