

Speaker Series – Tracing your Chinese Ancestry with Kerry Choy

Interviewer: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Inner West Library Speaker series. We would like to start by acknowledging the Gadigal and the Wangal people of the Eora nation on which this podcast is produced. Today we are joined by Kerry Choy, a keen genealogist and self-confessed 'geek' who decided to get serious about genealogy and researching his Chinese Australian ancestry after helping his children research the family tree numerous times for school assignments. Since then, Kerry has completed a Graduate Diploma of Local Family and Applied History and now volunteers his time and family history knowledge at the Chinese Australian Historical Society. Welcome, Kerry.

Kerry Choy: Gday. Thanks for having me on.

Interviewer: Researching your family history has become an increasingly popular pastime over the last few years, with numerous television programs such as *Who Do You Think You are?* and *Every Family has a Secret*. Can you tell me why you think researching your family history has become so popular in recent years? And why is it becoming more important for people to do this?

Kerry Choy: [00:01:06] Popularity in the recent years has been really probably fuelled by that sense of where are we? Where are we from? We've matured a bit. There was a time when probably as a society, we would have been a little embarrassed about having a convict background. Now we celebrate it. So, I think people look around and we can celebrate so many different things. So that's it's not surprising, really, that people have been interested in investigating their convict backgrounds. And now, I think investigating the Chinese backgrounds, which has also been a bit of a closed door in the past. So that's another one that's now open. There are so many things that people can actually be challenged about their identity and who they are. And TV programs do that. The whole sense of who we are in Australia now, that's probably feeling that as well. That's one side of it.

Interviewer: [00:01:50] How did you become involved in researching your Chinese Australian history? And can you provide some background information on the role that you play with the Chinese Australian History Organisation?

Kerry Choy: [00:02:01] Obviously I've a Chinese surname. When I began this exercise, my understanding was that all of my ancestors were actually of Chinese background. So I started doing this, doing these exercises with my children. We'd do the family tree exercise one year and then two years later for the next kid that came along we'd do it again. So after several attempts at doing this, I realised I probably need to actually just get this a little bit more regularized and get it played out better. And so I started to do some of the reading about how you should record your genealogy and it all went spiralling out of control from there. So I've been I've been doing that. I've found all sorts of interesting things about my own family history of my wife and family. So, while I thought I had an all Chinese background, detailed research is now proven that I probably actually have an Irish great grandmother.

Interviewer: So that's interesting.

Kerry Choy: Oh, we didn't know about that. So that was that was interesting. And then looking through my wife's side, who's a more colonial Australian sort of background. Yes, we've got the mandatory convicts in the family tree. I think about 15. I've found that a fascinating exercise of seeing what history looks like for an Australian family to have so many convicts in the family tree, have so many of them turned out to be policemen who were convicts as well. So it's been a really interesting exercise for me to find out all the history and be able to pass it on to my children.

Interviewer: [00:03:14] So did your children find it quite an interesting exercise as well? Were they quite surprised to see what relations sort of came up?

Kerry Choy: [00:03:22] Occasionally they look, I think what we seem to find more broadly, too, is that someone in the family gets the bug, they get the interest in family history, and they become the bit of the go to person. So they end up collecting all this stuff and organising it and documenting and putting it in shoeboxes or whatever. And then occasionally people come to and say, oh, what about so-and-so? And they'll find out about that. And then they'll they'll sort of wander away again. In each

generation, someone picks up the baton and hopefully we find someone to pass it on to in the next generation to be able to pass all that. All the information and recorded knowledge on a lot of family aren't interested in it until I find they are. And the tragedy is that sometimes when they actually start asking the questions about their family history, they find it too late because people who could have told them all that stuff, all of their elders have passed on. And that becomes one of the tragedies. And people might start too late some times.

Interviewer: [00:04:04] So a lot of that family knowledge is then lost to everyone else.

Kerry Choy: [00:04:08] Oh, I wouldn't say it's totally lost, but it certainly becomes more difficult.

Interviewer: [00:04:11] And so you're when you were researching your family history and obviously there were a few little surprises in there.

Kerry Choy: [00:04:18] Yeah. My grandfather during his lifetime, he did not have a birth certificate. He had no idea of it when he was born. But we were never able to nail down his birth certificate. So we didn't have that certainty. With the advent of online indexes and the ability to be a little bit sort of a more wild card searching in what you can look for in the archives and records. And we actually found a record, which actually was his name, but his name with another surname, which we didn't know about. We confirmed that record as being the link between who he thought he was and his birth name. That tracked a whole lot of interesting research.

Interviewer: [00:04:48] I suppose I wanted to know just sort of what your role was with the Chinese Australian History Organisation. Obviously, you're a volunteer there, and that's because of your love of genealogy and obviously, you want to help people, other people finding out about their past as much as possible. So can you tell me a little bit about your role with that organization?

Kerry Choy: [00:05:08] I've been on there with the society for a few years now. My primary interest is in family history. Obviously, a family history is a very personal thing. It's about your family, but your family sits within the story of of a society, and the history societies more generally about the history of of the Chinese Australians and

more widely and more generic sort of look at history. It's good to have a ring in both. It's good to actually have understanding and do the research for your family, but it's good to understand the context in which they live, and the society in which they grew up in because that informs your research. So understanding White Australia policy helps me understand what to research and how to research. So these backwards and forwards between specific history of my family and the general history of Chinese in Australia. So I sort of flick around in between those two threads of interest. And that really is my passion in that in being involved with this society.

Interviewer: [00:05:57] For someone who's never done any family research before and they've decided to start researching their Chinese Australian family history, where should they start? And I suppose the other question is, is it any different than for people researching their family history from, say, a colonial Australian background?

Kerry Choy: [00:06:16] There are few answers to that. It's no different to doing any other sort of family research whether you're researching in Australia or in France or in or in the US. Methods are the same. The recommendation is always you start with yourself and then you research your research backwards from there so you can look for records like birth certificates and official documentation, letters to confirm the relationships going backwards from yourself to your parents to your grandparents to your great grandparents. So that mechanism is the same, whether you have Chinese Australian backgrounds or not. The methods of organising research material and recording it and analysing it, both methods, methods are the same. They're quite well developed now. The library has a lot of would itself have a lot of access to resources that help people do family history research. There's plenty of good stuff to start with there. But for Chinese Australian history, there's probably some extra cultural context which people may be aware of. If you're coming at this exercise knowing that you have a Chinese Australian link, then you probably know, you know something already. You may have you may have a family that has celebrated it's Chineseness already. There are plenty of families who might have Chinese affectionate name for their grandparents rather than just, say, your grandpa or poppa whatever, they might use a Chinese affectionate like goong goong or Popo, which actually is a Chinese cultural thing.

So some people have come at this from having no cultural datapoint. That's where maybe maybe that that Chinese link has been either lost or forgotten about or

suppressed. So there may be some things that you might need to actually become aware of with once you've gone through the reason you found a record and the record has a name on it. You think I didn't know it was a Chinese name there more in the records before. So once you've got that point, then maybe you have a bit of a more broader reading, rather than just the normal school history about convicts. Maybe you need to do a little bit more reading about some of the other aspects of Australian history, which maybe you haven't touched on before, like the impact of the White Australia policy on Chinese and Australian history, which is quite significant and is an important thing to understand so that you understand how your ancestors fit in society, maybe be why they did some of the things they did, and what sort of records we can actually look for. Because the White Australia policy, despite it being a kind of a black episode in many respects and unfortunate in many respects, it created a treasure trove of records. The bureaucracy that was created by that is very useful for people who are doing family history research.

Interviewer: [00:08:33] It's quite interesting isn't it. What cultural context do you think are important to understand to begin researching your Chinese family history? So I suppose it was that the White Australia policy that you mentioned, but were there any other cultural contexts there that may influence the research?

Kerry Choy: [00:08:49] There's a whole lot of things about Chinese names, habits, which if you're unfamiliar with, may trip you up. The first thing that people will have to hit is issues around names and around Chinese names in Australian records. Probably the thing that will hit first, particularly if you're coming at it from the point of view of looking at the records, is to understand that the record in Australia will have transcribed names that Chinese people gave to the officials of the day, and it may not have actually been the name that is most useful for doing research.

Interviewer: [00:09:22] So that makes it a bit tricky, doesn't it?

Kerry Choy: [00:09:24] Yeah, yeah. To explain, my great grandfather, he is in all of the Australian records because he came to Australia in 1896. There's a nice paper trail of immigration records and in all the records his name is recorded as Ah Young, his actual family name, name for the name in the Chinese Chinese sort of family records and his formal name is Choy Manseui. There's not much not much commonality

between those two. Ah Young is a courtesy name. There are sort of cultural reasons why he would have used that name when the guy at the immigration desk is What's your name? There are cultural reasons why he would have applied with Ah Young rather than Choy Manseui. That's too long for this exercise, maybe for another cast, but but the point is that Ah Young became the name that was used in the Australian records, so all the way through to his death and on his tombstone, Ah Young has been recorded. You would not be able to go to China and say, hey, can you tell me who Ah Young is? It's kind of a nickname or it's a courtesy name. It's about as meaningful as an Australian nickname. Like if someone came to Australia saying that they're looking for a guy, that they think they think his name is called Bluey or Curly. It's a nickname that might identify in a context, but it wouldn't be able to identify him in any of the formal contexts that you would use for searching records.

Interviewer: [00:10:34] And I mean, there could be lots of people using that name as well.

Kerry Choy: There are plenty of Bluey's and Curley's in the world, too.

Interviewer: That's right. So that does make it a little bit difficult, doesn't it?

Kerry Choy: [00:10:42] Understanding that there's maybe multiple names involved. That's one of the things people need to start with. Then there's just the mechanics of Chinese names that the surname is normally given first and foremost. Choy Man Soy, so that's my family name is Choy. That led to all sorts of confusion, particularly in the record keepers, because when colonial people wrote down names, they assume that the last one that they got was the actual family name. So some of them who we have recorded in Australian records, their names are backwards. The name that has come down through the records as their family name and often the name of their family actually adopted as their Australian name, but that's not actually their real family name. It's actually someone's given name back in the past. That becomes even funnier because people will say they've found this Chinese name like they may think Suey is a Chinese name, but that's not a family name. Traditionally, there's a very small number of family surnames.

Interviewer: [00:11:32] How many roughly would there be?

Kerry Choy: [00:11:34] There's an old tradition that I was told that in a town, there might be a place of mailboxes, for mail to be put, and people and again they'll put mail there for each family. And there would never need to be more than 100 boxes. Often people who have Australian Chinese sounding names, they're probably not going to be their real Chinese family name. Sometimes some of the records that they've actually they've corrected for that, some haven't.

So the best way to actually understand, which is the correct name, is if you actually find it in Chinese characters.

Interviewer: If they don't speak Mandarin or Cantonese or read or write, you need to have someone that can help you with that.

Kerry Choy: [00:12:11] And that writing can actually confirm stuff. And that's also a very important point for later, too. So name order, paper names. A lot of times Chinese would adopt a name in Australia as well. Just because they're Chinese name may have been either difficult to pronounce or was was more a pain to get them to spell correctly each time. So they may have adopted other other surnames and they just picked one out of the hat. One of my families, they picked the surname Wilson. Why Wilson? Apparently the town that they were growing up in there were no Wilson's in that town, but they'd heard of that surname from another town sort of somewhere else. So they thought, well, there's no Wilson's here, we'll use that one. And so they used Wilson.

Interviewer: [00:12:49] I suppose that's as good a reason as any other reason, isn't it?

Kerry Choy: [00:12:53] Yeah. The point is that the process by which these names and records evolve has been not as precise as we we might think.

Interviewer: [00:12:59] So in other words, there's quite a little bit of detective work that you need to do to sort of sort through all the material.

Kerry Choy: [00:13:07] Can be. Yeah, yeah. Which adds to the fun of the exercise to really say, yeah.

Interviewer: [00:13:12] I suppose for people that have a very inquisitive mind, there's a lot that you can delve into.

Kerry Choy: Yes, indeed.

Interviewer: I've read that tracing your family history can be a bit like putting a jigsaw puzzle together and it's very easy to head off down a rabbit hole when you start delving into your past and you probably just outlined some bits of information that can be quite confusing I suppose when you're starting to do your research. Can you provide any other good tips or hints that will make the process any easier for people starting out in their family history research?

Kerry Choy: [00:13:46] It's great to sort of start off by gathering things and just shoving them in a shoebox, which is where a lot of family tree research starts off. But the guidance that you get out of a lot of the books, any of the books, any of the websites about how to order and record stuff is very important. So, I have new software to do that. You don't have to, but it just makes it a lot easier. Recording, you, keeping track of your research. For instance, you might have a person that you're researching and you've got a date of birth. Make sure you know where you got the information for that date of birth from, because when you get another date of birth from a different source, you're going to want to be able to just try and compare them and say, look, I got two different records here and which one's the right one. If you've not written that stuff down and you just got a date and you think, where did I get that date from? You're making a rod for your own back there by having to research your own research and look at how it had you come with us. So so that sort of organisation really good, really important, because the nature of the puzzle is that you need to just be able to manage your information.

Interviewer: Because I know you said earlier that one of your relatives, there wasn't a birth certificate for them, so for most people, you know, the birth certificate is probably where you start, but that would make it very hard if you haven't got that information to hand.

Kerry Choy: Exactly, we had two traditions that said that his date of birth was some of the dates. We'd been hammering the systems trying to find stuff that was in that date range. Years after we came up with another bit of information. In my records I can actually record the fact that I've got three potential dates of birth and one that is backed by information, which I think is very correct. I'm happy to say, look, this is the right one. These two are other ones that we knew about that are wrong. There are other factoids within my family tree where I've got two or three candidates and I haven't worked out which ones the right one yet. And we're still working on that one.

Interviewer: [00:15:33] So you've still got a bit more research to do. And how long do you think that might take you to find out all that information?

Kerry Choy: [00:15:41] Will I ever finish? I don't. I don't. I don't know. There's information out there that I haven't accessed yet, and when I'm able to or when it comes to light, then there'll be more things to find out about. We're not in a bad place just now because there's so much information that has become more available, particularly for online research, and more information is being indexed and being made available. As that amount of information keeps growing, there's going to be more stuff for us to mine.

Interviewer: [00:16:09] Yeah, so it's making it much easier now for people to go back and find more information about their past and their relatives.

So I did actually want to ask what are the other resources you might be able to suggest for anyone interested in furthering their research? And I know on the Chinese Australian Historical Society website, you do have a link there with resources. So could you give us a little bit more information about some of those?

Kerry Choy: [00:16:30] You can start with some of the more normal sort of research assets within your own family. You're looking for your own family records, for the letters, for the photos, for the family, Bibles, for the old books. The extra that I would recommend people keep their eye open for, is, anything which has a Chinese character written in it. So, the back of a photo which has someone's name on it, and then another little bit of scrawl on the side that people, that no one's recognised. They're bits of information which can be quite a goldmine. All the records that are the original records, they ought to be looked at with that extra eye, to say, is there anything else there?

We've seen records that are indexed through the archive sites that have information about a certain person. But then occasionally you'll find someone who's actually signed their name twice with an English name and a Chinese name. So those sorts of things, you'll only really ever see that if you can look at the original record. There are many ways in which records are being indexed now or they're being searchable, searchable through some of the commercial websites. But usually those indexes don't index that little bit of information as well, that Chinese character, because usually it's too hard to do that. They often don't have enough Chinese readers to be able to read through all those annotations on the on the record as well. So, as much as possible being able to look at the original records and see whether there is anything on the back that is a Chinese character, for instance. That's that's critical. Going onto immigration records. As I mentioned, the White Australia policy generated a lot of interesting documentation.

There's a particular one which is of special interest to Chinese Australian historians, and that is, these documents called Certificates of Exemption from Dictation Test. The CEDT is worthy of a whole episode of its own as well. But essentially think of it like a passport, because Chinese Australians weren't eligible for a passport during those years. So the CEDT's were a bit of a sort of makeshift passport for someone who was in Australia and looking to travel back to China and return again. These records have been maintained and large parts of them have been retained in the in the archives. They are searchable by the English name that someone travelled under. It has information about their travel dates, some of the associated records link us back to information about when they first came to Australia, because you are only eligible for a CEDT if you basically landed before Federation. And the photos can also be a great record for people who don't have any other photos or might well have other images of their Chinese Australian forebears. The CEDTs often have a photo with them. So that's really useful too. And there are other immigration records as well that people should become conversant with. And there is plenty of guidance on our website to other links that talk about how the CEDT is worked out and how they can be searched. The other equally interesting resource that's good for Chinese family research are tombstones. Genealogists are always interested in tombstones. We're not all macabre. But but they're useful. More so for the Chinese ones. That's another cultural issue again. So probably up until the Second World War, the expectation for many Chinese, not all, but many Chinese. The expectation was that their family would actually transfer their bones back to China for long term burial.

So the intention was if that if they died in Australia, they might be buried here. But after a few years, the bones would be exhumed, packed up and taken back to China to be buried in some family location back in China. They sort of adopted the Australian habits of two other tombstones, so the shapes and the fact there's a name on it and a date. Often that's been picked up as well because they're fitting in with the Australian method. If there was an intention for the guy to go back to China, they would often include his Chinese name in Chinese characters, and they'll often include the village that he came from, because that's where he was supposed to be reburied to. Finding out that link of where he came from, is really, really, really critical, because the village that you come from in China, is where your family records are going to be as well. Until recently, China didn't have a formal recording of name system like registrars, and there's no sort of government body that did that. The recording of who you were and where you're in the family, were in family records that were kept in each village that you came from. And those villages were very static. The villages I come from has 16 generations in the one village and in two surnames. So we've we come from a place that's pretty pretty static. So the village becomes critical to understand where you came from and where you might find the rest of the records for your family.

Interviewer: [00:20:53] So there's certainly a lot of information there for people to look at if they want to go down that path of researching their family history.

Kerry Choy: [00:21:01] You start with the records you've got. So whatever information you've got, you start with that, and you just start working backwards and start chipping away. And when you find an immigration record, that's great. You'll know how to look at it. When you find a tombstone, you'll know what to do with it. It's a little bit different, but it is otherwise always the same as any other family history research.

Interviewer: [00:21:17] Well, that sounds fantastic. I hope that lots of people have been inspired today by your information about researching your Chinese Australian family history. So thank you so much for your time today, Kerry, and good luck with furthering your own family's history.

Kerry Choy: Thank you.

Interviewer: Thank you for listening to today's podcast. If you're interested in finding out more information about researching your Chinese Australian family history, the library has a number of genealogy resources available, including Ancestry.com, amongst others. Please check our website or contact the library for further details. And don't forget to look out for more upcoming digital content through the Inner West Library What's On and social media channels.