

Guide for tracing a Chinese ancestor

Using Australian Archives (NSW) files of the Immigration (Restriction) Act

The files of the Immigration Restriction Act built up from 1901 to the 1950s and beyond held in AA (NSW) are largely intact today. In Sydney alone there are over 10,000 individual files containing detailed information on every person of Chinese resident of Australia before 1901 who used the Port of Sydney to travel to China and their home villages. Such a trip thousands did, often many times, resulting in files from which a great deal of personal information, including photos, can be obtained.

Minimum you will need: To have a chance of tracing an individual you will need the name that they used in English. This was, before the 1950s, often the personal name without reference to a family name, such as Ah Chee, or the family name converted into a 'first' name, such as Louie Gay. Spelling also varied a great deal. After the 1950s it was more common to use a family name with a European name. Thus Yat Kwan before World War Two became Ken Wong in the 1950s.

Accessing these records to trace an individual requires familiarity with various administrative files to find the individual file. Files of relevance to researching the details of individuals include two series containing tens of thousands of individual files (SP42/1 & SP1122/1) and a number of administrative files including¹:

*Register of Certificates Exempting from the Dictation Test (SP726/1)*²

This is a record of every Certificate Exempting From Dictation Test or CEDT issued in NSW from 1902 to 1959. Each volume is indexed by the name of the applicant alphabetically and records date of arrival and departure, ship name, file reference and CEDT No. With a name, a ship or a date of a trip, it is possible to locate the person

¹ For a more comprehensive listing of Immigration Restriction Act related files see *Chinese Immigrants and Chinese Australians in NSW*, compiled by Julie Stacker and Peri Stewart, Australian Archives NSW Office, July 1997. This guide is available at <http://www.naa.gov.au/Publications/>

² Under the Immigration Restriction Act people could be refused admission to Australia by being asked to take a 'Dictation Test'. Such a test would be given in a language it was known the person would fail. For Chinese people resident before 1901 who were entitled to return to Australia, it was necessary to obtain an exemption to this test as a form of 're-entry visa'.

you are looking for and so obtain a file number and a CEDT No. File Nos will lead you to either SP42/1 or SP1122/1 and the CEDT No. to series ST84/1.

CEDT copies (ST84/1)

This series contains a copy of every CEDT³ issued to those passing through the Port of Sydney under the Immigration (Restriction) Act. While little information is contained on them, each certificate contains a photograph of the applicant.

Individual files SP42/1 & SP1122/1

In the Australian Archives the files relating to individuals created by the administration of the Immigration (Restriction) Act are contained mainly in two series. The first is the 'C' or correspondence series, SP42/1. Each new application or file was given a 'C' for correspondence, followed by the year date, followed by a consecutive number. For example the Australian Archive (NSW) file, SP42/1; C33/6496, Mew Get, is a file created in 1933 for Mew Get and was the 6,496th file or item of correspondence of that year. As people made subsequent applications or other contact with the bureaucracy, their previous files were removed and added to the new file, this was called 'top numbering'. Thus Mew Get's 1933 file also contains his applications for CEDTs of previous years.

When the Immigration Department was formed in 1947-8, the filing notation was changed and these files are in the series, SP1122/1. In NSW the 'C' was replaced by 'N' for NSW. For example, Australian Archive (NSW), SP1122/1; N53/24/2504, Lee Man Dick (Man Duck), is a file created in 1953, the /24/ being a reference to the category 'Asiatics'. The series SP1122/1 is a continuation of SP42/1 and Lee Man Dick's file contains similar material. His file ended because he returned permanently to China while many similar files end when they do because a person became naturalised and thus ceased to need to deal with the Immigration. This feature has led many researchers to refer to such files as 'naturalisation' files.

³ Or 'Certificate of Domicile' as those issued between 1902 and 1907 were called.

If a look at the file number you got from the CEDT Registers reveals nothing then there are two choices. To ask the archives staff to view the *Card Index* or to try and trace the file number movement using the *File movement Index*.

Index Cards to correspondence SP1602/1

If the file was active in the 1960s or thereafter, especially if you think the person may have been naturalised, then the card index may give you the correct file number. As this index includes information later than 30 years, only Australian Archive staff can look at it. Remember that names were often written in various ways, so give the staff as many variations as you think possible. E.g., Lee Man Dick, Lee Man Duck, Man Dick Lee, etc.

File Movement Register SP143/1

An index of file movements exists for the years 1930-1948, these trace the placing of older files into newer ones. Thus a file number found in the CEDT register can be traced through one or more movements until its final resting place. From there you can access it.

Those who did not use CEDTs

CEDTs were for people who had a right of 'domicile' in Australia. This meant that they were already resident in Australia before the Immigration Restriction Act was passed in 1901. Many people of Chinese origin came to Australia after 1901, usually on temporary Certificates of Exemption. Such files are much more difficult to trace and the name index of the *File Movement Register SP143/1* or the *Index Cards to correspondence SP1602/1*, are your best options. Another difficulty is that those on Certificates of Exemption did not necessarily get their own file but were often incorporated into the file of who ever made the initial application of their behalf as sponsor, if that was the case. People born in Australia sometimes used their Birth Certificates as a kind of travel document instead of a CEDT. For such people the Register of Birth Certificates (SP726/2) is worth looking at.

Register of Birth Certificates (SP726/2)

This is a register kept of the Birth Certificate details of people of Chinese origin born in Australia who travelled outside Australia. There is an alphabetical index at the front with the entries by date. Most of the entries were made on people's return to Australia. Occasional remarks were made but the majority of entries contain only basic details of dates.

Brief description of Immigration Restriction Act procedures: In order to travel, the Immigration Restriction Act required of Chinese residents with a right of domicile that they apply for a CEDT (from 1902-7 a Certificate of Domicile). The application required various details: six photos, a thumb print (originally a full palm print), two written references as to character and a £1 fee. The police were used to verify photos, though this became less common as people applied for subsequent CEDTs.

The CEDT was drawn up in duplicate and one handed to the person or perhaps a shipping agent by the Customs Boarding inspectors at the ship. The CEDT carried to China was necessary to purchase a ticket back to Australia. On return, the CEDT was handed in to the Boarding Inspector who compared the photos and thumbprints. If a CEDT expired or was lost, a letter could be sent stating that the person would be 'admitted on being satisfactorily identified'. On return with such a letter a blank CEDT would be issued retrospectively.

For those who were not 'domiciles', a 'Certificate of Exemption' was issued instead. These certificates did not have photos and the category and period of validity were simply written in. On expiration, they were returned and a fresh one issued.

Minimum information: Every applicant for a CEDT had to provide at least:

Name (including Chinese characters approximately 50% of the time)

Date of birth (usually a year only)

Date of arrival in Australia (usually a year only)

Number of trips out of Australia (length of time in China/dates of departure/arrival)

Family (wife and children, this question was not asked between about 1905 & 1920)

Occupation (included past occupations and often listing pre-Federation jobs)

Location (again past locations results in a list, including those before Federation)

File number (this can be used to relate the file to other material)

Photo (this is often on the file and always on the actual CEDT copy)

Not all people who used CEDT were Chinese, many people from the then Indian part of the British Empire are also to be found. But Chinese people make up the overwhelming majority and so this guide has been written from the perspective of someone seeking a Chinese ancestor.