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Photos by Brant Ward / The Chronicle

People have placed dots on a map at the Chinese Cultural Center to show where their families came from.

CULTURE

Exploring Chinese roots

Program sends Americans to villages where ancestors lived

By Jessica Kwong
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

For Kelvin Chin, who did not grow up with traditional Chinese New Year celebrations and had only a handful of colleagues of his own ethnicity, nailing down his roots had “always been kind of a moving target.”

So when he stepped foot at the entrance to his grandfather’s village, he was shocked to be greeted by lion dancers, drumbeats, firecrackers and a gang of people telling him he was home.

“It was the shock of, ‘Wow, I’m here and I don’t quite know who these people are,’ but they essentially rolled out the red carpet for me,” said the 28-



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A tree made of recycled items symbolizes the importance of exploring roots.

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Americans explore their Chinese roots

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year-old. "They were happy to see me, happy that somebody from my family line had come back."

Within a couple of hours, Chin had toured the rural village, met distant cousins, and made offerings at his ancestral shrine. He was one of 26 Bay Area young adults, ages 17 to 29, who made the identity-seeking journey to China last summer.

True to its name, the In Search of Roots program has, for two decades, brought young adults to the Pearl River Delta region of the Guangdong province of China. The Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco, the Chinese Historical Society of America and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of Guangdong Province have sponsored the program since its inception.

Emotional accounts

Several months of genealogy research, history seminars and visits to places like the National Archives at San Francisco and the barracks at Angel Island culminate in the two weeks spent at their ancestors' native villages.

Though each participant has a different experience, all say it is emotional.

Amy Koehler is half Chinese, a quarter Salvadoran and a

In Search of Roots

The 2010 program participants will discuss their experiences and release their book of short essays at 1 p.m. Saturday at the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco, 750 Kearny St., Third Floor.

quarter German. She knows only basic Chinese words, such as for food items and numbers.

"The caretaker of my ancestral home just took my hand," the 20-year-old San Francisco State University student said. "We couldn't communicate, but actions speak more than words. I felt like she totally got it and knew why I was there."

July's trip was special for the program, which celebrated its 20th anniversary. It had the largest group — about twice the usual number after the 2009 trip was canceled because of the worldwide swine flu outbreak — and the most diverse.

Half Chinese and half African American, Acacia Woods-Chan said she had always felt like the black sheep among her Chinese relatives and didn't feel accepted by her grandmother. Things changed after she returned from Shek Tam Chuen, her grandmother's village.

The 23-year-old recalls, "My mother told me, 'Acacia, Grandma's really proud of you — she was talking to relatives back in



Lacy Atkins / The Chronicle

Albert Cheng, who founded the In Search of Roots program in 1991, prepares bone marrow for a potluck lunch.

China and they referred to you as the black one. Grandma said, she's not the black one, she's Acacia.'"

Small groups, large impact

The program started after San Franciscan Albert Cheng, a fourth-generation Chinese American, went to his ancestral village for the first time in 1988. Three years later, he founded the program with the late Chinese American historian Him Mark Lai.

In 1991, the group could visit only one village per day because rivers and deltas were difficult to navigate. In the last decade, paved roads have made traveling to two or three villages in one day possible.

Cheng has resisted calls to grow the program to include several hundred participants.

"Making a larger impact on a smaller group of people is more lasting," the trip leader said.

Participants pay \$1,200, about half the total cost. More donations are needed to cover scholarships and other expenses,

especially with the down economy, said Alan Liu, 28, president of Friends of Roots, an alumni group created last year to raise money.

On Saturday at 1 p.m., this year's participants will make an oral presentation at the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco, which is holding an exhibit featuring their photographs, artifacts and art through April 20. A book of their short essays also will be released.

Second time around

It will be the second "graduation" for 24-year-old Brandon Louie, whose 2005 trip to visit his father's ancestral villages prompted him to want to explore his mother's side of the family.

"I already considered myself pretty in tune with the culture before going," he said. "But being able to tell people exactly where the villages are validated that feeling."

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