



MY
CHINA ROOTS
中華家脈



Chinese Genealogy 101

The Experts' Guide to
Kickstart Your Ancestral Research

MyChinaRoots.com



Getting Started: Names & Places

In the **Western world**, identity-related documentation has usually been maintained by central, church, or state authorities.

In **China**, **families** and **clans** kept all the documentation. So rather than heading to any central archives, the first step in tracing your Chinese family history is finding

- Your **ancestors' names** in Chinese
- The name of their **hometown** in Chinese

This guide will show you **where to find this info** so that you can start unlocking your family history!



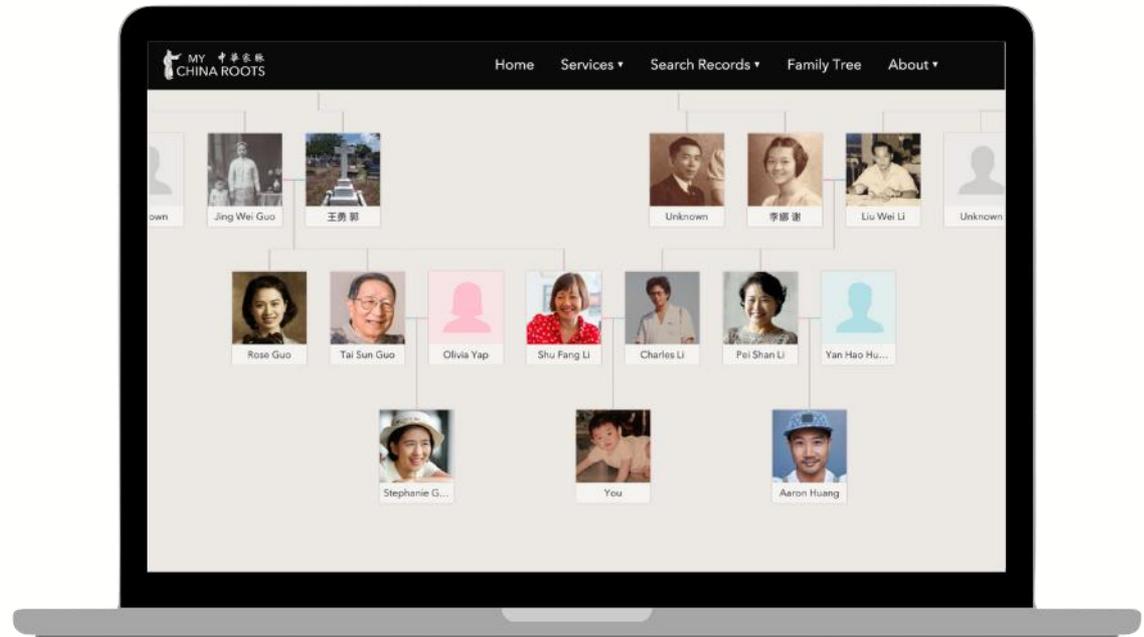
Step 1: Get organized

Before you start...

Make sure you have a place to store and save all your family's info.

Where possible, keep paper and digital copies of photos and other important files.

If you don't have a **family tree** yet, head over to our [Family Tree Builder](#) to start organizing what you know!



Step 2: Speak to Family

Find your storytellers: In most cases, the eldest member of your family will know the most about your **family history**. However, sometimes a younger generation, like a history-crazed cousin, may well know the info you need.

Come prepared: Having some background knowledge will help you separate fact from opinion and may even help jog your relative's memory. Sometimes starting off with a certain theme or issue helps get the conversation going. This could be stories about other relatives, what life was like back in their **ancestral village** or anything that has meaning to your family.

Set the mood: The setting of the interview is as important as a good, comfortable environment is more likely to get the memories flowing. A relative will probably feel more comfortable in their own home and always make sure you are attentive to their needs. Be sure there are no distractions and that they don't mind being recorded.

Some common natural contexts are family dinners, picnics, reunions, and holidays. These are the times when families are likely to share stories, whether or not you are there with your tape recorder.

"What if I live far from my relatives or struggle to communicate with them in Chinese?"



You can always hire our bilingual roots translators to help you connect with your distant family!

We'll join a video call or travel to your Chinese relatives' house to set up an interview. [Get in touch](#) for more info.

Step 3: Look for Clues

– Graves & Tablets –



If your ancestors are buried in a **Chinese cemetery**, or there are Chinese characters on their tombstone, it is likely that the tombstone includes:

- Their **full name** in Chinese
- Their **ancestral hometown** in Chinese



Tablets are designated “seats” for deities and ancestors. They also list **names** and **ancestral places**. Tablets can be found on your family’s altar or in a local Chinese Association Temple that your ancestors were members of.

Don’t have access to the grave?

Try contacting the cemetery or local Chinese association to check their records, as well as

- FindAGrave.com
- Billiongraves.com
- [The Chinese Jamaican Cemetery Project](http://TheChineseJamaicanCemeteryProject.com)

Step 3: Look for Clues

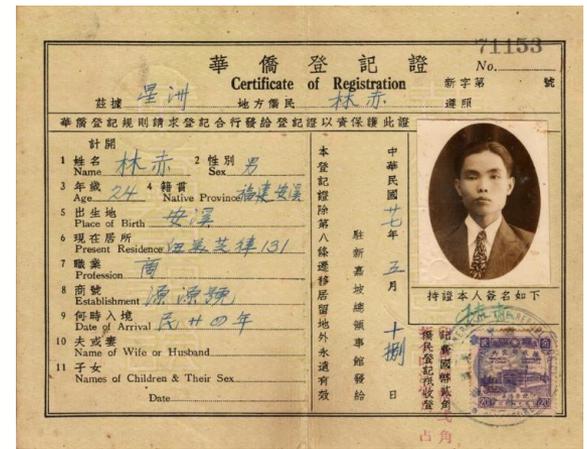
– IDs & Passports –

The various forms of ID – **passports, ID cards** and **Overseas Chinese Cards** – carried by your ancestors can all carry clues as to who they were and their history. Perhaps your family has kept a copy somewhere at home or in the attic...



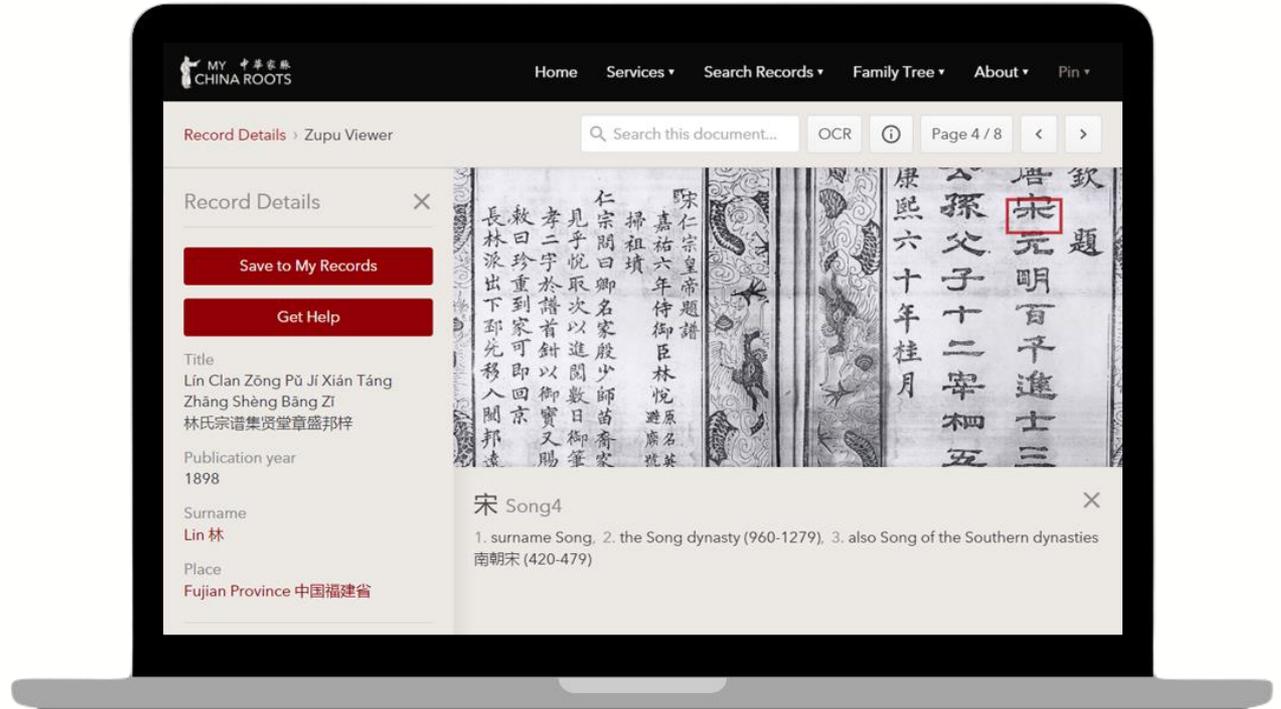
Such records typically list:

- Their **full name** in Chinese and English
- Their **ancestral place** in Chinese
- Their appearance
- Their occupation
- Their age
- Details on their arrival abroad



"I know my
ancestor's
Chinese
name
already.

What's the
fastest way
to find my
lineage?"



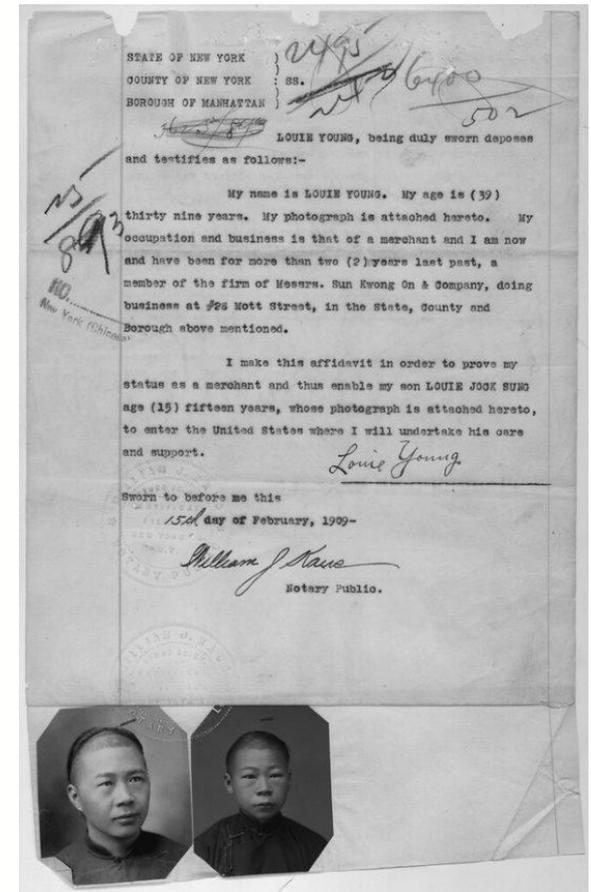
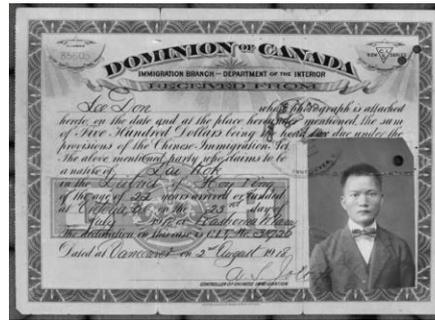
Head over to [MyChinaRoots AncestorSearch](#) to check if their name is in any of our digitized family tree records. Supports searches in Chinese characters only.

Step 3: Look for Clues

– Immigration & Travel –

Check the following resources to find documentation of your ancestor's journey from China!

- [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) for **passenger lists**, census records and other travel documents
- If your ancestor migrated to the **United States**, search the [National Archives \(NARA\) Catalog](https://www.ancestry.com) for immigration files including **interviews, photographs, and naturalization files**
- If your ancestor migrated to **Canada**, search for their name in the [Head Tax Database](https://www.ancestry.com)
- If your ancestor migrated to **Australia**, visit the [National Archives of Australia](https://www.ancestry.com) for **immigration and naturalization records**.



Step 3: Look for Clues

– Letters & Remittances –



Far from home, your ancestors likely stayed in touch with family in China. Look among your family's belongings for **envelopes**, **letters** or **photographs** with Chinese **addresses** and **names**.

Many Chinese Overseas also sent their hard-earned money back to family in the motherland, often leaving a paper trail in the form of **remittances**. Look for receipts with the **names** and **places** you're looking for!



Keywords to look out for:

Sender

寄件人 (jijianren)

Recipient

收件人 (shoujianren)

收信人 (shouxinren)

Return address

回信地址 (huixin dizhi)

Recipient address

通訊地址 (tongxun dizhi)

Dear...

親愛的... (qin'ai de...)

Sincerely...

此致敬禮... (ci zhi jingli...)

"Help!

I don't know
how to read
Chinese..."



Simply [send us your clues](#) and we'll let you know if they contain any useful info.

Step 3: Look for Clues

– Newspapers, Obituaries & Association Records –



Your relatives may have carefully kept **newspaper clippings** about your ancestors' lives. Alternately, check out the following databases for any articles that might mention your ancestors:

- [UBC Chinese Newspaper Resources](#)
- [Singapore and Malaya Chinese Newspaper Database](#)

Finding themselves in a strange and unfamiliar land, many Chinese joined a local society or "club" to socialize with others from the same **ancestral place**, **surname**, or **dialect group**.

Try to find out if your ancestor was part of such a club. These associations, also known as **"tong"** in North America or **"kongsi"** or **"huay kwan"** in Southeast Asia, occasionally kept:

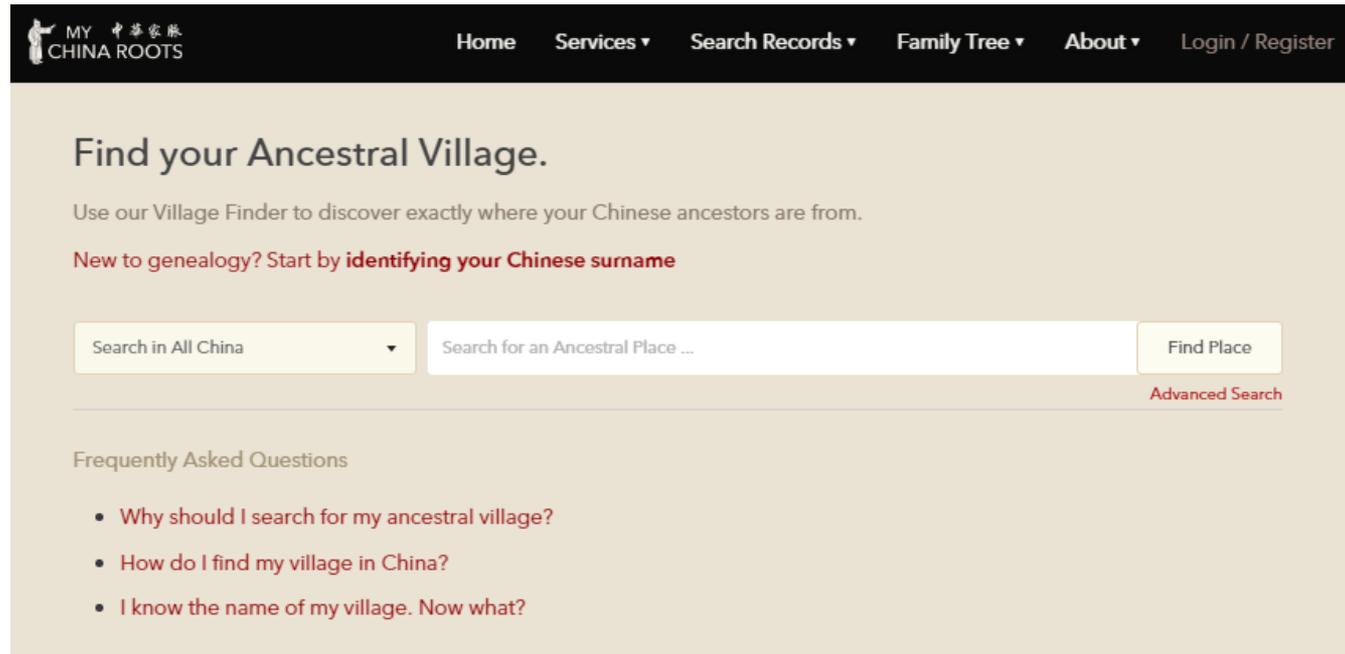
- Cemetery records
e.g. [Chinese Benevolent Association of Jamaica](#)
- Ancestral tablets
e.g. [The Sze Yup Temple of Sydney, Australia](#)
- Commemorative association booklets
- Family tree books of relevance to their members



Step 4: Locate Your Village

Once you have collected your clues, go to [MyChinaRoots Village Database](#) to see if you can identify your village.

You can search using Chinese OR English characters, or filter villages by surname.



The screenshot shows the MyChinaRoots website's Village Finder search page. The navigation bar at the top includes links for Home, Services, Search Records, Family Tree, About, and Login / Register. The main heading is "Find your Ancestral Village." Below this, a sub-heading reads "Use our Village Finder to discover exactly where your Chinese ancestors are from." A red link suggests "New to genealogy? Start by identifying your Chinese surname". The search interface features a dropdown menu for "Search in All China" and a text input field for "Search for an Ancestral Place ...". A "Find Place" button is located to the right of the input field. Below the search area, there is a section for "Frequently Asked Questions" with three bullet points: "Why should I search for my ancestral village?", "How do I find my village in China?", and "I know the name of my village. Now what?".

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Home Services Search Records Family Tree About Login / Register

Find your Ancestral Village.

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New to genealogy? Start by **identifying your Chinese surname**

Search in All China Search for an Ancestral Place ... Find Place

Advanced Search

Frequently Asked Questions

- Why should I search for my ancestral village?
- How do I find my village in China?
- I know the name of my village. Now what?

Step 4: Locate Your Village

As you explore potential matches, check the **administrative level** of the place you are looking at.

For example, Counties are large areas that count **hundreds to thousands of villages**, so they won't be very helpful.

Try to narrow down your findings to the **Town** or **Village** level.



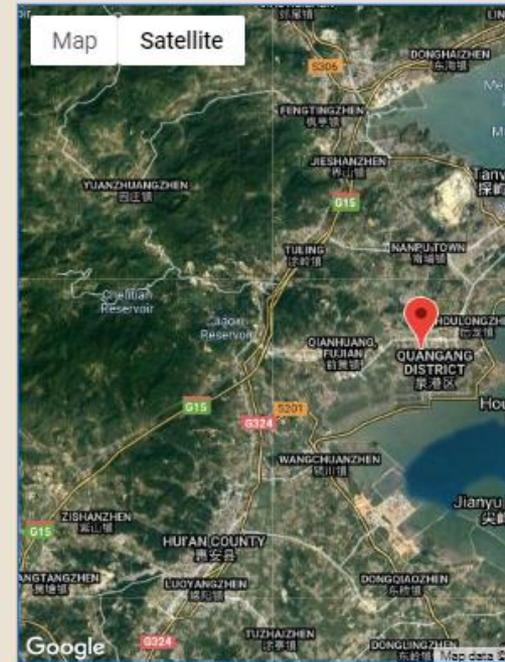
MyChinaRoots Village Database

Shanyao 山腰街道

| | |
|------------------|--|
| Province | Fujian 中国福建省 |
| Prefecture/City | Quanzhou 泉州市 |
| County/District | Quangang 泉港区 |
| Town/Subdistrict | Shanyao 山腰街道 |
| Village | |
| Major Clans | 庄 Zhuang 林 Lin 郑 Zheng 钟 Zhong 唐 Tang 郭 Guo 张 Zhang 叶 Ye 陈 Chen |
| Migration Town? | Yes |

[View all villages within Shanyao](#)

[View all zupus from Shanyao in our database](#)



Step 5: Visit Your Village

– Find Your Ancestors' Traces –

Once you have identified your **ancestral village** and ancestors' names, it's time to connect with your roots!

Your village is where you are most likely to find:

- **Descendants** of your ancestors' relatives
- **A clan book** (zupu / jiapu) with lineages spanning hundreds of years
- **Graves** of your ancestors' family
- **An ancestral temple**
- **Houses** that belonged to your family
- **Stories** about your ancestors
- **... and more!**

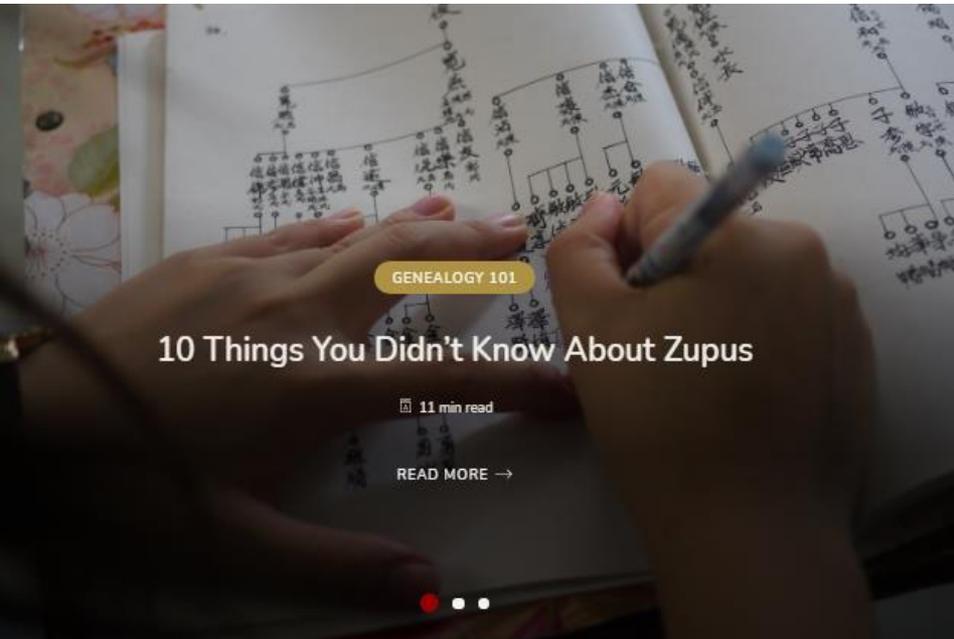


"What if I
can't travel
to China to
visit my
village?"



If there's one thing we've learned over the years, it's that you shouldn't delay visiting!
For those that can't travel, we offer to be your hands and feet to capture its surroundings,
temples, stories, families and records, before it's too late. [Start a conversation with us](#) to
see what's possible.

Want more helpful tips?



Check out our [Blog](#)

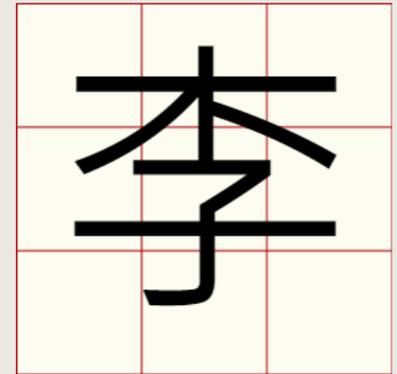
Li Surname Origins

Li Surname Meaning

Meaning: plum

Li Surname Origins

According to tradition, the Li clan is descended from the legendary emperor Zhuangxi, the grandson of the mythical Yellow Emperor. During the reign of Emperor Yao, Zhuangxi's descendant General Gao Yao served as daili or Minister of Law. During the Xia dynasty, his ancestors adopted Li 理 as their surname. There are many tales about how 理 (reason) became 李 (plum). The most common one says the minister Li Zheng was executed by King Zhou of the Shang dynasty. Li Zheng's son and wife escaped and survived by eating plums. As a sign of gratitude, his descendants thereafter adopted the surname meaning "plum".



Search our [Surname Database](#)



Or [ask us a question!](#)