

Researching your Chinese Ancestry

by Sophie Couchman, Professional Historian and Curator

A growing number of Australians are discovering their Chinese ancestry. Little wonder: Chinese people have lived in Victoria since the 1830s.

While not all the estimated 42,000 Chinese goldrush arrivals stayed, many did. The population aged and numbers steadily declined from this peak until immigration slowly opened up in the 1950s. But these early arrivals built growing families

(sometimes in both Australia and China) and there were still a few ways Chinese people could come to Victoria – both legal and illegal. Researching your Chinese ancestry can be challenging but also very rewarding. Following are some tips on how to do this. The focus is Victoria in prior to the easing of immigration restrictions in the mid-twentieth century.

First Steps

Step 1:

Find all you can from standard genealogical sources – including their guides on researching Chinese ancestry.

Step 2:

Talk with family about their memories of the family's Chinese ancestors and don't forget to push the record on your phone to document the conversation. Be sensitive and patient. It is much more socially acceptable to have Chinese ancestry now than it was even a generation ago. Try and verify information you gain.

Step 3:

Reach out to others either directly or via social media.

- Chinese Australian Family Historians of Victoria (CAFHOV), www.cafhov.com, and their books about researching Chinese ancestry
- Chinese Australian Cultural Society Ballarat, www.chineseballarat.org.au
- Chinese Australian genealogical and family history groups in other parts of Australia and places like north America and Canada.
- Use the twitter handle #chinozhist

Kate Bagnall's 'Tiger's Mouth' blog (<http://chineseaustralia.org>), particularly 'Finding your

Chinese roots', <http://chineseaustralia.org/finding-your-chinese-roots>, is rich in tips and examples of research about Chinese Australian families in Australia and southern China. Her doctoral thesis (<https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/1412>) and other writing also provides a valuable insight into the complexity of understanding relationships between white women who partnered with Chinese men.

Step 4:

Think about the archival material you are collecting. Why was it created? How might attitudes at the time have shaped it? What might the gaps in your research mean? What can the lives of women tell you about your family? How does your family's story conform with or challenge established history?

Finding your ancestor in southern China

Almost all Chinese who came to Victoria prior to the 1960s were from southern China. To research your family history in China you will need:

- Full name of your ancestor in Chinese characters
- Village/town name (not just district) in Chinese characters. NB: 'Canton' (commonly listed as birthplace) can refer to present-day Guangzhou city or Guangzhou province.

The sad reality for many is that this information has been lost. Check original documents and gravestones for Chinese characters. Purchase original birth and marriage certificates. Think laterally. Might you have more information about a sibling, uncle or cousin who came from the same place?

What you might find:

- Ancestral village where you might find distant relatives and the location of surviving graves, family homes and ancestral halls
- Family genealogies, Jiapu (家譜), or clan Zupu (族譜). These provide the patrilineal lineage of the family often dating back many generations and are increasingly being collected, digitised and published online.

Sophie can be contacted at sophie.couchman@gmail.com
www.sophiecouchman.com

Without Cantonese you will need assistance with your research. Commercial enterprises such as *My China Roots* (www.mychinaroots.com) and Dr Selia Tan and her team at the *Cangdong Village Project* (<https://cangdong.stanford.edu/people/dr-selia-jinhua-tan>) can help but can't work miracles. These services can be expensive so gather as much information beforehand as you can.

See also:

- Kate Bagnall, 'Taking my own advice finding home villages using Chinese student records', <http://chineseaustralia.org/taking-my-own-advice-finding-home-villages-using-chinese-student-records>
- Kate Bagnall, 'US army maps', <http://chineseaustralia.org/us-army-maps>
- Pauline Rule, 'Researching Chinese Australian Ancestry in Hong Kong' in *Journeys into Chinese Australian Family History*, CAFHOV, 2019.
- Michael Williams, 'Chinese Australia – the view from the village', *Locality*, 2003, <https://cahsociety.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/village-view-copy.pdf>.
- Jon Kehrer, 'Honourable ancestors: My search for the Chinese connection', *The Ancestral Searcher*, 27(4), pp.328-333
- Mei-Ling and John Griffiths and Alan To and Terry Young's chapters in *Journeys into Chinese Australian Family History*, CAFHOV, 2019.

Searching Chinese names and places

Understanding how Chinese languages works can be challenging for new researchers. Things to note:

- There are many Chinese languages. Most arrivals spoke Cantonese or a Cantonese dialect and if they were literate wrote in traditional/complex characters.
- Chinese language is tonal which means it cannot be accurately romanised. When used properly romanisation systems incorporate numbers or symbols to represent tones. There is no universally agreed system for Cantonese so Cantonese words can sometimes be spelt differently.
- There are many Cantonese dialects. The sound of words (and their spelling) can vary depending on the dialect it was spoken in.
- Chinese names generally have three parts: family name, generational name and given name (in that order). Generational and given names can be written as two words, one word or separated with a hyphen. Their order is often confused.
- 'Ah' or 'A' (阿 or 亞) is not a name but a prefix before a given name. It is a casual way to address someone.



▲ Image1: Ah Ham's cancelled naturalization certificate, 1883. Photograph and annotations show it was used for travel purposes in 1898. As a naturalized Victorian the bearer would have been exempt from immigration restrictions at this time. (NAA: A801, 2377)

- Incorrect Chinese names in English can be accepted as the family's correct name.
- A lack of familiarity with Chinese names often leads them to be mis-transcribed.

Tips:

Keep track of the different spellings of Chinese words and where you found them

If you can't type Chinese, photograph or use screen capture functions to document characters then ask someone to type them in traditional and simplified forms so you can 'copy and paste' them into search engines and elsewhere.

Use advanced search functions. Eg: instead of doing a 'Name Search' in the National Archives of Australia's RecordSearch use the 'Advanced search' function. Search within specific series.

Further reading:

- Kate Bagnall, 'Quong not Zuong, Quay not Zuay', <http://chineseaustralia.org/quong-not-zuong-quay-not-zuay/>
- Kate Bagnall, 'Trouble with spelling Chinese names', <http://chineseaustralia.org/the-trouble-with-spelling-chinese-names/>
- Chinese Australian Historical Society, 'Chinese names', <https://chineseaustralianhistory.org/chinese-names/>
- Sophie Couchman, 'Working with Chinese language when you don't speak Chinese' in *Journeys into Chinese Australian Family History*, CAFHOV: Melbourne, 2019.

- Paul Jones, *Chinese-Australian Journeys: Records on Travel, Migration and Settlement, 1860-1975*, National Archives of Australia, 2005, www.naa.gov.au/naaresources/publications/research_guides/pdf/chinese_guide_21.pdf

Naturalisation and citizenship

People born in China were eligible to be naturalised under Victorian colonial law until the passing of the Commonwealth 1903 *Naturalization Act*. However, by administrative decision, the government decided to stop naturalizing Chinese in the mid-1880s. They could be naturalised again from 1920 but very few were until after 1956.

Although naturalisation/citizenship was automatic for those born in Australia in practice many Australian-born Chinese were treated as if they were Chinese nationals.

- Kate Bagnall, 'Legacies of Colonial naturalisation', www.naa.gov.au/help-your-research/research-guides/chinese-australian-journeys-records-travel-migration-and-settlement. (overview of the history of Chinese naturalisation in Australia)
- David Dutton, *Citizenship in Australia: A Guide to Commonwealth Government Records*, National Archives of Australia (NAA), <http://guides.naa.gov.au/citizenship/index.aspx>

Key series

NAA: A712 (applications for Victorian naturalisation (1851-1903). NB: not all applications were approved)

PROV: VPRS 4396 (index of approved naturalisations, on microfilm at PROV and through *Ancestry*. NAA: A1 (applications for Commonwealth naturalisations)

NAA: A801 (cancelled naturalisation certificates. Some have photographs and were used for travel. Be warned certificates were confiscated because officials did not believe the holder was the person named on the certificate)

Restrictions on arrivals

There were no restrictions on Chinese arrivals to Victoria before 1855 and between 1863 and 1881. Chinese women and children were also exempt from some early restrictions. During the White Australia period there also a few categories of people – students and merchants – who were able to enter on a temporary basis, which could be extended.

- NAA: MP56/13 (1932-1946) and MP65/3 (butts for Victorian Certificate of Exemption, 1945-1951. Certificates allowed holders to stay in Australia temporarily. From 1934 some

businesses, such as restaurants, could bring in replacement workers)

- NAA: B659 and A1 (applications for temporary admission of Chinese students. See: Kate Bagnall, 'Back to school', <http://chineseaustralia.org/back-to-school/>)
- NAA: B937, B938 and B940 (indexes to case files of immigrants, 1947-80)

Overseas travel

The dictation test introduced under the 1901 *Immigration Restriction Act* was used to stop 'coloured' immigration. Long term Chinese residents, naturalised and Australian-born Chinese were exempt but had to apply and pay for a 'Certificate exempting from the Dictation Test' (CEDT) to prove this or travelled on birth and naturalization certificates.

- Kate Bagnall, 'Where to find CEDT applications and certificates', <http://chineseaustralia.org/where-to-find-cedt-applications-and-certificates/>

Key series (post-1901)

- NAA: B6003 (registers of CEDT applications, 1904-59. An online searchable index of registers is being developed, www.cafhov.com/chindex)
- MT19/4 (applications for CEDTs, 1908-30)
- B13/1 (CEDT applications and files related to their travel, c1902-c1962)
- MT19/4 (lapsed CEDTs)

Key series (pre-1901)

- Victorian Government Gazettes (Exemptions issued under the *Chinese Act 1890* were published in Gazettes, 1891-1902. Searchable via the State Library of Victoria (<http://gazette.slv.vic.gov.au>). Filter by 'Chinese Acts' then view each exemption notice)
- NAA: B6443 (265 photographs, 1899-1901 related to exemption applications under the *Chinese Act 1890*. See also: Sophie Couchman, 'Not so mug mugshot: Behind the portraits of Series B6443', <https://sophiecouchman.files.wordpress.com/2018/07/couchman-2004-not-to-mug-mugshots.pdf>)

The World Wars

Although official regulations barred those 'not substantially of European origin or descent' from serving during WWI and WWII we know men with Chinese ancestry succeeded.

- Chinese Museum, 'Chinese Anzacs', <https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/a-diverse-state/chinese-anzacs>
- Leigh McKinnon, 'Chinese Anzacs of the Loddon Mallee Region', Golden Dragon Museum: Bendigo, 2018. www.goldendragonmuseum.org/events/chinese-anzacs/download-ebook



◀ Image1: View of Cangdong village, Kaiping in southern China, 2019. Money earned by overseas Chinese helped improve life for families back in the village (Photograph by the author)

Alien registration

During both wars 'Aliens' (anyone not a British subject) had to register with the government. This included women married to aliens.

- NAA: MT269/1 (WWI-era registrations)
- NAA: B78 (WWII-era registrations)

Chinese-language newspapers

The Ballarat *Chinese Advertiser* (1856) was Australia's earliest Chinese-language newspaper, most were published from the turn of the twentieth century. They are digitised on Trove but are not reliable for keyword searching due to poor character recognition scanning.

- Tung Wah Newspaper Index (English language with names in Mandarin pinyin, <http://resources.chineseaustralia.org/tungwah/>)
- Kate Bagnall, 'Trove presents a new perspective on Australian history', www.nla.gov.au/stories/blog/trove/2015/02/19/early-chinese-newspapers

Community organisations

There are now over two hundred Chinese community organisations in Victoria. The earliest, the Kong Chew Society, was established in 1840s and is still operational. You can still contact these early organisations via mail or their social media profiles.

- **See Yup Society** (established 1854, district association for the Siyi area, Guangzhou): umbrella organisation for **Kong Chew Society** (Xinhui area), **Ning Yang Society** (Taishan area), **Hoy Ping Society** (Kaiping area) and **Yang Ping Society** (Enping area).
- 'Chinese Chamber of Commerce of New South Wales', Noel Butlin Archives Centre, <http://archivescollection.anu.edu.au/index.php/chinese-chamber-of-commerce-of-new-south-wales-deposit> (includes material related to the Kong Chew Society, most material in Cantonese)
- Mei Weiqiang, *A Brief History of the See Yup Society of Victoria, Australia (1854-2004)*, See Yup Society, c2016 (English translation).

- *Compendium of Kong Chew Society, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia*, Kong Chew Society, 2005 (traditional Chinese)

- **Lung Kong Association** (clan association for the Lau, Kwan, Cheung and Chiu clans)

- **Hung League**, also Yee Hing, Gee Hing (secret brotherhoods, anti-Qing dynasty, banned in China, became the **Chinese Masonic Society** in 1911)

- Cai Shaoqing, 'From mutual aid to public interest: Chinese secret societies in Australia' in S. Couchman, J. Fitzgerald & P. Macgregor (eds), *After the Rush: Regulation, Participation and Chinese communities in Australia 1860-1940*, 2004

- Kok Hu Jin (trans), *Hung Men Handbook*, Golden Dragon Museum, 2002

- **Chinese Nationalist Party of Victoria** and **Chinese Nationalist Party of Melbourne**, also Kuomintang (established in 1912)

- 'Chinese Australian History Collections Online', https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20150227195402/http://www.kuomintang.org.au/en/en_introduction.aspx (archived on Trove, information on the KMT archives and records of early Chinese Consulate)

- Mei-fen Kuo and Judith Brett, *Unlocking the History of The Australasian Kuo Min Tang 1911-2013*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013.

- Young Chinese League (established 1932, now mostly inactive)

- Significant collections held at the Chinese Museum.

- Les Youie (OAM) Collection, <https://arrow.latrobe.edu.au/store/3/4/5/5/1/public/youie/index.htm>.

Histories of Chinese community and their organisations:

- C.F. Yong, *New Gold Mountain: The Chinese in Australia 1901-1921*, Raphael Arts, 1977
- Mei-fen Kuo, *Making Chinese Australia: Urban Elites, Newspapers and the Formation* ▶▶

of *Chinese-Australian Identity, 1892-1912*, Monash University Press, 2013, <https://publishing.monash.edu/books/mca-9781921867965.html> (free)

- John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia*, University of NSW Press, 2007

Christianity

The number of Christian converts was not large but they were influential.

- Ian Welch, *Chinese missions to the Chinese in Australia and New Zealand, 1855-1900*, <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20070831184905/http://www.chaf.lib.latrobe.edu.au/welch/index.htm> (archived on Trove, lists of Chinese missionaries)
- May C. Poon, *Memoirs of a Chinese Catholic, Melbourne 1945-2001*, Spectrum Publications: Richmond, 2004

Sickness, death and burials

- Memorial tablets, See Yup Temple, South Melbourne (over ten thousand memorial tablets. Each tablet lists full name of deceased and their village and district of birth. Tablets are not dated. Almost all are men from See Yup (Siyi). Contact the Society to access their searchable database.
- *Chinese Memorials & Memories: The White Hills Cemetery – Bendigo*, Golden Dragon Museum: Bendigo, 2001
- Kok Hu Jin's cemetery books published by the Golden Dragon Museum (Kok has transcribed and interpreted Chinese gravestones from Ararat, Avoca, Beechworth, Bendigo, Campbell's Creek, Echuca, Eddington, Pennyweight Flat, Rutherglen, Vaughan, White Hills and Yackandandah cemeteries)
- Linda Brumley, Liu Bingquan and Zhao Xueru, 'Fading links to China: Ballarat's Chinese gravestones and associated records, 1854-1955', <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20070831190401/http://www.chaf.lib.latrobe.edu.au/brumley/brumley.htm> (archived on Trove, also includes: Chinese inquests, admissions to the Ballarat Hospital and Ballarat Benevolent Asylum)
- Chinese Heritage Interest Network, http://chinese-heritage.tripod.com/research_indexes.htm (Indexes, 1848-1912, of Chinese patients at various asylums, exhumation requests, prisoners with Chinese names, deaths in Melbourne Hospital)

Local histories and museums

Often hold indexes and publish about their Chinese communities. Don't forget the Chinese Museum, Melbourne (www.chinesemuseum.com.au) and Golden Dragon Museum, Bendigo (www.goldendragonmuseum.org)

- Leigh McKinnon, *Places associated with Bendigo's Historic Chinese Community*, Golden Dragon Museum: Bendigo, 2015
- Leigh McKinnon and Anita Jack, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Historic Figures in Bendigo's Chinese Community*, Golden Dragon Museum, 2015

Other online resources

- Chinese Australian Historical Images in Australia: <http://chia.chinesemuseum.com.au> (information about people and organisations as well as historical photographs)
- Chinese Heritage of Australian Federation: <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20070830035016/http://www.chaf.lib.latrobe.edu.au> (archived on Trove)

Diving deeper

In addition to published histories of Chinese in Australia many post-graduate theses are published online. These histories will help you understand more about your ancestor's lives and often discuss ordinary Chinese Australians.

Restrictions (and attempted restrictions) were placed on many aspects of Chinese Australian lives which often leave traces in the archives.

- Petitions against restrictions, see Anna Kyi, 'Finding the Chinese perspective', <https://prov.vic.gov.au/explore-collection/provenance-journal/provenance-2009/finding-chinese-perspective>.
- Chinese Protectorate system established under the 1857 *Act to regulate the residence of the Chinese Population in Victoria*
- Amendments to *Factories and Shops Act*, 1896-1915, constrained the activities of Chinese furniture makers and laundries
- Amendments to the *Pharmaceutical Chemists' Act* in 1925 that prevented Chinese herbalists from dispensing medicinal herbs
- Royal Commissions into the fruit and vegetable industry, early twentieth century

But mostly enjoy the research journey! ■

About the Author

Sophie is a professional historian and curator based in Melbourne with an expertise in Chinese Australian history. She has worked as curator at the Chinese Museum and the Immigration Museum, has run family history tours in Hong Kong and southern China and helped develop the Chinese-Australian Historical Images in Australia website. She was a founding member of the Chinese Australian Family Historians of Victoria (CAFHOV) and has edited two books for them: *Secrets, Silences and Sources: Five Chinese Australian Family Histories* and *Journeys into Chinese Australian History*.