

Asian Americans whose ancestors came to the U.S. before 1965 may find many immigration documents because there were so many restrictions against their immigration. They may also be able to find more resources – newspapers, yearbooks, census reports, ship manifests, etc. – that can help in their research. For the vast majority of Asian Americans whose families have arrived here since the immigration laws changed in 1965, there may be fewer documents, but ideally you will have more living relatives who can tell you about their immigration experiences and their family histories.

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

For Chinese families who immigrated during the Exclusion era (1882-1943) or shortly afterward, 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). Other Asian ethnic groups may have changed their names before, during, or after immigration. Don't limit yourself to just your direct line – aunts, uncles, grandparents' siblings and cousins, and more can all help you out.

Documents you can find online, especially on Ancestry, but some on Family Search, etc., include the following. They are especially useful for pre-1965 immigrants. :

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 Asian immigrants, called "*Chinese Passenger Arrivals and Disposition, 1903-1947*" housed on Ancestry.com. Even though the heading says "Chinese," I have found other Asian groups in this record group. These are helpful in that one can often trace the journey that immigrants took through the system that required many 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 mother's 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 especially useful 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 but does have 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 the countries of origin they had. Doing some research on *Titanic* survivors, I discovered a 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 and Gentlemen's Agreement, which restricted Japanese immigration. More recent immigrants will find some helpful information in these documents as well.

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 filed 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, and St. Paul. 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 lists 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. There are case files for immigrants and visitors from over 80 countries in San Bruno, including many from Asia, especially those affected by the Chinese Exclusion Acts, picture brides from Japan and Korea, and Filipinos after 1934.

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 you can [download](#).

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, I believe the files for those born in 1915 or earlier are available at NARA San Bruno. Those for people born from 1916-1920 should be ready soon – they are overdue! The records are supposed to be released in five-year groups 100 years after dates of birth. Search for A-files and case files at www.archives.gov/research. Email sanbruno.archives@nara.gov if you are searching for specific files.

For A-files that aren’t at San Bruno yet, the **US Citizenship and Immigration Services [genealogy website](#)** also has access to a number of 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 a fee to get copies of the records which USCIS has proposed drastically increasing. USCIS also 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 use the process they describe. Eventually, the A-files from west coast and Hawaii immigrants are supposed to go to the National Archives, where you will be able to get them for free.

Search tips and free online resources

When **searching on Ancestry.com, 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 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 in Ancestry 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.

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 a free but less

complete competitor to Ancestry.com; 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 and other great resources. 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.

For all researchers, there are many resources to help you document your family.

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 at [Misbach.org](#).

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.

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 a commercial version. Many people naturally have privacy concerns, so they do not list living people, which can make it hard for your research, but these apps are great 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](#); email me if you'd like to join) which has a lot of useful files to download and [Siyi Genealogy](#) has a very thorough set of message boards. There are great resources for people from pretty much every country of origin. Google what you're interested in or go to sites like [groups.yahoo.com](#) and search. Facebook houses the [Asia, Africa, and Pacific Genealogical Research Community](#) and [Nikkei Genealogical Society](#), or Nikkei Gen.

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. They even found the first photo I have ever seen of my great-great grandfather, found while researching their grandfather. A distant cousin at an Owyang (mom's side) reunion brought me a photograph of my family we had never seen, and we have developed huge family trees for everyone to update. Seemingly distant cousins' research can often be helpful for yours.

Genealogists are usually very 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. I’m a member of the board of the [California Genealogical Society](#), which serves mostly Northern California and has extensive programs and an excellent library (currently closed due to the pandemic but like most groups now offering courses online). There are genealogical societies all over the country and the world.

In northern and southern California, there are Chinese American genealogy groups that meet on a regular basis: the [Bay Area Chinese Genealogy Group](#) and the [Chinese Family History Group of Southern California](#). Please let me know if you know of groups elsewhere in the country. CFHGS has put together “A Guide for Researching Your [Chinese Family History](#),” a helpful DVD. [NikkeiGen](#), mentioned above, has in-person meetings in Southern California for Japanese American research. Linda Harms Okazaki organized a ten-part series on Japanese American genealogy for Seattle-based Densho and its videos are [available for free](#) online. The [Filipino American National Historical Society](#) has chapters all over the U.S. – it’s more of a historical organization but many genealogists are members.

Other genealogists specializing in Asian American research include Amy Chin in New York City (chinowitz10001@gmail.com and 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 with the New England Genealogical Society, who put together a [very thorough guide](#) to Chinese American genealogy, and Trish Hackett Nicola in Seattle, who publishes www.ChineseExclusionFiles.com, a terrific blog about the Chinese immigration files at the National Archives in Seattle. Linda Yip specializes in Asian Canadians and has a wonderful website called [Past Presence](#). Linda Harms Okazaki researches Japanese American records and can be reached at lindahokazaki@gmail.com.

Helpful resources

The [National Archives in San Bruno](#) has about 90,000 case files from about 1900 to 1944: sanbruno.archives@nara.gov, 650-238-3501, hours by appointment. 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 research](#) 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 their index. Ancestry also has a lot of case files indexed now so they might show up in your basic searches. If your ancestor became a naturalized citizen or participated in the “confession” program, he or she might have an “A-file” (A for Alien). If your ancestor came through other ports, contact the Archives branch near their port of entry. You can find the [locations](#) of other National Archives offices here.

The **National Archives** have an [extensive repository](#) of many different Chinese-related files at and they have a list of [links](#) here.

[Find a Grave](#) 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.

[Kanopy.com](#) has many documentaries available to stream for anyone with a library card. has a link to 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” or “Japanese American” or other groups for many other fine films, including Toshi Washizu’s *Issei: The First Generation*, Paula Williams Madison’s life-affirming story, *Finding Samuel Lowe*, about searching for her Chinese grandfather who several children including Paula’s Chinese-Jamaican mother from his time living in Jamaica.

Local 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, National Japanese American Historical Society in San Francisco, Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii, and many more have great programs and resources, many now online. The Korean American National Museum is set to open in the near future.

Author [Minal Hajratwala](#) has an excellent account of her family’s migration from India all around the world in *Leaving India: My Family’s Journey from Five Villages to Five Continents*.

Everyone who goes to San Francisco should visit Angel Island to visit its historic immigration station, which was in use from 1910 to 1940. The historic hospital building was converted to the Angel Island Immigration Museum and opened in 2022. Learn more, see many online exhibits and resources, and sign up for the mailing list of the [Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation](#).

The Motherland and Its Documents

[Friends of Roots](#) 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. Henry Tom organizes conferences and journeys to Guangdong Province henry.tom@cox.net. [My China Roots](#) has researchers in China who have extensive connections and will help you for a fee. One of many programs for young people to go to Japan is the [APAICS Kakehashi](#) program. If you know of other programs for people to visit their ancestral homelands in Asia or other resources in general, please let me know and I will add them to this list.

Chinese family tree books, or jiapu in Mandarin or jiapko in Cantonese, are invaluable resources to trace your family history back many generations, often thousands of years. My China Roots, mentioned above, and [FamilySearch](#) have extensive searchable collections. Koseki are family registries in Japan – they do not go back as many generations as jiapu, but present extensive family connections among recent generations in Japan. Two resources are [Densho](#)’s koseki services and [My Koseki](#). You will need to provide birth certificates to prove you and your parents, grandparents, etc. are related to the people listed in the Koseki. Ship manifests can often be helpful to provide addresses for where your ancestor lived in Japan. Koreans also have jokpo and Vietnamese have gia phả, but I do not know of any central

repositories that collect those books. As with Chinese and Japanese documents, you will probably need to contact the villages, towns, or other municipalities to search for these.

Angel Island Videos and stories

Erika Lee and Judy Yung's *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* is the definitive book on Angel Island immigrant history. It has a general overview plus sections on Chinese, Japanese, South Asian, Korean, Russians and Jews, Mexican, and Filipino immigrants.

Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung's *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island 1910-1940* has most of the Chinese poems on the island in Chinese and English, along with oral histories and other immigration sites where poems were found.

Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation's website is at www.aiisf.org. Visit the Immigration Voices website at www.aiisf.org-immigrant-voices to browse through the over 220 stories, most of which are about Angel Island immigrants, and are searchable by country of origin, age at immigration, and many other factors. You can also visit AIISF's Youtube page here: <https://www.youtube.com/user/AIISFYT>. Here are some of the stories and videos AIISF has made available.

A tour of the Angel Island Immigration Station

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnpgiUY5ip4&t=127s>

Eliseo Felipe's story and video about his immigration from the Philippines:

<https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/stories-by-author/angel-island-profile-eliseo-felipe/>

Li Keng Wong's story and video

<https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/stories-by-author/882-li-keng-wong/>

Li Keng's book: *Good Fortune*, published by Scholastic, is available in many bookstores and online.

Dalip Singh Samra's story and a video visit of his family to the National Archives

<https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/stories-by-author/933-from-punjab-india-to-angel-island/>

Tyrus Wong's story and video

<https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/stories-by-author/587-wong-tyrus-3/>

Nick Friesen's story and video

<https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/stories-by-author/364-remembering-nick-friesen-1913-2011-3/>

Rosa Ginsberg's story and a link to her YouTube trailer

<https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/stories-by-author/830-looking-for-love-or-just-a-better-life/>

<http://www.heatherklein.net/shanghai-angel.html>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RfJvG1UQoE>

Mrs. Lee Yoke Suey's 15-month detention on Angel Island.

<https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/stories-by-author/967-mrs-lee-yoke-sueys-fifteen-month-detainment-on-angel-island/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPwL9oJEWAc>

Rose Young Soon Park's story

<https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/stories-by-author/699-two-korean-woman-and-a-child-at-angel-island/>

Kou Kitano's arrival as a picture bride

<https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/stories-by-author/609-kitano-kou/>

Jiro Dick Kobashigawa's wait on the island as a U.S. citizen

<https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/stories-by-author/614-kobashigawa-jiro-dick/>

The Nikonenkos, who got married on a ship on their way to Angel Island

<https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/stories-by-author/1007-the-nikonenkos-married-at-sea-on-the-way-to-angel-island/>

Kartar Singh's story

<https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/stories-by-author/875-student-and-revolutionist/>

Kehar Singh's story as told by granddaughter Valarie Kaur.

<https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/stories-by-author/946-becoming-american-the-journey-of-early-sikh-pioneer-kehar-singh/>

Angel Island: The Story Behind the Poems (scenes from the restoration of the barracks)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEQY-0ThOM&t=7s>

PORTS (Parks Online Resources for Teachers and Students) – online classes about Angel Island

http://www.ports.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=27693

Links to all the Korean immigration case files at NARA San Bruno:

https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=*&f.parentNald=296445&f.level=fileUnit&sort=naldSort%20asc&tabType=image

Feel free to ask me questions and visit my website (soon to be updated and made mobile compatible). Grant Din, grant@tonaidin.net, www.tonaidin.net. Please feel free to contact me with resources I may have missed.

Grant Din has been researching his and other families' histories for over forty years, since he learned he was in the 36th generation of Gongs (and 24th generation of Owyangs). He has worked for over forty years with nonprofit organizations in the Bay Area, including the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation, Asian Neighborhood Design, and the Asian Foundation for Community Development; as well as at Basement Workshop in New York Chinatown and as the Oberlin College Asian American Counselor/Coordinator in Ohio.

Grant serves on the boards of directors of the California Genealogical Society, Asian and Pacific Islanders in Historic Preservation, and Mu Films, Deann Borshay Liem's filmmaking nonprofit. His articles have appeared in publications from the National Genealogical Society (*NGS Magazine*) and California Genealogical Society (*CGS Nugget*), has made presentations to many genealogical societies, universities, libraries, and organizations, and was part of the research team on the upcoming film about the Chinese who survived the wreck of the *Titanic*, *The Six*. With staff from Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation and Angel Island State Park, Grant was co-curator of the exhibit on Angel Island telling the story of the World War II use of Angel Island as a temporary detention center where "enemy aliens" were taken from Hawai'i and the west coast before being sent to Department of Justice camps throughout the western half of the U.S. It is called [*Taken From Their Families*](#).

Grant's academic background includes a B.A. in Sociology with emphasis in urban studies from Yale University, an M.A. in Public Policy Analysis from Claremont Graduate University, a fellowship from the Coro Fellows Program in Public Affairs, and a certificate in genealogical research from Boston University. He currently consults with nonprofits in the Bay Area and on genealogical projects for organizations and individuals.