

LW1 China and the History of Fingerprinting: A Forgotten Chapter?

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand how officials in premodern China used fingerprints to make identifications, how these practices differed from modern fingerprinting, and how the patterning of friction ridge skin has been described and classified in different places and historical periods.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by improving upon commonly accepted narratives of the history of fingerprinting with new facts and interpretations and by promoting a deeper understanding of the history, development, and present-day circumstances of this field.

Textbooks and other writings on fingerprinting often contain brief discussions of the history of this field. Such discussions generally mention the fact that historical precedents for fingerprint identification can be found in Chinese history. The *Fingerprint Sourcebook* of the National Institute of Justice, for example, notes that “[the] Chinese were the first culture known to have used friction ridge impressions as a means of identification.”¹ Another example: “Chinese dynastic history is filled with examples of fingerprints used as personal marks long before European historical fingerprint records.”² Ever since Francis Galton’s (1822–1911) *Finger Prints* (1892), those who have written on the history of fingerprinting have marshaled a range of evidence—finger impressions on ancient Chinese pottery, deeds and contracts with inked fingerprints, and scattered textual references—to describe the role that China played in this history.³

There is, in fact, a premodern Chinese usage of fingerprints that has been largely ignored in English-language histories, yet that is arguably the application that was closest to modern fingerprint identification. During the last imperial dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911), Chinese officials were required by law to examine convicts’ friction ridge patterning in specific ways. Officials were to record the configuration of two different pattern-types—known as *dou* and *ji*—across the ten fingers. The Chinese word *dou* was used to refer to fingerprints that were circular or spiral-shaped, similar to the “whorls” of today. The word *ji* was used for fingerprints that were asymmetrical or crooked in form. When examining a convict’s ten fingers, officials might record, for example, that there were *dou* patterns on this and that finger and *ji* patterns on others. Given that the specific configuration of *dou* and *ji* on the hands could be expected to vary across different individuals, this method provided a simple way of verifying a convict’s identity, used in conjunction with additional identifying information such as scars or tattoos.

Long before the late 19th-century innovations of Edward R. Henry (1850–1931), Juan Vucetich (1858–1925), and others, which made it possible to efficiently organize large numbers of paper-based fingerprint records, this older Chinese system provided a way for officials to describe the full profile of a person’s ten fingerprints in systematic ways and to use this information in identification work. Given the utility of this method, it should not be surprising that Chinese officials continued to use it well into the 20th century, during a period when modern techniques of fingerprint identification were also being introduced.

After explaining how this identification method worked and briefly comparing it to modern ways of classifying, registering, and matching fingerprints, this presentation will conclude with a discussion of the modern afterlife of this older system. In the 1910s and 1920s, those who translated modern knowledge of fingerprinting into Chinese (including during and after Vucetich’s visit there in 1913) used the older terminology of *dou* and *ji* as the basis for the modern Chinese words for “whorl” and “loop,” terms that are still used today.

Reference(s):

1. National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice, *The Fingerprint Sourcebook* (2011), 1-8. Link: <https://nij.ojp.gov/library/publications/fingerprint-sourcebook>. Last accessed September 8, 2020.
2. Hillary Moses Daluz, *Fundamentals of Fingerprint Analysis*. Second Edition (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2019), 17.
3. Francis Galton, *Finger Prints* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1892), 24-26.

Fingerprints, Identification, China