

Beginning Steps to Finding Your Chinese Ancestors

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Why Family History?

“A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.” —Marcus Garvey

Begin

Collect information from the Elders in your family. Interview them asking questions about what they know and remember about the family. Preserve this information, by writing it down, using video or audio to record interviews. Scan documents and photos.

If the goal is to locate the family genealogy book (jiapu). The following items must be identified:

- Surname Character
- Name(s) of Ancestral Village

Once a village location and surname character have been identified then we can look for the clan genealogy which contains a written record of generations of ancestry back to the founding ancestor. This record may contain 20 or more generations of the family.

Questions

Possible questions to ask family members.

- Where is the Ancestral Home located? What is the nearest Market Town or city?
- Where is the Ancestral Hall?
- Where are our ancestors buried? Is there a family cemetery?
- Do we have a family genealogy book (jiapu 家譜)? Who has this book?
- Does our family use generational names? Where is our generational poem?
- Who was the first person in our family to come from China?
- About when did he come to the United States or Canada? Where did he arrive?
- Has our family been associated with a Benevolent Association?
- Do you have any letters or photos?
- What is your full name, including alternate names? When were you born?
- What are the names of your parents? When and where were they born?
- What are the names of your siblings? When and where were they born?
- Who were your grandparents? When and where were they born?

Make time to ask the family elders about any family stories or memories. These questions should be open-ended and allow for a longer response.

Things to look for at home that may have clues about the family:

- Photos
- Letters
- Announcement cards
- Newspaper clippings
- Passports
- Citizenship records
- Birth, Marriage and Death Certificates
- Tombstones, funeral records
- Death notices, obituaries
- Family Association records
- Wedding announcements

Names, Dates & Places

Chinese names begin with the family name first, followed by the personal names. The personal names may consist of a generational family name which is identified by all the children from a particular generation of the family have the same generational name, derived from a generational poem.

Chinese name, date and place formats:

- Names – Most important name first
 - First the family name, surname or clan name (character)
 - Women use their maiden surname or family surname throughout their lives (character)
 - Second and third names are usually personal names. One of these may also be a generational name, typically used for males.
- Dates – Largest to smallest
 - First the year, followed by the month, then the date
- Places – Largest to smallest
 - First the country, followed by the province, the county, town or village

The goal is to gather all family information including names, dates and places of life events. Once the immigrant ancestor has been identified, records containing details about the origins of this ancestor need to be searched. At this point two pieces of information are crucial in order to begin research in China. These are the family name character and the ancestral village

location. Depending on when your family left China there are different approaches to locating this information.

Background: History of China, History of Chinese in America

These periods of time include political and cultural turmoil, unsettled home situations, and the need to financially support extended family members.

Before 1943 – Chinese could not become American citizens. There were many Chinese living and doing business in the United States. Immigration records may contain information about the family name character and the village location.

After 1943 the Magnuson Act ended 62 years of Chinese exclusion. After this time Chinese people in the United States could go through the process to become naturalized citizens. Naturalization records may be helpful.

Chinese Names in America - Challenges

- How does the name sound? Use phonetic spelling
- “Ah” sometimes combined with given name
- Family name may be listed first or last
- A personal name may be mistaken for the Family name
- Cantonese and other dialects

Chinese family name character - Challenges

- Traditional Chinese or Simplified Chinese

English Spelling of Chinese Family Name

- Wades-Giles (1859)
- Pinyin (1958)
- Yale (WWII)
- Williams (1865) Romanize Cantonese

Records that may list the Family Name Character and the Ancestral Village Name

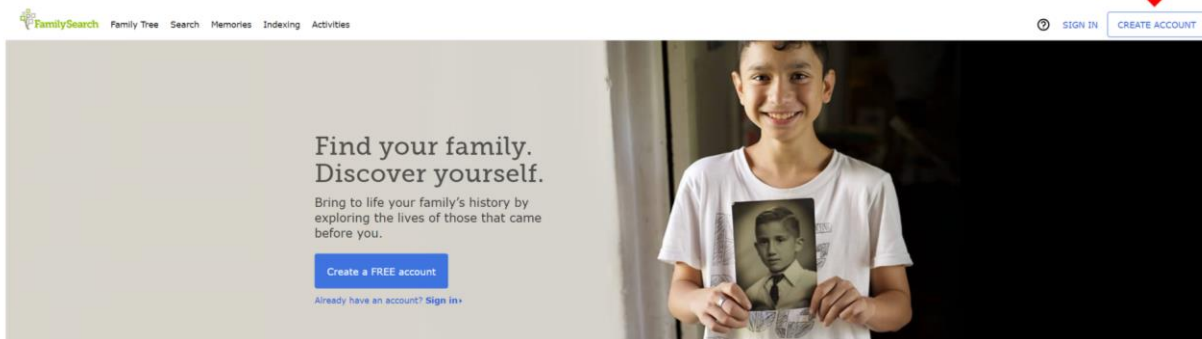
- Tombstones
- Immigration records (A-Files)
- Benevolent Associations

Records in the United States that may contain clues about your family

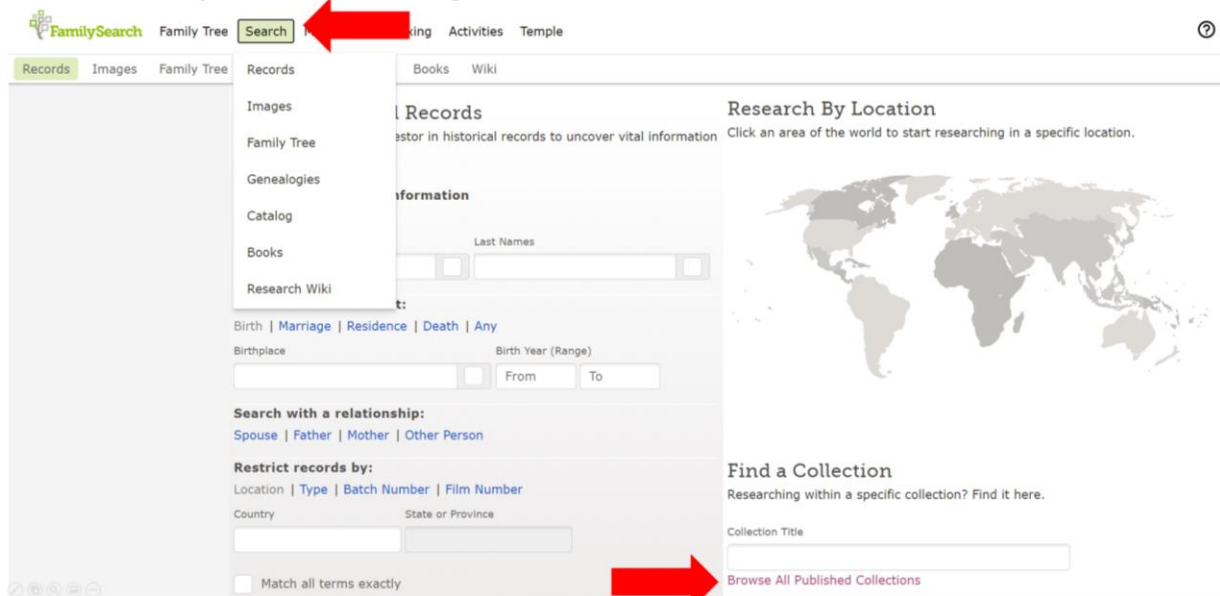
- Passenger Lists
- Immigration Files (A-Files)
- Business and City Directories
- US Federal Census records

- State Census records
- Military records
- Vital records
- Social Security Death Index
- Cemetery and Funeral Home records

FamilySearch.org – Free Contains Digital Images & Indexes



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Click on “Browse All Published Collections”

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- Other 9
- Pacific Islands 22
- South America 133
- United Kingdom and Ireland 223
- United States of America 1,581

Date

- Pre 1700 542
- 1700 - 1749 671
- 1750 - 1799 895
- 1800 - 1849 1,441
- 1850 - 1899 2,311
- 1900 - 1949 2,367
- 1950 to present 1,240

Historical Record Collections

Showing 1-100 of 3,025 Collections. Show All

Title	Records	Last Updated
Alabama Births and Christenings, 1881-1930	165,607	Mar 17, 2020
Alabama Civil War Service Records of Confederate Soldiers, 1861-1865	1,213,534	Apr 20, 2012
Alabama Civil War Service Records of Union Soldiers, 1861-1865	31,582	Apr 20, 2012
Alabama County Marriages, 1809-1950	5,935,455	Jan 15, 2020
Alabama County Marriages, 1818-1936	6,764	Jan 17, 2020
Alabama Deaths and Burials, 1881-1952	75,889	Jan 19, 2020
Alabama Deaths, 1908-1974	1,875,674	Nov 30, 2020
Alabama Estate Files, 1830-1976	25,296	Dec 11, 2013
Alabama Marriages, 1816-1957	797,937	Mar 25, 2020
Alabama Probate Records, 1809-1985	Browse Images	Feb 19, 2013
Alabama State Census, 1855	34,978	Oct 9, 2018
Alabama State Census, 1866	243,781	Dec 12, 2011
Alabama Voter Registration and Poll Tax Cards, 1834-1981	498,196	Feb 9, 2021
Alabama, Census of Confederate Veterans, 1907, 1921, 1927	20,403	Dec 21, 2016
Alabama, Church Records, 1831-1994	11,048	Mar 11, 2020

Browse by State, then click on collection of interest. The collections with a camera image contain actual images. The collections without the images are indexes only.

FamilySearch.org, Chinese specific collections:

California, Chinese Partnerships and Departures from San Francisco, 1893-1943

California, San Diego, Chinese Passenger and Crew Lists, 1905-1923

California, San Francisco Chinese passenger lists, 1882-1947

California, San Francisco, Register of Chinese Immigrant Court Cases and Foreign Seaman Tax Cards, 1883-1924

Hawaii State Archives, Chinese Immigration Labor Permit Records, 1893-1898

Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Case Files of Chinese Immigrants, 1900-1923

United States, California, San Francisco, Records of Chinese Laborers Returning to the US, 1882-1888

FamilySearch.org, General collections:

United States Census, 1790-1940

Passenger Lists

Immigration Records

United States City and Business Directories

Military Discharge Records & Military Draft Registration Records

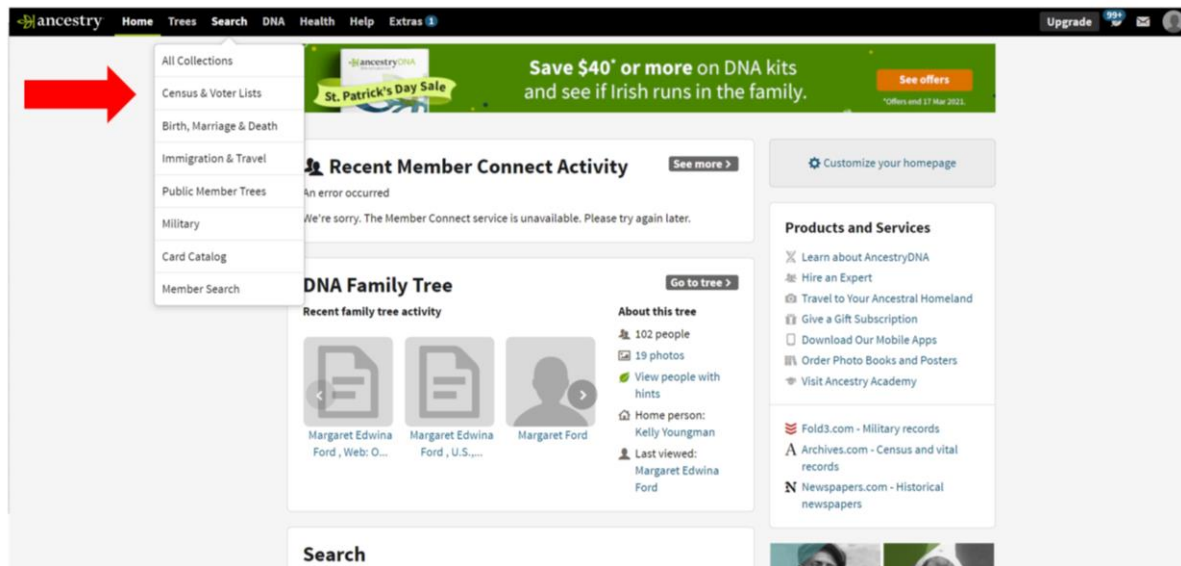
Birth, Marriage and Death records for many states

United States Social Security Death Index

Funeral Home & Cemetery Records, also search Findagrave.com

Citizenship & Naturalization Records

Ancestry.com – Subscription Site Contains Digital Images & indexes



At Ancestry.com, you can search by record category: Census, Birth, Marriage & Death, Immigration, Military.

Ancestry.com, Chinese specific collections:

- California, U.S., Chinese Arrival Case Files Index, 1884-1940
- California, U.S., Mortuary Records of Chinese Decedents, 1870-1933
- California, U.S., Index to Chinese Exclusion Case Files, 1903-1944
- Hawaii, U.S., Certificates of Identification for Chinese Arrivals, 1895-1898
- Hawaii, U.S., Index to Chinese Exclusion Case Files, 1903-1944
- New York, U.S., Index to Chinese Exclusion Case Files, 1898-1943
- North Dakota and Washington, U.S., Chinese Arriving Passenger Arrivals and Disposition, 1903-1944
- Portland, Oregon, U.S., Chinese Immigrant Landing Records and Applications for Admission, 1882-1903
- San Francisco, California, U.S., Registers of Chinese Laborers Returning to the U.S., 1882-1888
- San Francisco, California, U.S., Chinese Arriving Passenger Arrivals and Disposition, 1903-1947
- U.S., Naval Intelligence Personnel Duty Locations and China Muster Rolls, 1942-1945
- U.S., Chinese Immigration Case Files, 1883-1923
- Vancouver, British Columbia, Manifests of Chinese Arrivals, 1906-1912, 1929-1941

Ancestry.com, General collections:

- United States Census, 1790-1940
- Passenger Lists
- Immigration & Emigration Books
- City and Area Directories

Military Draft, Enlistment & Service Records
Birth, Marriage and Death records for many states
United States Social Security Applications and Claim Index
Death, Burial Cemetery & Obituaries, also search Findagrave.com
Citizenship & Naturalization records
Border Crossings & Passports

Chinese Genealogy Resources:

The A-Files: Finding Your Immigrant Ancestor

(<https://www.archives.gov/files/publications/prologue/2013/spring/a-files.pdf>)

Getting Started in Chinese Genealogy, Linda Yip (<https://past-presence.com/product/getting-started-in-chinese-genealogy/>)

Chinese Family History Group of Southern California

(<https://www.chinesefamilyhistory.org/>)

Bay Area Chinese Genealogy Group (<https://bacgg.org/>)

Chinese Historical Society of America (<https://chsa.org/>)

Ancestors in the Americas (<http://www.cetel.org/discover.html>)

Chinese-American Genealogy (<https://www.americanancestors.org/education/learning-resources/read/chinese-american-guide>)

National Archives, Genealogy: Ethnic Heritage Links > Asian

(<https://www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/ethnic-heritage.html>)

Tips for Conducting Chinese Genealogy Research in America, by Anthony King

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5TdQY8gQ7LA>)

The Complicated Chinese Family Tree (<https://ltl-school.com/complicated-chinese-family-tree/#download>)

Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of Chicago (<http://www.ccbachicago.org/>)

Pleco – Chinese/English Dictionary (<https://www.pleco.com/>)