



Guide to Chinese-Australian Family Research

This guide describes resources of particular interest to those researching their Chinese-Australian ancestry. It should be used to supplement standard family research at libraries, historical societies and genealogical societies.

The following three steps are a good way to start your general family research:

1. Gather as much information as possible from family members and family stories.
2. Obtain Australian birth, death and marriages certificates which provide information about the family's original Chinese Australian ancestor. An Australian marriage certificate should provide information about an ancestor's birthplace and parents. Sometimes a Chinese groom will have signed his name in Chinese characters, which is valuable information and occasionally the birthplace named is more specific than the normal 'Canton' or 'China'. Birth registrations may also provide tiny but useful pieces of information
3. Visit the genealogical section of your state or territory library and your local genealogical society

Chinese Names

Typically Chinese have three characters to their name, sometimes two, which translate to a three syllable name. Traditionally the first character is the 'family name' but overseas Chinese also swap their names around to suit western conventions.

Chinese names can change over a person's lifetime. It was common for babies to be given a 'baby name' which was used instead for their name for the first few years of their life. Some people also changed their names when they retired. Women do not traditionally take their husband's name.

Often many Chinese names in English have the term 'Ah' or 'A' at the start such as 'Ah Lee'. The 'Ah' does not have a meaning. It is simply a way of indicating that the next word is the person's given name and was used as a way of addressing friends. 'Ah' was often mistakenly entered into documentation as part of people's names and over time were joined as one word and eventually become the family surname. There are also several examples of families who became known by their business name rather than their actual name.

The only way to accurately know your ancestor's Chinese name is to have the Chinese characters for it. As Chinese is a tonal language it is not possible to translate the Chinese name accurately into English unless a system such as pinyin is used. It is not possible to work backwards from English without guesswork. This is further complicated by the fact that names may sound different depending on the Chinese dialect used to pronounce them.

As is standard with genealogical research it is important to search as many variations of a person's name as you can think of. This can include different spellings which might provide the same sound.

For further information about the Chinese naming practices and how they work in both Australia and China see some of the items below:

- *Bai Jia Xing = 100 most common Chinese surnames* edited by Cynthia Wang (Melbourne, Vic: Word Connection, 1997)
- Chung, Yoon-Ngan, *The origin of Chinese surnames* (Nedlands, W.A., Yoon-Ngan Chung through Rio Bay Publishing, 2000)
- Jones, Russell, *Chinese names: the traditions surrounding the use of Chinese surnames and personal names* (Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, c1997)
- Kehrer Jon, 'The Bai Jia Xing or Book of Hundred Surnames', in *The Ancestral Searcher*, Vol 24, No 2, June 2001, pp.60-73
- Kehrer, Jon, 'Who Was "John Chinaman"', in *The Ancestral Searcher*, Vol 24, No 4, December 2001, pp201-205
- Kehrer, Jon, 'Honourable Ancestors: My Search for the Chinese Connection', in *The Ancestral Searcher*, Vol 27, No 4 December 2004, pp.328-333 is a discussion of how the author gradually found his ancestor's name, its Chinese characters and eventually the location of his ancestral village and relatives.
- Presland, G., 'Some difficulties in researching Chinese ancestry' in *From gold to federation: papers from the Fourth Victoria Family State Conference*, ed. Noelle Oke (Melbourne, Vic, Penfolk Publishing, 2001)

Chinese family trees: Jiapu and zupu

Traditionally Chinese have kept family genealogical records, *jiapu*, and clan or lineage records, *zupu*. These records normally are patrilineal. The Family History Library of the Mormon Church in Salt Lake City has a large collection of these Chinese genealogical records. A visit to your local Family History library to consult their catalogues may help to ascertain whether there is anything in these records which may be of use. The actual microfilms would then need to be ordered from the head library in Salt Lake City. As the records are in Chinese any initial inquiry and consultation of the records would need to be undertaken with the assistance of a person familiar with the Chinese language.

Arriving and Leaving

Chinese immigrants and their descendants not only travelled to Australia but they also made repeated visits back to China and Hong Kong for business and family reasons. Many also tried to return home before they died and if this was not possible some families organised for their bodies to be exhumed and the bones returned to China. Shipping lists documented the arrivals and departures of individuals to colonies in Australia.

Shipping lists for Victoria (<http://www.access.prov.vic.gov.au>) are held at the Victorian Public Records Office (PROV) with digitised indexes for inward unassisted shipping from 1852-1923 and outward passengers currently up to 1852-1901. Not all shipping passenger lists survived and some lists for ships with Chinese passengers merely state there were a certain number of Chinese passengers in steerage. If a possible name and ship is found on the online index it is important to check the microfiche of the inward passenger lists from foreign ports. The microfiche show the actual passenger lists and may provide more detail, such as whether someone travelled in steerage or as a cabin or saloon passenger, their gender, their birthplace and their occupation. In addition to PROV the microfiche are also available at the Genealogical Society of Victoria (GSV).

Shipping lists for New South Wales (<https://search.findmypast.com.au/search-world-records/new-south-wales-passenger-lists>) This collection includes records of both assisted and unassisted passengers. The assisted passenger lists cover 1828 to 1896 and comprise series NRS 5310 and NRS 5316. The unassisted passenger lists span the years 1826 to 1900 and include series NRS 13278 and NRS 1291. The lists provide the names of people who were passengers for Sydney and the ships' crew. Chinese people who landed in Sydney may have later travelled to Victoria. A large number of the crewmen on the ships especially those

coming from Hong Kong and Singapore were Chinese. Their names are also listed on this site. This is not the case for the Victorian shipping lists.

Restrictions on Chinese immigration meant that Chinese who had been living in Australia and were exempt from these restrictions needed **travel documents** in order to freely return to Australia after travelling overseas. They might travel on a range of different kinds of documents – birth certificates, naturalisation certificates or exemption certificates (see Dr Kate Bagnall’s discussion of this documentation - <http://chineseaustralia.org/?p=838>). Much of this documentation is held by the National Archives of Australia (NAA) and can be accessed through RecordSearch <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/recordsearch/index.aspx>. Some material can also be found in State government archive collections.

Naturalisation and Citizenship

Prior to Australia’s federation in 1901 naturalisation was legislated independently by each Colony and those naturalised became British subjects. From the 1880s restrictions were placed on Chinese wanting to naturalise. These took different forms in different colonies. In 1903 Chinese were prevented legislatively from being naturalised across Australia. Before restrictions were enforced Chinese did become naturalised. Applications for naturalisation, rejected applications and cancelled and confiscated naturalisation certificates can be found in State government archives and the NAA.

Research Guides and Support

The **Chinese Australia website** (previously Chinese Heritage of Australian Federation, CHAF) contained a **‘Resources’ page** which acted as a portal to the wide range of Chinese Australian historical resources published on the web. This can now only be accessed through Latrobe University’s Opal open access page and search for Chinese Australian material (<https://opal.latrobe.edu.au/>).

The **‘Chinese Australian History Resources’ database** on the same website lists over 2,500 published and unpublished materials related to the history of Chinese in Australia including newspaper articles, theses, monographs, books and journal articles and oral histories in both English and Chinese language.

A number of **published guides** have been produced to guide researchers to Chinese-Australian materials. Trove, a search facility run by the National Library of Australia (NLA), can be used to locate the following printed material in Australian libraries.

- Boey, Danny, *Basic guide to Chinese genealogy* (Singapore, Chinese Roots, 2002)
- Chao, Sheau-ueh J, *In search of your Asian roots: genealogical research on Chinese surnames* (Baltimore, Md., Clearfield, 2000)
- Chinn, A.R. *You are royalty: a guide to your Chinese ancestor* (Toronto, A.R. Chinn, 2002)
- Jones, Paul, *Chinese-Australians journeys: records on travel, migration and settlement, 1860-1975* (Canberra, National Archives of Australia, 2005)
- Stacker, Julie & Stewart, Peter, *Chinese Immigrants and Chinese-Australians in NSW* (Canberra, National Archives of Australia, 1998).
- Young, Faye & van Barneveld, Nicole, *Sources for Chinese local history and heritage in New South Wales* (Kareela, N.S.W., F. Young: Alexandria, N.S.W., N. van Barneveld, 1997)
- Paul Jones & Terri McCormack, ‘Chinese Australians: A guide to holdings in the Mitchell Library’

An increasing number of people have created **blogs and websites** documenting their research successes and findings. The following might be of interest:

- **The tiger's mouth: thoughts on the history and heritage of Chinese Australia** (<http://chineseaustralia.org>). This is a blog maintained by Kate Bagnall. It contains interesting and useful material about Chinese Australians with special reference to the documents held by the NAA and undertaking Chinese-Australian family history.
- **Chinese Rural Victoria** (<http://chineseruralvictoria.wordpress.com/>). This was a blog created by Carol Holsworth. It has interesting material on Chinese herbalists but also refers to other aspects of Chinese Australian life in rural Victoria.
- **Taishan Genealogy: A Sze Yup County in Guangdong Province China** (<http://siyigenealogy.proboards.com/thread/781/taishan-genealogy>). Many of the Chinese who came to Victoria came from the Taishan district in Guangdong (Canton until 1922) Province. This excellent website is especially designed for people interested in Taishan ancestry but is useful for anyone familiarising themselves with their Chinese background.
- **3 Journals of Chinese Australia (JCA)** (<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/tep/50815>). JCA was a free, online journal archived on the National Library's Pandora Web archive site, dedicated to providing access to research and resources on the history and culture of Chinese people in Australia.

Aside from the local historical societies and museums, specialising in the places where your ancestor may have lived and worked, there are a range of organisations which specialise in Chinese-Australian history. These include:

- **Chinese Australian Family Historians of Victoria Inc (CAFHOV)** (<http://www.cafhov.com>) are a group researching in the area of Chinese Australian family history. Their website contains their contact details with links to other institutions and organisations in Australia which might assist with Chinese Australian family research.
- **Chinese Australian Historical Society Inc** (<http://chineseaustralianhistory.org>) is based in Sydney, New South Wales. Enquiries by email.
- **Chinese Heritage Association of Australia Inc** (<http://www.chineseheritage.org.au>) is based in Sydney and is a community organisation set up to promote the study and discussion of the history of the Chinese community in Australia.
- **Chinese Heritage in Northern Australia (CHINA Inc)** (<http://chinainc.yolasite.com>) is based in Cairns and is committed to promoting research and study into the Chinese Australian experience in northern Australia. Requests by email through their website.
- **Chinese Heritage Interest Network** (<http://chinese-heritage.tripod.com/>) is a not-for-profit research group with an interest in the Chinese heritage of regional Victoria.
- **Chung Wah Association** (<http://www.chungwah.org.au/>) was established in Perth in 1909 to meet the social, cultural and political needs of Chinese in Western Australia and has become the representative body for the Chinese community in Western Australia.
- **Golden Dragon Museum** (<https://www.goldendragonmuseum.org/>) displays the living history of the Chinese people of Bendigo, from the 1850's gold rush to the present day. Ming Yeung Library and Joan Jack OAM Research Centre can be accessed by appointment. An index of Chinese Family names which are associated with objects and photographs in their collection can be found on their website.
- **Museum of Chinese Australian History** (<https://chinesemuseum.com.au/>) is a national museum that explores and preserves the history and heritage of Chinese in Australia. Information about the Museum's collection is available by email. The Museum's Research Library catalogue is accessible through Museum's [CatalogIt](#) hub.
- **Museum of Chinese in Australia (MOCA)** (<https://www.moca.com.au/>) This museum is based in Sydney at 744 George Street Haymarket.

- **Northern Territory Chinese Museum** (<http://www.chungwahnt.asn.au/>) is part of the Chung Wah Society and based in Darwin. It aims to encourage greater awareness and understanding of the history of the Chinese in the Territory.

Digitised historical resources

Chinese Australian Historic images in Australia (CHIA) (<http://www.chia.chinesemuseum.com.au>) website is a catalogue of historical images of Chinese, Chinese immigrants and their descendants held in Australia. It draws on photographic holdings of the Museum of Chinese Australian History but includes photographs from other online archives, publications and private family collections.

Christianity and the Chinese 1800s-1900s

Ian Welch's comprehensive thesis about Cheok Hong Cheong contains information about Chinese missions, Christian births, marriages, burials and a bibliography of material related to the study of the Chinese in the West Pacific-Oceania region together with other references to Chinese history and culture and the nineteenth century evangelical missionary movement. A copy can be found in the Museum's reference library and is also available online through Open Access.

Kok, Hu Jin, ***Chinese cemeteries in Australia*** has authored many volumes listing inscriptions on Chinese grave stones and their location in the Chinese sections of cemeteries in Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. There are copies in the Museum's library and research archives.

National Museum of Australia's ***Harvest of Endurance Scroll*** available online at: (http://www.nma.gov.au/collections/collection_interactives/endurance_scroll/harvest_of_endurance_html_version/home) This is a 50-metre-long scroll representing two centuries of Chinese contact with, and emigration to, Australia. Stories of hardship and survival, resourcefulness and reward are painted in the traditional *gong bi* style as a project sponsored by the Australia–China Friendship Society celebration of the Australian Bicentenary in 1988. The scroll took just over 12 months to complete and consists of 18 elaborately painted panels. The National Museum of Australia bought the scroll in 1992.

Victoria

Chinese Heritage Interest Network website (<http://chinese-heritage.tripod.com/>) has:

- Register of Chinese Patients – Ballarat Asylum, 1893 -1907; 1877 – 1884
- Register of Chinese Patients – Collingwood, 1864 - 1871
- Register of Chinese Patients – Beechworth Asylum, 1867 – 1884
- Register of Chinese Patients – Yarra Bend Asylum, 1848 – 1912
- Register of Chinese Patients – Ararat Asylum, 1867 - 1884
- Register of Chinese Patients – Kew, 1871 - 884
- Register of Chinese Patients – Sunbury Asylum, 1879 -1912
- Index of some Chinese Exhumation Requests (Victoria)
- Index of Male Prisoners with Chinese Surnames (Victoria); Index of Female Prisoners with Chinese Surnames (Victoria)
- Chinese Deaths in the Melbourne Hospital copied from the *Argus* 1868 -1880

New South Wales

Whilst the Golden Threads (<http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/projects/golden-threads/index.html>) has been archived and is no longer updated, it still contains a database of people with Chinese ancestry, their objects and the places lived and worked in rural NSW along with an online exhibition and stories.

Jones, Doris Yau-Chong, *Remembering the forgotten: Chinese gravestones in Rookwood Cemetery 1917-1949*, (Pymble, NSW, 2003).

Chinese-language Newspapers

The Chinese Times (1902-1922) was published in Melbourne and was a Chinese-language newspaper with some English-language advertisements. A microfilm copy of this newspaper is available in the Newspaper Reading Room at the State Library of Victoria.

Tung Wah newspaper (1898-1936) was published in Chinese but there is an English-language index (<http://resources.chineseaustralia.org/tungwah/>). The name of the newspaper changed its name from the *Tung Wah News* to *Tung Wah Times* in 1902.

Some other Chinese newspapers were the *Chinese Australian Herald* (1894-c1920s), the *Chinese World's News* or *Gong Bao* (or *The Bulletin*).

Some other things to try...

Newspapers in Australian Libraries (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/>) contains a comprehensive digital archive of newspapers, gazettes and other publications in Australia including some Chinese language newspapers.

Government Gazettes, Police Gazettes and Street Directories contain hundreds of thousands of names and have been digitised by Archives Digital Books Australia. The search facility for the digitised versions is very user friendly. Hard copies of the gazettes and microfiche copies of directories are available in State Libraries.

Oral history collections of the Northern Territory Archive Service, National Library of Australia, Museum of Chinese Australian History, Golden Dragon Museum and the State Library of Victoria.

Family history websites to explore:

Kate Bagnall's blog: <http://chineseaustralia.org/finding-your-chinese-roots/>

Family Search's family history guide: <http://www.thefhguide.com/project-9-china.html> and wiki: https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Chinese_Research_Helps

Originally compiled by S Couchman and P Rule for the Chinese Museum in June 2011. Modified and updated by I Poon June 2018 and August 2024. Any corrections or additions should be emailed to collection@chinesemuseum.com.au.