

Chinese American Genealogical Resources

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There are many ways to get started researching your Chinese American roots. Here are some tips and hints, from basic to complex, that I have found helpful over the years. Please feel free to email me if you have other suggestions or questions. Please note that because of the pandemic, some of the in-person resources may have limited hours at this time.

In the U.S., most Chinese Americans today are immigrants who have arrived since the Immigration Act of 1965 created new opportunities, and their descendants. They will have fewer government documents to examine because there is no Chinese Exclusion Act in effect today, but one can still use many of the same genealogical methods.

Start if you can by talking to family members and friends, and others.

As with all groups, family members can provide you with a great starting point regarding names of your ancestors, when they immigrated, where they lived, etc. For Chinese families who immigrated during the Exclusion era (1882-1943) and beyond, it is a good idea to confirm with elder family members that the family name you have known all your life is really the ancestral name. It's also a great way to try to learn about potential ancestral villages, find if there are documents that the family has, etc. Ideally you can learn the approximate date and possibly the ship ancestors arrived on (it will help find ship manifests and other documents).

Documents, especially for those who immigrated before 1965, that you can find online, especially on Ancestry, but some on Family Search and other sites, include:

Ship manifests, which are great resources for information on where people came from and where they were going – be sure to check the second pages that are often there. There are also some special accompanying records for Chinese, called *“Chinese Passenger Arrivals and Disposition, 1903-1947”* that are on Ancestry.com. *These are helpful in that one can often trace the journey that immigrants took through the system that required them to go through extensive questioning to verify their ability to immigrate, at Angel Island in San Francisco Bay or other ports.*

Birth, death, and marriage records are extremely useful for finding dates and names, as well as mothers' maiden names, which will help you find new branches of your tree but do keep in mind the family member who reports this information does not always have the correct information.

Census records are very helpful for family information, country of origin, etc., and the information varies. For example, the 1910, 1920, and 1930 censuses have the important year of immigration; the 1940 one does not, replacing it with information on previous addresses and annual salaries. You can also go from page to page to see who one's neighbors were and see what kind of work they did and countries of origin they had. I discovered a substantial community of rooming houses in Cleveland full of Chinese laundry workers in 1910!

Naturalization, draft, and other records have useful family information and the restrictions to immigration created all kinds of useful information, especially for those who came during the Chinese Exclusion Acts.

Case files, which often became part of Alien files (**A-files**), are a key resource. They will have information on immigration, other family members, any questioning the immigrant faced, testimony from relatives, invaluable photographs, government correspondence, etc. They are generally stored at the NARA center closest to where the person immigrated through – San Bruno (the “San Francisco center”) for Hawaii and much of the west coast, as well as Seattle, Chicago, St. Paul, and I believe New York. Ancestry has also added **case file databases**, some volunteer created, to these files from several National Archives branches to their search function. This covers at least the volunteer-created list of close to 70,000 records for San Bruno and 18,500 from New York – I don’t know if the other centers have been included yet. San Bruno (and perhaps other centers) house **duplicate certificates of identity**, documents such as the one below for my paternal grandfather that contain information on admission status, age, ship, date of arrival, distinguishing features, and case file number. These were issued when the immigrant was released from detention and finally allowed to enter the United States.



For those who became naturalized citizens or went through the “confession program” in the 1950s and 1960s to get their real family names back, the case files became A-files (some never had case files, but A-files were created later. Archivists Elizabeth Burnes and Marisa Louie Lee wrote an article about the A-files that you can [download](#). There will be an A-File number on documents such as naturalization petitions and certificates

The National Archives is in the process of making the A-files for those who immigrated through west coast ports available for free if you bring your own scanner (available remotely for a copying/scanning charge). Currently, the files for those born in 1910 or earlier are available at NARA San Bruno. Those for people born from 1911-1915 might also be available. The records are supposed to be released in five-year groups 100 years after dates of birth but they are running behind, so the 1916-1920 group should also be released soon if they haven’t been already. Search at www.archives.gov/research.

For files that aren’t at San Bruno yet, the **US Citizenship and Immigration Services genealogy website**: <https://www.uscis.gov/genealogy> - also provides access to many A-files, numbers 8 million and under.

There is a whole process to find these files that is complicated but worth following, but unfortunately there is a fee to search and then another fee to get copies of the records. <https://www.uscis.gov/g-639> has information on how to find A-files above 8 million through the Freedom of Information Act program. There is no charge to search for these files if you follow the process they describe.

Search tips and online resources

When **searching on Ancestry.com** (available at many libraries for free but you can't email users about their family trees), **Familysearch.com** (free but doesn't have as many Chinese American resources) **and other sites**, if you know specific dates, use them, but at least at first, don't use the "exact" settings unless you are sure. Government officials and people who transcribe for the indexes often make mistakes, so allow latitude in your searches. There are often variations in romanizing Chinese names. For example, my maternal grandfather's name has shown up in documents as Ao Yang, Owyang, Ouyang, and Ow Young. Sometimes people's names totally change, so you may need to use different methods such as finding a census for a town or neighborhood and then looking block by block. It's tedious but can produce results. Use the card catalog feature under Search to browse by databases. Look at the source information to see the dates covered and other information. Within Ancestry, it is also helpful to use the Support Center, Learning Center, and Message Boards to try to find answers. Many local libraries offer online access

Use **free resources available online**. Free sites include the very thorough cyndislist.com, which has links to hundreds of specific research pages (click on "categories"); familysearch.org; which is free but doesn't have some of the Chinese immigration records that Ancestry.com has; stevemorse.org, a search engine to passenger lists, census, and other records, Google and other search engines (Steve Morse has a terrific guide to finding specific census pages by address here: <https://stevemorse.org/census/unified.html> and many other great resources. China websites on Family Search: https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/China_Websites

Siyi Genealogy houses extensive bulletin boards about Chinese genealogy, especially those from Guangdong Province and the siyi (sei yup in Cantonese; four counties) area around Toishan: <https://siyigenealogy.proboards.com/>

Family Search has a good guide to Chinese resources including jiapu and zupu (family and clan genealogy books from China) at <https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/chinese-family-tree-jiapu/>. Chineseancestor.org also has a good explanation of zupus and jiapus at <http://chineseancestor.org/culture/zupu/>. The Family History Centers of the Mormon church provide access to their extensive collection of zupu at their main center in Salt Lake City, and My China Roots (www.mychinaroots.com) is also making a large number available online, some for a fee.

Legacy Tree Genealogy has good tips to get started: <https://www.legacytrees.com/blog/3-tips-chinese-genealogy-research>.

As always, keep an open mind but don't believe everything you read, especially when it comes to ancestors and family relationships described online. Try to find sources that use strong documentation, not just hearsay.

Pedigree charts help you organize information on your ancestors. Start with you or the person you want to track on line 1 (you?!), put your father in position #2 and mother on #3, and work your way up the

chart. A typical page can hold your ancestors through great grandparents – use additional sheets as needed. A **family group sheet** provides information on one family – the parents and children. You can print these from family tree software or go online - several different forms are available for free downloads from Misbach at <http://misbach.org/free-pdf-charts.html> and the National Genealogical Society at <https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/free-resources/charts/> (free registration required).

Keep a log about your research, both what you find and what you can't find. **Document** where or from whom you got the information (people, publications, URLs, etc.), so you can check back with it if necessary and reference the sources to help other researchers. Keep track of people you talk to, including email or phone info. Misbach also has those forms.

To develop **family trees**, you can use free online apps like geni.com, which allows you to link with family members from different branches, or pay for commercial software which resides on your computer. Many people naturally have privacy concerns, so they do not list living people on online apps, which can make it hard for your research, but these are helpful for putting ancestors on and for determining how one is related. For a desktop-based application, I use Roots Magic, at rootsmagic.com, but there are also others like Family Tree Maker. These apps have “relationship calculators” so you can figure how two people in the tree are related.

Moral and Research Support

Create or join networks or organizations. I moderate a Yahoo group for people who are Owyangs – we have members from around the world. I also moderate a **Chinese American Family History online group** (<https://groups.io/g/chineseamericanfamilyhistory>; email me if you'd like to join) which has a lot of useful files to download.

In northern and southern California (but accessible from anywhere through their online programs), there are Chinese American genealogy groups that meet on a regular basis. Websites are <https://bacgg.org/> for the Bay Area Chinese Genealogy Group and <https://www.chinesefamilyhistory.org/> for the Chinese Family History Group, located in Southern California. Please let me know if you know of groups elsewhere in the country. CFHG has put together “A Guide for Researching Your Chinese Family History,” a helpful DVD also available online. <https://www.chinesefamilyhistory.org/guide.html>.

Find other family members who like to do this research. I have a cousin who loves to document our family information in beautiful scrapbooks. I try to share information online. We and other cousins are a great team! **Reunions** are great. I organized one on my Gong (dad's) side, and through my second cousins, once removed who attended, I learned about my grandparents' time with them at their laundry, before my grandparents started their own one. One cousin even found the first photo I have ever seen of my great-great grandfather, found while researching her grandfather. A distant cousin at an Owyang (mom's side) reunion brought me a photograph of my family we had never seen, because our families knew each other, and we have developed huge family trees for everyone to update. Seemingly distant cousins' research can often be helpful for yours.

Genealogists are usually happy to provide advice and help you get past your “brick walls.” Join local and state genealogical societies. There are national groups such as the National Genealogical Society (www.ngsgenealogy.org/), which offers a lot of online classes and other resources. These organizations

are great for learning about things like DNA research. Facebook groups on genetic genealogy, specific research topics, software, etc. abound.

Other genealogists specializing in Chinese American research include Amy Chin in New York City (genealogy@thinkchinatown.org); Marisa Louie Lee (marisalouie@gmail.com) in San Francisco, who specializes in 19th and 20th century immigration and naturalization records, Chinese Exclusion, and archival research; Alice Kane, formerly at the New England Genealogical Society, put together a very thorough guide to Chinese American genealogy at <https://www.americanancestors.org/education/learning-resources/read/chinese-american-guide>, Trish Hackett Nicola in Seattle, who publishes www.ChineseExclusionFiles.com, a terrific blog about the Chinese immigration files at the National Archives in Seattle, and Linda Yip in Saskatchewan, who is an expert on Chinese Canadian research <https://past-presence.com/>. Henry Tom doesn't have a website, but he organizes very helpful 2-3 day conferences in Las Vegas on many aspects of Chinese American genealogy. You can email him at henry.tom@cox.net to find out when the next ones will be.

Helpful resources

The **National Archives** in San Bruno has about 90,000 case files from about 1900 to 1944, most for Chinese immigrants: sanbruno.archives@nara.gov, 650-238-3501, hours by appointment, as well as thousands of A-files. Contact them ahead of time and let them know what info you have, if you know things like arrival date, etc., and they will try to help you. **National Archives' main search page**, <https://catalog.archives.gov/>, will tell you most of the files that exist, where to find them, and who to contact, but is still catching up on basic case files. It has many Alien files (aka A-files) in its index. The Seattle site also has many Chinese Exclusion era files (see Trish Hackett Nicola above for more details).

The **National Archives** has an extensive repository of many different Chinese-related files at <https://www.archives.gov/research/chinese-americans>, and they have a list of links here: <https://www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/ethnic-heritage.html#asian>.

Find a Grave: www.findagrave.com – has cemetery listings from all over, even photographs of some gravestones. I have had amazing results when looking for a gravestone by posting what I am searching for. Within a few days, volunteers have posted photos. I have returned the favor by posting photos from local cemeteries. **Family History Centers** have great resources and helpful staff – the Oakland center has a Chinese research specialist.

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Oakland_California_FamilySearch_Library.

Local Chinese American and Asian American historical organizations like the Museum of Chinese in America in New York, Chinese Historical Society of America in San Francisco, Chinese American Museum of Los Angeles, Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience in Seattle, Chinese American Museum of Chicago, The Mississippi Delta Chinese Heritage Museum in Cleveland, Mississippi, the Locke Chinese School Museum in the Sacramento Delta, and many more have programs and resources.

A good timeline of Chinese American history from the University of California can be found here: <https://bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/chinese-immigration-to-the-united-states-1884-1944/timeline.html>

Kanopy.com has many documentaries available to stream for anyone with a library card. It includes Felicia Lowe's excellent films, *Carved in Silence*, about the Angel Island Immigration Station; *China: Land of My Father*, about Felicia's journey to China shortly after it opened up in the 1970s; and *Chinese Couplets*, about her quest to learn more about her mother's immigration story and father's time in Cuba. *Chinese Couplets* shows the challenges Felicia had in getting her mother to talk about her past. Search for "Chinese American" for many other fine films, including Paula Williams Madison's life-affirming story, *Finding Samuel Lowe*, about searching for her Chinese grandfather who had children including Paula's mother from his time in Jamaica, then returned to China.

Here is a link to the movie about the Chinese who survived the wreck of *Titanic*, called [The Six](#). It was released in 2021, first in China, and I hope it will be available for streaming someday.

The Motherland

Friends of Roots (<http://www.friendsofroots.org/>) organizes trips for youth and adults to home villages in China in Guangdong Province and has great resources on their website including the Village Database, an amazing resource that helps identify ancestral villages by looking at last names. Henry Tom, mentioned above, organizes conferences and journeys to Guangdong Province. Unfortunately, the pandemic has put these programs on hold, but it's worthwhile to check back from time to time.

My Chinese Roots (<https://www.mychinaroots.com/>) has researchers in China who have extensive connections and will help you find your village, for a fee. They also have excellent resources on their website.

Feel free to ask me questions and visit my website (my daughter is updating it and it will be mobile compatible soon). Grant Din, grant@tonaidin.net, www.tonaidin.net.