



Fannie Chok See, James Choy Hing and their three children, Dorothy May, James and Pauline, in Sydney, 1905. James Choy Hing was from Ngoi Sha village in Chungshan. Image courtesy of the National Archives of Australia: SP244/2, N1950/2/4918

Cantonese connections

The origins of Australia's early Chinese migrants

By Dr Kate Bagnall

For Australians researching their Chinese family history, discovering their ancestors' hometown and Chinese name is significant.

In a quiet residential street in the inner-city Sydney suburb of Glebe, on a large grassy block that stretches down towards the harbour, sits the Sze Yup Kwan Ti Temple. Built between 1898 and 1904, the Sze Yup Temple is one of two heritage-listed temples in Sydney. The second, the Yiu Ming

Temple in Retreat Street, Alexandria, was opened a few years later, in 1909. In contrast to the Glebe temple, the Yiu Ming Temple is tucked away at the end of a double row of terraces, also owned by the Yiu Ming Society, all of which are now surrounded by busy commercial buildings and apartment blocks.

Family grouped in front of their home in New South Wales, circa 1880–1910.
Image courtesy of the State Library of Victoria

In the early years of the 20th century, when the two temples were built, the Chinese population in Sydney and surrounding suburbs was just over 3800, of whom about 200 were women and girls. In Australia as a whole, there were about 33,000 people of Chinese ancestry. Chinese communities around Australia were diverse – in occupation, politics, class and religion, as well as in dialect and hometown. Most Chinese people in Australia traced their origins to the province of Kwangtung, often referred to as Canton, but the two temples reflect the significance of particular hometown ties. The Glebe temple was for people from the Sze Yup, or Four Counties, region of Kwangtung, while the Alexandria temple was for people from the counties of Koyiu and Koming.



Glossary of places

English	Mandarin <i>pinyin</i>	Chinese
Amoy	Xiamen	廈門
Chungshan	Zhongshan	中山
Fukien	Fujian	福建
Heungshan	Xiangshan	香山
Hoiping	Kaiping	開平
Kongmoon	Jiangmen	江門
Koyiu	Gaoyao	高要
Koming	Gaoming	高明
Kwangchow	Guangzhou	廣州
Kwanghoi	Guanghai	廣海
Kwangtung	Guangdong	廣東
Namhoi	Nanghai	南海
Punyu	Panyu	番禺
Sam Yup	Sanyi	三邑
Shekki	Shiqi	石岐
Shuntak	Shunde	順德
Sunning	Xinning	新寧
Sunwui	Xinhui	新會
Sze Yup	Siyi	四邑
Toishan	Taishan	台山
Tsengshing	Zengcheng	增城
Tungkun	Dongguan	東莞
Yanping	Enping	恩平

For Australians researching their Cantonese family history, knowing their ancestors' hometown in Kwangtung is also significant. Unlike Australia and Britain, in Kwangtung there were no official records of birth, death and marriage, nor were there parish records. Genealogies of the male line were kept within families and clans, which were tied to particular counties, towns and villages. To trace Cantonese ancestry back beyond an immigrant ancestor therefore requires identifying their county and village of origin in China, as well as their name in Chinese.

Most 19th-century Chinese emigrants were from the southern coastal provinces of Kwangtung and Fukien. Around 3500 Fukienese came to the Australian colonies from the port of Amoy as indentured labourers in the mid 19th century, but by far the majority of Chinese who arrived in Australia were Cantonese from Kwangtung. They primarily came from rural counties in the densely populated Pearl River Delta, which surrounds the provincial capital of Kwangchow, also known in English as Canton. The Delta is a maze of rivers, canals and streams, and until the 20th century, these provided the main form of transportation. Emigrants would make their way from their village to a local river port, then to a larger river or seaport – such as Kongmoon, Shekki, Canton, Kwanghoi or Macau – from which they would travel on to Hong Kong for the voyage to Australia.

Immigrants to Australia came from counties across the Pearl River Delta. Close to the provincial capital of Canton were the wealthier Sam Yup, or Three Counties, of Namhoi, Punyu and Shuntak. To the east of Canton were Tsengshing and Tungkun. To the south was Heungshan (later Chungshan), with the Portuguese colony of Macau at its southernmost tip. To the west were Koyiu and Koming. And to the south-west were the Sze Yup counties of Sunwui, Sunning (later Toishan), Hoiping and Yanping. Within these counties a number of different dialects were spoken,

some of which were mutually unintelligible. The majority of Australian-Chinese spoke either a version of standard Cantonese, as spoken in Canton, Macau and Hong Kong, or a variant of Sze Yup dialect.

In Australian records, such as marriage or birth certificates, the native place of Chinese people was often simply recorded as 'China' or 'Canton'. More occasionally, county, town or village names are recorded, but very seldom are these given in Chinese characters. To complicate matters, until the 20th century, there was no standard way of Romanising Chinese, particularly the local dialects spoken in Kwangtung, so spellings in English are rarely consistent. For example, the name of the river port of Kongmoon might also have been written down as Kong Moon, Quong Moon or Kong Mun.

As such, using Australian records to trace Cantonese ancestors back to their home village in China is often a difficult task. There are, however, some records that can provide the crucial information needed. The gravestones of many Chinese who died in Australia in the 19th and early 20th centuries include their name and place of birth in Chinese characters. Immigration, naturalisation and alien registration records might also record a Chinese place of origin. And digitised newspapers in Trove, including early Chinese-language newspapers such as the *Chinese Australian Herald* and *Tung Wah Times*, can also provide vital clues. ◦

Kate's research tips:



In addition to her 'roots searching' tour to Guangdong and Hong Kong, Kate recommends the following websites for Chinese Australian family historians:

- Chinese Genealogy Forum: <http://siyigenealogy.proboards.com>
- Guide to Chinese Australian Family History by the Chinese Museum, Melbourne: <https://chinesemuseum.com.au/>
- The Tiger's Mouth (Kate Bagnall's Chinese Australian history blog): www.chineseaustralia.org
- Chinese Australian Family Historians of Victoria: <http://www.cafhov.com>
- Golden Dragon Museum in Bendigo: <https://www.goldendragonmuseum.org>
- Chinese Heritage Association of Australia in Sydney: <https://www.chineseheritage.org.au>
- Chinese Australian Historical Society in Sydney: <https://chineseaustralianhistory.org>

About the author

Dr Kate Bagnall is a Canberra-based historian who specialises in Chinese Australian history. Currently an ARC DECRA Research Fellow at the University of Wollongong, she has written widely on the history of Chinese Australian families, women and children. For the past three years, Kate, together with Dr Sophie Couchman, has led a 'roots searching' tour to Guangdong and Hong Kong for Chinese Australian family historians. Her website is www.katebagnall.com.

What's that thingamajig?

Answer: Convict leg iron guard

This improvised handcrafted leather ankle cuff was made to protect a convict's ankle from leg irons, which were extremely painful and caused bruising and skin lesions.

The cuff features a serrated edge for comfort, and holes for lacing together. The straps either side attached over the leg iron ring. Because it does not feature the broad arrow stamp of government property, the cuff was probably made illegally by a convict who had leatherworking skills.

Made between 1819 and 1848, the guard was found during restoration works at Hyde Park Barracks in 1979. It is the only known leg guard that survives in Australia. ◦



Image and information courtesy of Sydney Living Museums's Hyde Park Barracks archaeology collection, HPB/UF125.