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# Finding your Chinese roots

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## *Tips for tracing your Australian family's Chinese origins*

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For Australians whose Chinese ancestors arrived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tracing the family history back to China can be a real puzzle.

Whether you are simply curious about your Chinese origins or would like to visit your ancestor's home in China, there are two things you need to know – your Chinese ancestor's name in Chinese characters and their village and county of origin.

Here you will find some suggestions for using Australian records to find these critical pieces of information.

## Chinese origins

Most Chinese who arrived in Australia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came from the rural Pearl River Delta region of Guangdong province, south of the provincial capital of Guangzhou, north of Macau and inland from Hong Kong. A smaller number of Chinese migrants came from other parts of Guangdong province and from Fujian province (through the port of Xiamen, known historically as Amoy), as well as from other places such as Shanghai.

This paper concentrates on Cantonese migrants who came from the Pearl River Delta.

Cantonese migrants came from a number of different areas in the Pearl River Delta, including:

- Sam Yup (Sanyi, meaning the 'three districts'): Namhoi (Nanhai), Poonyu (Panyu) and Shuntak (Shunde)
- Heungshan (Xiangshan), later known as Chungshan (Zhongshan)
- Tongkun (Dongguan)
- Tsengshing (Zengcheng)

- Koyiu (Gaoyao) and Koming (Gaoming)
- Sze Yup (Siyi, meaning the ‘four districts’): Sunwui (Xinhui), Sunning (Xinning) or Toishan (Taishan), Hoiping (Kaiping) and Yanping (Enping).

The Cantonese migrants spoke a range of dialects including: standard Cantonese, Cantonese variations such as Shekki dialect, Longdu (Zhongshan Min) dialect, Sze Yup dialects such as Taishanese, and Hakka. The earlier Amoy Chinese spoke Hokkien.

## The big stumbling block

To successfully track your family back to China you ideally need your ancestor’s name and their village and district of origin in Chinese characters. If your family migrated to Australia more recently and this information is known within the family, you have a tremendous advantage. If you don’t have this information, you will need to try and work it out from records available in Australia. This can be very tricky.

Until the twentieth century there was no standard way of romanising the various Chinese languages and dialects. Because of this, and because Chinese in Australia spoke different sorts of Cantonese, there is a lot of variation in how personal and place names are recorded in Australian English-language sources. Only rarely are Chinese characters to be found. The discrepancies in how Chinese names were written down in colonial Australia are not necessarily an indication of racist or uncaring attitudes toward the Chinese, but more a reflection of the fact that nobody, including the Chinese themselves, knew how to spell the names ‘properly’ in English.

## Personal names

Chinese personal names usually comprise three characters, with one being the family name and two being the given name – for example, 譚梅玲 Tam Moyling. A few Chinese family names comprise two characters (e.g. O’Young, Seeto), and sometimes a given name comprises only one character.

Although the characters remain the same, the pronunciation of a name changes depending of the dialect spoken. For example, the two-character surname 司徒 is pronounced Situ in Mandarin, Seeto in Cantonese and Soohoo in Sze Yup. The common family name 陳 is pronounced Chen in Mandarin, Chan/Chun in Cantonese, Chin in Hakka, and Tan in Hokkien.

Chinese personal names were recorded in many different ways in Australian records and, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries at least, rarely was a name written down ‘correctly’. A person’s name might have been recorded with multiple spelling variations – for example, one early Sydney resident was recorded as Man Sue Bach, Mum Shou Pac, John Ah Shue Bach, John A. Sue Bach, John Ah Sue and John a Shue.

Because of the different word order (surname first in Chinese but last in English), many Chinese given names came to be used as surnames in English – for example, Wong Chun Bun might become known as Jimmy Chun Bun and his children registered under the surname Bun.

Many, many Chinese personal names also include ‘Ah’ or ‘A’. This represents the character 阿, which is a prefix added to a given name as a familiar or informal form of address, much like adding ‘ie’ or ‘y’ to the end of a name in English (Ann to Annie, Tom to Tommy).

While sometimes confusing, romanised versions of personal and place names can tell us helpful things. For example, personal names written with a ‘sl’ or ‘shl’ or ‘thl’ sound at the beginning (like Dang Bown Sluey or Slit Schin) suggest that these people were likely to be from Taishan, as this sound is particular to Sze Yup sub-dialects rather than standard Cantonese.

Or, a woman’s name that includes a ‘See’ or ‘Shee’ (氏) usually gives her father’s family name and indicates that the woman was married – a bit like the term *née*. Ham See, for example, would be a married woman who was born into the Ham (譚) family – Ham would be her father’s, not her husband’s, surname.

Emma Woo Louie has written on Chinese American names, much of which applies in the Australian context. Her book is *Chinese American Names: Tradition and Transition* (McFarland & Company, 2008). A preview of the book is available from Google Books. She has also published articles on the subject in the Chinese Historical Society of America’s journal *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*.

For more on overseas Chinese names see:

- ‘Chinese names’ on the *Chinese-Canadian Genealogy* website: [http://www.vpl.ca/ccg/Chinese\\_Names.html](http://www.vpl.ca/ccg/Chinese_Names.html)
- Kate Bagnall, *Golden Shadows on a White Land*, PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2006 – Section 4: Belonging (starts on p. 196): <http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/1412/4/04sections3%264.pdf>

- Kate Bagnall, ‘The trouble with spelling Chinese names’, *Tiger’s Mouth* [blog], 12 February 2013: <http://chineseaustralia.org/the-trouble-with-spelling-chinese-names/>
- Janis Wilton, *Golden Threads: The Chinese in Regional New South Wales 1850–1950*, New England Regional Art Museum, 2004
- Jon Kehrer, ‘Who was “John Chinaman”’, *The Ancestral Searcher*, vol. 24, no. 4, December 2001, pp. 201–205
- Jon Kehrer, ‘Honourable ancestors: My search for the Chinese connection’, *The Ancestral Searcher*, vol. 27, no. 4 December 2004, pp. 328–333
- Gary Presland, ‘Some difficulties in researching Chinese ancestry’, in *From Gold to Federation: Papers from the Fourth Victoria Family State Conference*, ed. Noelle Oke, Penfolk Publishing, Melbourne, 2001.

## Place names

The native place of many Chinese is recorded in Australian sources as Canton – which variably refers to the province of Guangdong or the capital city of Guangzhou. However, most migrants came from the rural counties outside the capital, rather than the city itself.

Unfortunately if ‘Canton’ is all the information you can find about your ancestor’s origins you will probably not be able to progress your research much further.

More occasionally county, city, town or even village names are recorded: Sunning, Sun Wui, Heung Shan, Amoy, Shekki, Kongmoon, Lee Yuan, Chuk Sau Yuen or Bak Shek, for example. Sometimes it’s easy to identify these places, sometimes it’s not. The smaller the place, the harder it can be to identify, but the more useful it will be if you eventually work out where it is.

The trick is to be able to translate from the old romanised version of a place name to how it is known today. The Cantonese city known in Mandarin today as Jiangmen (江門), for instance, might have been written Quong Moon, Kong Mun, or Kongmoon.

There are several words that often appear as the last syllable in village names that it can be useful to recognise:

- **choon or toon** – 村 *cun*, meaning ‘village’  
e.g. 南潮村 Nam Chew Toon
- **lee or lay** – 里 *li*, meaning ‘village’  
e.g. 南勝里 Nam Sing Lay
- **yuen** – 園 *yuan*, meaning ‘garden’  
e.g. 竹秀園 Chuk Sau Yuen.

You can use clues you find in other records, such as distance from a larger town or physical characteristics of the place, to help narrow down your search for your particular village. If you know your ancestor’s surname you can also cross-check village names with the surname. The following database of village names is useful for this purpose:

- Roots Village DB:  
<http://villagedb.friendsofroots.org/about.html>.

The ‘Location, location, location’ section of the Chinese Genealogy forum (<http://siyigenealogy.proboards.com/>) is an excellent place to read up how others have gone about identifying and locating their ancestral villages.

If your ancestor came from Taishan, Xinhui or Zhongshan counties, you might find relevant information in the material produced by a project undertaken by the Asian Library at the University of British Columbia that identified the village and town of origin of Chinese migrants to Canada. Many migrants to Australia came from the same places as those who went to Canada. See:

- <http://asian.library.ubc.ca/special-projects/mapping-the-villages-and-towns-recorded-in-the-register-of-chinese-immigration-to-canada-from-1885-to-1949/>.

## Australian sources to consult

The following records are places where you are more likely to find personal names and village origins in Chinese characters.

### Gravestones

A headstone in Chinese often provides the person's name and place of birth in China. See:

- Doris Jones, *Remembering the Forgotten: Chinese Gravestones in Rookwood Cemetery 1917–1949*, Invenet, Sydney, 2003:  
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn1022231>
- Linda Brumley, Liu Bingquan and Zhao Xueru, *Fading links to China: Ballarat's Chinese Gravestones and Associated Records 1854–1955*, on the Chinese Heritage of Australian Federation website at:  
<http://arrow.latrobe.edu.au/store/3/4/5/5/1/public/brumley/brumley.htm>
- Kok Hu Jin's numerous books describing and translating Chinese gravestones around Australia, published by the Golden Dragon Museum at Bendigo
- 'Chinese tombstones', *House of Chinn* website:  
<http://houseofchinn.com/ChineseTombstones.html>.

### Birth, death and marriage records

You should obtain Australian marriage and death certificates for the original Chinese ancestor, as well as birth certificates for their children and death certificates if the children died young. Sometimes a Chinese groom or father will have signed his name in Chinese characters and the birthplace will be more specific than just 'Canton' or 'China'.

### Immigration, travel and alien registration records

Immigration and travel records, as well as alien registration records, might contain details of people's place of origin and their name in Chinese. Twentieth-century travel documents issued to Chinese Australians under the Immigration Restriction Act and related records are held by the National Archives of Australia. 'Aliens' (people who were not British subjects) were required to register with the government from World War I. These records are also held by the National Archives and can contain Chinese signatures, information about place of birth and so on.

See:

- Kate Bagnall, 'A legacy of White Australia', National Archives of Australia website, <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/publications/papers-and-podcasts/immigration/white-australia.aspx>
- Paul Jones, *Chinese–Australian Journeys: Records on Travel, Migration, and Settlement, 1860–1975*, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, 2005, <http://guides.naa.gov.au/chinese-australian-journeys/> (pdf available online for free).

## Naturalisation records

Some Chinese migrants became naturalised British subjects in the colonial period, and their application forms and certificates can include details such as place of origin and their original signature in Chinese. Naturalisation applications, rejected applications and cancelled and confiscated naturalisation certificates are found in state archives and in the National Archives of Australia.

## Chinese newspapers

From the 1890s, Australia's Chinese communities had their own Chinese-language newspapers, including the *Chinese Australian Herald* and the *Tung Wah Times*. The *Tung Wah Times* has been indexed in English, which allows you to search without knowing Chinese. The index can be helpful in identifying articles that might include an ancestor's name in Chinese.

The major early Australian Chinese-language newspapers are also available through the National Library of Australia's discovery service, Trove. If you have located names in Chinese characters you can search the newspapers even if you only have basic Chinese language skills. See:

- *Tung Wah Newspaper Index*: <http://resources.chineseaustralia.org/tungwah/>
- Kate Bagnall, 'Early Chinese newspapers', *Trove blog*, <https://www.nla.gov.au/blogs/trove/2015/02/19/early-chinese-newspapers>.

## Chinese student records

In the early twentieth century, young Chinese were allowed to come to Australia to study. Most who came were the children or relatives of people already living here. These students were issued with special Chinese student passports that included their name and place of origin in Chinese characters as well as in English. Many of these passports are held in immigration files in the National Archives of Australia. On how you might be able to use these passports to identify your ancestor's village of origin, see:

- Kate Bagnall, 'Back to school', *Tiger's Mouth* [blog], 3 February 2010, <http://chineseaustralia.org/back-to-school/>
- Kate Bagnall, 'Taking my own advice', *Tiger's Mouth* [blog], 15 November 2010, <http://chineseaustralia.org/taking-my-own-advice-finding-home-villages-using-chinese-student-records/>.

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