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Los Angeles

Everyday Archiving in Chinese American Families:

The Affects of Ordinary Things

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Information Studies

by

Jiarui Sun

2025

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Everyday Archiving in Chinese American Families:
The Affects of Ordinary Things

by

Jiarui Sun

Doctor of Philosophy in Information Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2025

Professor Anne Jervois Gilliland, Chair

Archival practices historically emerged from work with government and organizational records. In recent decades, a new attention to the practices and motivations of community archives by archival scholars has resulted in considerable pluralization of, and challenges to, foundational archival concepts and understandings within the archival profession. However, little research has examined archives and archival practices within domestic family contexts, especially those of ethnic and diasporic populations. To address this gap, this dissertation study investigates the everyday archiving practices of Chinese American families and examines how seemingly small and ordinary objects can carry deep emotional significance, shaping a sense of belonging and

intergenerational connection. In the process, the study engages broader questions of memory, affect, identity and archival practice within the context of migration and diaspora.

The study used a qualitative, multi-method research design, incorporating in-depth interviews of Chinese Americans from different generations, object elicitation and observation of family archives as its primary methods of inquiry.

Findings indicate that the notion of “family” is fluid, shaped by family dynamics and shared experiences rather than being restricted to biological ties. These understandings influence imagined archival boundaries, determining who is included, excluded and represented. Family archives emerge at the intersection of incidental accumulation and intentional selection, guided by judgments about what is meaningful or worth preserving. Even if they are dispersed, they are also purposefully arranged within the home, with valued items placed in visible locations carrying affective and symbolic significance. The growing ease of documentation enabled by digital technology raises questions about how such convenience and associated abundance and wider distribution might influence the intentionality and perceived value of family archives. The study also identifies a latent gendered division of archival work: men, particularly the eldest son, often take responsibility for the custody of physical materials (material stewardship), while women are more often positioned as transmitters of family stories (narrative transmission). Grounded in the concept of archival pluralism, the study challenges conventional understandings, showing that archives can be changing rather than fixed, in use rather than archived away, interaction-centered rather than object-centered and reproducible rather than necessarily original. In doing so, it

supports records continuum ideas of archives as ever-mutating, always evolving through continuous interactions between users and content. By foregrounding the affective dimensions of archival work, the study demonstrates how emotional connections can elevate ordinary things beyond their utilitarian functions—findings that, perhaps unsurprisingly, affirm much of what community archives scholarship has revealed. At the same time, it extends the newest scholarship on the role of affect by showing that family archives, at least in the Chinese American context, are distinctive: partly because of their object orientation, partly because of their intangible and affective qualities and partly because of how they reflect particular elements of Chinese culture.

Based on these findings, the dissertation advocates for community-engaged archival practice that supports families in preserving their archives with sensitivity and emotional care. The research also points to several directions for further research, including targeted studies of specific subgroups to examine how distinct historical experiences shape Chinese Americans' awareness of and attitudes toward archival preservation, as well as investigations into how digital and physical archives may differ in their roles in intergenerational transmission, including questions of ownership in digital archival legacies.

The dissertation of Jiarui Sun is approved.

Michelle Caswell

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2025

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In the fall of 2019, I crossed half the globe from China to Los Angeles to begin my doctoral studies at UCLA. The climate and the scenery felt familiar, yet six years have since slipped quietly between mornings and evenings. These years have been the most treasured time of my twenties.

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This is the end of my twenty-four years as a student, and the beginning of a new chapter in my life.

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Chapter I. Introduction

In a residential home in Northridge, Los Angeles, a pink rose is blooming in the yard. On a Google Drive folder, a 3D model of an ancestral house in Guangdong is carefully preserved. In a cabinet in East Lansing, Michigan, a robe once worn by a grandfather quietly rests. And in Nanjing, China, a handwritten note that once hung behind the door, meant to gently remind a grandmother with early-onset dementia, has long disappeared. To outsiders, these items may appear trivial and insignificant. But for the family members who keep or once kept them, they hold memory, connection and care.

This dissertation examines the everyday archiving practices of Chinese American families: the informal, often overlooked ways in which individuals document, preserve and make meaning of their lives. It explores how seemingly small and ordinary objects can carry deep emotional significance and shape a sense of belonging and intergenerational connection. In doing so, the study engages with broader questions of memory, affect, identity and archival practice in the context of migration and diaspora.

Overlooked Archives: Theoretical Gaps and Chinese American Realities

In its early development, archival scholarship focused mainly on the records of governments and public institutions (Jenkinson, 1937; Muller et al., 2003; Douglas and Mills, 2018), neglecting the archival possibilities offered by individuals, families and communities (Douglas, 2017). In recent decades, increasing attention has been given to records created by individuals (Douglas and

Alisauskas, 2021) and communities (Caswell et al., 2017). However, little scholarly work has examined archives and archival practices within domestic family contexts, especially those concerning ethnic and diasporic populations. This oversight is not merely a gap in the literature; it reflects and reinforces longstanding assumptions about what counts as an archive and whose experiences are worth preserving.

These gaps in the literature are especially consequential when considering the historical experiences of Chinese Americans. The long history of Chinese migration to the United States dates back to the late 1840s, when most immigrants came from the Taishan region of Guangdong Province. It was not until the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965 that Chinese immigration to the United States began to increase significantly (Zhou, 2009), with immigrants coming from a wider range of places of origin. For many decades, the majority of Chinese Americans were engrossed in the day-to-day struggle to make a living, and few attempted to collect or document materials related to their history (Lai, 1986). Today, according to the Pew Research Center (2023) and the U.S. Census Bureau, there were an estimated 5.5 million Chinese Americans in 2023, accounting for approximately 22% of the U.S. Asian population and making them the largest Asian origin group in the country. Approximately 35% reside in California, with other states hosting large Chinese American populations, including New York, Texas, Washington and Massachusetts. About 60% of Chinese Americans are naturalized immigrants, while the remaining 40% are U.S.-born. While demographically diverse and numerically significant, Chinese Americans continue to be shaped by enduring racialized narratives, most notably the

“model minority (Zhou and Bankston, 2020)” and the “perpetual foreigner (Zhou, 2012)”. In addition, incidents of anti-Asian hate speech and violence increased (Fan et al., 2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic, further deepening social exclusion and undermining the sense of safety and belonging within Chinese American communities.

Research Questions

Bridging gaps in archival theory and diasporic lived experience, this dissertation examines Chinese American family archives and archiving practices through three interrelated research questions:

First, how do Chinese American families engage in everyday archiving, and in what forms do these practices manifest?

Second, what role do seemingly small and ordinary things play in carrying emotional meaning and fostering a sense of belonging across generations and geographies?

Third, how can the study of Chinese American family archives complicate and enrich dominant archival assumptions and practices?

Each of these questions addresses a distinct but interconnected dimension of the study. The first research question examines the everyday archiving practices of Chinese American families. It considers what materials are preserved, why families engage in archiving, how these family archives come into being, where they are stored, how technology shapes archiving practices and what challenges are encountered in the process.

The second question centers on the affective dimensions of family archives, exploring how

emotional connections can transform everyday objects beyond their utilitarian functions. It also examines how such objects acquire significance as reference points of belonging and connection across generations, particularly in contexts shaped by migration and loss.

The third question investigates how insights drawn from Chinese American family archiving can complicate and enrich dominant assumptions and practices in archival studies. It challenges foundational questions within the field, namely, what constitutes an archive, where its value derives from and what role the archivist plays, by centering everyday, intimate and emotionally embedded forms of recordkeeping that are often overlooked in traditional frameworks.

Research Purpose

This dissertation is guided by three primary purposes.

First, it seeks to deepen our understanding of Chinese American family archives and archiving practices, both in terms of how these practices are carried out in everyday life and how they shape the lived experiences of those who engage in them. In particular, the study examines how such practices and materials carry emotional significance and how they foster intergenerational continuity and cross-border connection.

Second, it aims to expand current archival scholarship by foregrounding domestic and intimate forms of archiving that are often overlooked in institution-centered frameworks. By drawing attention to these informal practices, the study contributes to a broader and more inclusive understanding of the archival landscape.

Third, the study seeks to raise greater scholarly awareness of Asian American, particularly

Chinese American, histories and memory work. It aims to contribute to the preservation and transmission of Chinese American heritage within archival studies and in broader conversations about identity and belonging.

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters.

Chapter One introduces the contextual background, identifies gaps in existing scholarship, and presents the central research questions guiding the study. It also outlines the purpose of the research.

Chapter Two reviews relevant literature on family archives, community-based archives, and archives and affect. It identifies key debates and theoretical developments that inform the study, while highlighting the lack of sustained attention to familial and informal archiving practices, as well as the broader neglect of Chinese American experiences in archival scholarship.

Chapter Three discusses the research design. It elaborates the epistemological foundations and qualitative research orientation, details the qualitative methods used in the study and the rationale for their selection, and reflects on questions of positionality, trustworthiness and limitations.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six present the core empirical findings. Chapter Four, addressing Research Question One, examines how Chinese American families engage in everyday archiving practices. Chapter Five, focusing on Research Question Two, investigates the emotional and affective dimensions of family archives. Through two paired examples, it analyzes how seemingly

ordinary items become emotionally charged and foster intergenerational belonging. Chapter Six, centered on Research Question Three, illustrates how the study of Chinese American family archives complicates and enriches dominant archival assumptions and practices.

Chapter Seven concludes the dissertation by synthesizing key findings, discussing theoretical and methodological contributions, outlining practical and societal implications, offering reflective comparisons between family and community archives as well as between Chinese American and Chinese family archives, acknowledging limitations and suggesting directions for future research.

Chapter II. Literature Review

This chapter reviews the body of literature relevant to the study of Chinese American family archives. It engages with several areas, including scholarship on family archives, research on community-based archives with particular attention to studies of Chinese American communities within archival studies, as well as works that examine the intersections of archives and affect.

Family Archives

Archival studies, particularly in their early development, have tended to emphasize archives held in state institutions and other public bodies (Jenkinson, 1937; Muller et al., 2003; Douglas and Mills, 2018), often overlooking the possibilities offered by archival forms created by individuals, families and communities (Douglas, 2017; Douglas and Mills, 2018). In recent decades, attention to community-based archives has grown significantly. These explorations (Flinn, 2007; Caswell, 2014a; Cifor et al., 2018) have broadened our understanding of archives and archival practices, moving beyond the confines of institutional records. However, archives and archival practices situated within private domestic spaces remain comparatively underexplored. As Jennifer Douglas (2017) argues, studying these alternative forms “provides a means of highlighting gaps in and challenging traditional archival theory; contributing to the developing understanding of the affective dimensions of archives and archival work; and reinvigorating archival advocacy.”

A number of studies have examined the definition of family archives, underscoring the importance of how “family” itself is understood in shaping both the scope and interpretation of

such archives. Some definitions take a narrow view, linking family directly to biological ties. This framing positions family as exclusively defined by biological relationships. In contrast, Woodham et al. (2017) adopt a more inclusive understanding, defining “family” as “any grouping of people with a shared bond or identity, whether as friends, housemates, or blood relatives, living in the same space or geographically dispersed.” This broader definition better reflects the realities of many families, whose composition may be based on shared experiences and emotional closeness rather than kinship alone. Moreover, it recognizes that family members do not necessarily live under the same roof, which is particularly relevant in the context of migration and population mobility. Accordingly, this study adopts Woodham et al.’s definition for understanding family, while allowing participants, in practice, to define for themselves who they considered to be part of their family.

The Society of American Archivists, in its webpage under “What Are Archives”, defines archives as “the permanently valuable records – such as letters, reports, accounts, minute books, draft and final manuscripts, and photographs – of people, businesses, and government.” This definition, excerpted from Laura Millar’s (2009) *The Story Behind the Book: Preserving Authors’ and Publishers’ Archives*, illustrates an emphasis on textual and paper-based materials. Such a focus largely reflects an institutional understanding of archives and does not account for the archival practices that take place at the personal, family or community level. Moreover, the notion of “permanent value” similarly derives from institutional expectations about archival worth. In the context of family archiving, however, value is often highly subjective; what is meaningful to one

person may hold little or no significance to others, making the very idea of permanence in value deeply problematic. In recent years, however, an increasing body of research has moved beyond this narrow scope. For instance, Woodham et al. (2017) found that family archives in the United Kingdom often included “candlesticks, wine glasses, medals, jewelry, souvenirs and other ‘objects.’” One of the few studies related to Chinese American family history, conducted by Chao (2016), defines relevant archival materials as “evidence relating to their past, such as photos, videos, diaries, awards, property records, obituaries, birth certificates, immigration records, marriage licenses, military records, [and] household registries.” Drawing on this broader approach, and inspired by the principle of archival pluralism (AERI and PACG, 2011), which seeks to “move from an archival universe dominated by one cultural paradigm to an archival multiverse; from a world constructed in terms of ‘the one’ and ‘the other’ to a world of multiple ways of knowing and practicing, of multiple narratives coexisting in one space”, this study adopts an inclusive conception of archives that embraces a wide range of forms and media.

The definition of family archives has also been examined in existing scholarship. Chen (1987) defines family archives as “materials or historical records formed by families and family members in family affairs and certain social activities.” Here, the creators of the archives are restricted to the family and its members, reflecting an institutional influence that emphasizes records generated in the course of business or human activities. However, this definition overlooks the intergenerational dimension and the ways in which family archives can be transmitted across time. In contrast, Woodham et al. (2017) describe family archives as “documents, photographs,

heirlooms, scrapbooks and a whole range of other items that ‘reveal insights’ into past generations, and preserve family stories.” This broader framing moves beyond the institutional bias toward textual and paper-based materials, encompassing a wider variety of material possessions and objects and explicitly recognizing the significance of intergenerational heritage. While this study reviews existing definitions of family archives, it does not impose a predetermined definition. Instead, it adopts a broadly inclusive understanding of what constitutes a family archive. In practice, this research is guided by the agency of Chinese American families themselves, allowing participants to determine what they consider to be family archives and what items these archives contain.

In addition, several studies have examined the characteristics of family archives. Sun (1996) argued that family archives are marked by attributes such as private ownership, a wide range of archived objects and diverse materials. The study also acknowledged the diversity of their composition, emphasizing that they are not confined to paper-based records. Similarly, Zhang (1997) identified characteristics including their often-random creation, rich content, multiple values and varied sources. This study provided an important foundation for understanding the characteristics of family archives, including their motivations, contents, values and provenance. Other research has focused on the importance and significance of family archives and family archiving. Feng (2007) suggested that family archiving is not only “conducive to encouraging social participation in the construction of national archival resources” but also “has a long-term, gradually growing positive effect on the construction of history, culture and social identity for

individuals.” In this work, family archives were regarded as an integral component of the national archival resources, and their significance in documenting history and shaping identity was acknowledged. Similarly, Jia (2015) analyzed the relationships between family archives, collective memory and identity, arguing that “we should understand the importance of family archives in a broader social context” and emphasizing their crucial role in shaping identity.

Digital technology has also had a significant impact on the curation and preservation of family archives. Some existing studies have noted the influence of technology on family archiving; however, it is noteworthy that much of this work originates from other fields, such as design and human–computer interaction, rather than from archival studies. Drawing on ethnographic interviews, design activities and focus groups, Stevens et al. (2003) presented the Living Memory Box, “a device and service to assist families in preserving memories in a variety of media forms.” Similarly, Kirk et al. (2010) introduced the family archive device, “an interactive multi-touch tabletop technology with integrated capture facility for the archiving of sentimental artefacts and memorabilia.” They described this device as “a technology probe to help us open up current family archiving practices and to explore family archiving in situ.” These studies have provided important technological support for family archiving. However, in the absence of greater involvement from archival professionals, there remains room for improvement in understanding archival needs and practices, and in aligning them more effectively with technological support. In addition, recognizing that “the informal nature of home movies makes it difficult to use fully automated techniques for scene detection and annotation,” Abowd et al. (2003) developed the Family Video

Archive, “a tool to give consumers the ability to annotate and browse large collections of informal family movies.” This study facilitated the description and use of audiovisual archives. However, as noted earlier, these studies originate from fields such as design rather than archival studies. While they provide tools and methods for supporting family archiving, they do not engage with questions about the nature of family archives or the underlying practices of family archiving.

Community-based Archives, Chinese Americans and Underrepresented Groups

Over the past two decades, community archiving has emerged as a critical topic within archival discourse in many parts of the world. Although this study focuses on archives at the family level rather than the community level, family archives and community archives are closely interconnected. Accordingly, this section also reviews relevant scholarship on community-based archives. Such a review, including how “community archives” are defined, helps to clarify the distinctions as well as the overlaps between family and community archives.

Gilliland and Flinn (2013) observe that “the characteristics of what are being labeled as community archives and community archiving vary considerably across different settings, driven by complexes of considerations such as social justice, a focus on common identities and experiences, and a desire to document communities historically under-represented in mainstream archives.” This variation is evident in how community archives are understood in the United Kingdom and the United States. For example, UK-based scholars Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens and Elizabeth Shepherd (2009) define community archives as “collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise

some level of control.” They emphasize that “the defining characteristic of community archives is the active participation of a community in documenting and making accessible the history of their particular group and/or locality on their own terms.” This definition highlights the autonomy of community members in determining and controlling their archives. Notably, it does not provide a more specific delineation of what constitutes a “community,” which may be based not only on shared identity but also on geographic locality. By contrast, in the United States, “community” in this context often refers to historically underrepresented groups and the phenomenon of community archives is closely intertwined with histories of power and oppression (Caswell et al., 2021). Caswell et al. (2016) argue that “those who have been disempowered by oppressive systems, those who have been ‘symbolically annihilated,’ those whose histories have been ignored, maligned, misrepresented, and/or grossly distorted by mainstream memory institutions, feel the need to create their own autonomous community archives.” In the U.S. context, then, community archives function as a means of empowering marginalized groups, enabling them to challenge the omissions and misrepresentations of mainstream archival institutions in documenting their histories.

Community archives and their relationship to identity have been widely examined in archival scholarship. In *Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma*, Gamson (1995) observed that “while recent social movement theory has paid attention to the creation and negotiation of collective identity, it has not paid sufficient attention to the simultaneous impulse to destabilize identities from within.” He further argued that “fixed identity categories are both the

basis for oppression and the basis for political power,” emphasizing that identity is at once constructed, questioned and destabilized. This discussion of identity has provided important theoretical grounding for many identity-based community archives. Drawing on the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) as a primary research site, Caswell (2014b) proposed three key theoretical concepts underpinning the formation of identity-based community archives: strategic essentialism, memoryscape and archival imaginaries. She further contended that “independent community-based archives are crucial tools for fighting the symbolic annihilation of historically marginalized groups,” once again underscoring the vital role of community archives in empowering marginalized communities defined by shared identities. Using focus group data from users of five different community-based archives, Brilmyer et al. (2019) explored “community archives users’ imaginations, anxieties and affect regarding other archival users and the shifting boundaries of their community.” They introduced the concept of reciprocal archival imaginaries to describe “the circular, continually entangled relationships between archival users, their imaginaries, and community-based archives.” This study highlights a crucial point that both communities and community archives are not fixed entities but shifting spaces continually shaped through the imaginaries and interactions between archives and their users. This work extends the discussion of boundaries in identity-based community archives, with reciprocal archival imaginaries enriching the theoretical depth of the field. In *Community Archives and the Limitations of Identity: Considering Discursive Impact on Material Needs*, Paschild (2012) examined how identity discourse, heavily influenced by postmodernism, has shaped critical

analysis of community archives. Paschild argued that “an overarching emphasis on questions of identity can distract community institutions from pragmatic evaluations of sustainable practice and can inadvertently mire archivists in a marginalizing rhetoric that blurs the issues in hand.” This reflection invites consideration of the extent to which an emphasis on identity is beneficial or, in some cases, potentially limiting for community archives.

Politics, power and activism have also been central to the discourse on community-based archives. Howard Zinn (1977) famously urged archivists to “compile a whole new world of documentary material” that reflects the experiences of underrepresented communities. As one of the earlier works at the intersection of archives and activism, Zinn’s article helped shift perceptions of archives as neutral repositories, instead framing them as potential tools for giving voice to marginalized groups. In their paper, Williams and Drake (2017) described the conception and development of *A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland*, using this case to advance “the archive as a postcustodial model for other grassroots organizations protesting various forms of state violence.” This study challenged traditional models of archival management, and the postcustodial model it proposed provides an important example for community archival initiatives seeking to empower marginalized groups. The rukus! archive project, founded in London by Ajamu X and Topher Campbell, seeks to “collect, preserve, exhibit, and otherwise make available for the first time to the public historical, cultural, and artistic materials related to the Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities in the United Kingdom through a variety of activities and events” (Ajamu et al., 2009). In *Love and Lubrication in the Archives, or rukus!: A Black*

Queer Archive for the United Kingdom, Ajamu et al. (2009) examined the critical dialogues this archive fosters with “both mainstream heritage practices and dominant Black and queer identity discourses.” Published in 2009, this paper was among the earlier works to introduce the practices of community archives. Similarly, Wakimoto et al. (2013) explored “the role of activism in the community archives and implications for re-examining the role of activism to incorporate communities into the heart of archival professional work” through an analysis of three queer community archives in California. They concluded that “only through being an activist and actively creating connections with community members and collecting records of groups who have been historically marginalized can the archives reflect the diversity of society and actually document the whole of the communities.” This study explicitly articulated the necessity of community archives’ engagement in politics and activism, emphasizing the importance of strengthening connections with community members. These examples illustrate that community archives often serve as a means for marginalized groups to resist the marginalization imposed by mainstream archival institutions, making power and empowerment central concerns. Such struggles over representation inevitably engage with activism and social justice. However, family archives differ in significant ways. The preservation of family archives does not necessarily carry the same political motivation or activist intent. While the preservation of family archives within underrepresented communities may offer valuable micro-level perspectives that complement mainstream historical narratives, the act itself is typically not grounded in an explicit activist agenda.

The relationship between community archives and liberation has been a prominent theme in recent archival scholarship. In many respects, discussions of liberatory memory work are closely tied to the central concerns of community archives, particularly issues of power, activism and social justice. Building on this concept, Michelle Caswell (2021), in her book *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*, identified three core dimensions of liberatory memory work—the temporal, the affective and the material—and proposed corresponding liberatory objectives for archival theory and practice: chrono-autonomy, self-recognition and redistribution. This framework provides a more concrete pathway for enacting liberatory memory work in archival practice. Using autoethnography to reflect on the work of the Texas After Violence Project (TAVP), Solis (2018) examined the dynamics of symbolic annihilation in the context of state violence. Solis argued that “the personal stories and experiences of victims and survivors of state violence are critical counter-narratives to dominant discourses on violence,” and that such counter-narratives “confront and challenge the social, cultural, and ideological power of symbolic annihilation.”

In addition to these research themes, some scholars have explored the question of autonomy in community archives (Jiang and Sun, 2024), as well as their implications for dominant archival theories and practices (Wurl, 2005; Zavala et al., 2017; Sutherland et al., 2021). Others have focused on questions of sustainability, addressing the long-term viability and resource challenges faced by community archives (Newman, 2012; Lian and Oliver, 2018).

At the 2022 Archival Education and Research Initiative (AERI) meeting, Hung et al. (2022) observed that “with the notable exception of the South Asian American Digital Archive, Asian

American archives, archivists and archival patrons are largely absent in LIS literature and education.” Beyond the South Asian American Digital Archive, several ongoing archival and oral history projects documenting the experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities warrant attention. Huynh et al. (2022) introduced the *Visualizing Our Identities and Cultures for Empowerment* project, based at the University of California, Irvine, which sought to “train student researchers in the photovoice methodology to document the experiences of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders during the COVID-19 pandemic.” They argued that “this approach could serve as a model for other Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions that embrace the mission of ‘service’ as well as ‘empowerment’ and ‘care’ for marginalized communities.” Similarly, Phuc Duy Nhu To et al. (2022) contended that “quantitative studies on the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 do not reveal qualitative experiences of a racialized pandemic.” Employing photovoice, described as “an ideal archival and pedagogical tool to capture the lived experience of AAPI communities”, they highlighted “the importance of students as co-producers of archival knowledge.” Collectively, these studies have significantly enriched the documentation and preservation of archives related to Asian American communities. It should also be noted that these studies and projects have remained largely focused on the community level rather than the family level.

The Chinese American community, historically underrepresented in archives (Han, 2025; Han and Han, 2025), is the largest Asian ethnic group in the United States (He, 2016). A number of community-based archival institutions focus on preserving Chinese American history, including

the Chinese Historical Society of America, the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California and the Chinese American Museum. However, despite the existence of various projects and cultural heritage institutions dedicated to Chinese American archives and history in practice, little research within the archival studies field has directly addressed issues concerning Chinese Americans.

In 2016, *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, the journal of the Chinese Historical Society of America, published a special issue titled *Chinese American Archives, Collections, and Librarians*. As the editor of this issue, Yan He (2016) stated that it “focus[es] on introducing the archives, collections and librarians of Chinese diaspora studies” and aims “to offer insights into the content, historical significance, digitalization process, and metadata description of select Chinese American collections.” Focusing on the Him Mark Lai Collection at the University of California, Berkeley—“the most comprehensive scholarly collection for Chinese American and Overseas Chinese studies in the country”—Shih (2016) sought “to provide a general overview of what has been done to improve onsite and online access to the Him Mark Lai Collection; to highlight Lai’s unparalleled newspaper collection and archival materials as primary sources for teaching and research in Chinese American Studies; and to examine how to best promote the usage of the Him Mark Lai Collection from an external librarian’s perspective.” In the same issue, Chiu (2016) examined the potential of websites as primary sources. She argued that “hometown websites of new Fuzhou migrants can constitute a new genre of primary documentation to supplement our understanding of this invisible community and the culture of these immigrants in

Manhattan Chinatown from 2004 to 2016.” Through online discourse analysis, Chiu found that these websites revealed “the social expression of Chinese immigrants mixing hometown memories and desires.” Much of this research approaches Chinese American–related archives through practical projects, introducing existing resources and collections. Unfortunately, theoretical studies of Chinese American archives within the field of archival studies remain scarce.

In summary, these scholarly works represent valuable efforts to document and preserve Chinese American archives and history, offering useful reference points for exploring how Chinese American materials are maintained in institutional archives. However, the often-overlooked archival practices embedded in the everyday lives of Chinese American families have received little attention. How Chinese Americans preserve archives within private domestic spaces and how these practices operate across generations and transnational contexts, remains underexplored.

Archives, Affects and Emotions

In recent decades, affect (both as a verb and as a noun) has become a major focus of fields as diverse as psychology and psychoanalysis, neuroscience and critical theory (Cifor and Gilliland, 2016). Psychologist Robert Plutchik (2001) identified eight primary emotions: anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation, trust and joy. These emotions have since been recognized within archival studies as also manifesting in archival engagement, leading to a growing exploration of the intersections between archives and affect. In November 2014, a symposium on *Affect and the Archive* was held at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), bringing together leading scholars not only in archival studies, but also in cultural studies, gender studies, literature and

anthropology (Cifor and Gilliland, 2016). In 2016, *Archival Science* published a special issue titled *Affect and the Archive, Archives and Their Affects*. As co-editors of this issue, Cifor and Gilliland (2016) explained that “one goal of this special issue, therefore, has been to draw together and elucidate some of different disciplinary understandings and point to their potential for research and practice in the archival field,” and “another goal for this special issue, therefore, has been to begin to probe what the archival field might offer that would cross-inform understanding of and debates about the nature, role, and effects of affects in such diverse fields as psychology, neuroscience, and critical theory.” This special issue is, to the best of my knowledge, the earliest systematic effort in the archival field to introduce and engage with affect theory.

As one of the earlier scholars to examine the intersections of archives and affect, Cifor (2016) “provided an introduction to affect theory for the archival field,” arguing that “an engagement with affect theory is a significant way in which dimensions of social justice for the archival field can be elucidated, fleshed out, and ultimately confronted.” Building on this foundation, a series of subsequent studies has further enriched the discussion of archives and affect. Using two queer/ed and transgender archives as sites of inquiry, Lee (2016) explored “the erotic and affective nature of accessing the archival body in its multimodal forms.” Lee further argued that “the understanding of the record and its affects can be enriched by temporal perspectives that acknowledge distinct and diverse temporalities and promote generative understandings of potentially meaningful progressions of time and everyday rhythms embodied within archival materials.” Gilliland and Caswell (2016) proposed two new terms—impossible imaginaries and imagined records—noting

that “these concepts offer important affective counterbalances and sometimes resistance to dominant legal, bureaucratic, historical, and forensic notions of evidence that so often fall short in explaining the capacity of records and archives to motivate, inspire, anger, and traumatize.” This study moved beyond the traditional view of archives as evidence, drawing scholarly attention to the ways in which archives interact with emotions, particularly in shaping individual and collective action. Moreover, Jennifer Douglas’s research focuses on the roles of recordkeeping and archive-making in the intimate and emotional lives of individuals and communities. Drawing on theoretical and clinical literature on bereavement, Douglas et al. (2019) introduced the concept of grief work and “investigated some ways in which grief work can be performed through the creation, use, organization, and preservation of records.” Also, Sloan, Vanderfluit and Douglas (2019) reported “the findings of the survey issued to Canadian archivists regarding their understanding and experiences of secondary trauma,” drawing attention to “the ways that archivists experience their work and interactions with records and researchers emotionally.” They also proposed that “more research should be undertaken to characterize the role(s) of emotion(s) in archival work and to determine the most effective ways of preparing archivists for emotional work.” In addition, Douglas and Alisauskas (2021) conducted in-depth interviews with eight bereaved mothers to explore “ideas about what records are and what they do.” They identified four parent-defined concepts of records: objects as records, records of/on the body, events and rituals as records, and spaces and places as records. The study also outlined four prominent types of records work emerging from the interviews: records as proof of life and love; recordkeeping as a form of

parenting; recordkeeping as a means of communicating and continuing a relationship; and recordkeeping as imagining. The application of affect theory in the archival field has thus expanded both the definition of what constitutes an archive and our understanding of the value that archives hold.

Moreover, in recent years increasing attention has been paid to the mental health impacts that arise in engaging with archives, with particular focus on trauma (Laurent and Wright, 2020; Wright and Laurent, 2021; Regehr et al., 2025). This line of research reflects a human-centered orientation within archival studies and holds significant value for fostering healthier and more sustainable archival environments.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that the intersections of archives and affect have made significant progress, particularly over the past decade. However, research on archives and affect remains largely confined to institutional, personal and community archives, with little attention given to family archives, particularly to their conveyed emotional value and the emotional demands involved in engaging with them. As a form of memory work situated within the intimate and private space of the home, family archives are deeply intertwined with interpersonal emotions and memories. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how emotion is manifested within the context of family archiving.

Chapter III. Research Design

Chapter Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework that guided this study on Chinese American family archives and archiving practices. Grounded in a constructivist and interpretivist epistemology, the study employs a qualitative, multi-method research design that integrates in-depth interviews, object elicitation and contextual observation.

The chapter begins by elaborating the study's epistemological foundations and qualitative research orientation. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the three primary data collection methods. This discussion first introduces recruitment strategies and demographic characteristics of the participants, then explains the rationale for selecting each method and how it was implemented, including the ethical considerations that shaped the research process. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the researcher's positionality, strategies for ensuring trustworthiness and the study's methodological limitations.

Together, these components provide a comprehensive account of how the study was designed and conducted, and how the methodological choices aligned with its overarching research goals and questions.

Epistemological Foundations and Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach that is both exploratory and interpretive in nature. Its constructivist and interpretivist epistemological stance posits that meaning is socially constructed and contextually situated rather than objectively discovered. Constructivism

foregrounds how archival meaning is shaped through Chinese Americans' lived experiences, while interpretivism emphasizes the importance of understanding participants' perspectives and the significance they assign to seemingly ordinary objects and practices. Together, these philosophical orientations support a qualitative design attentive to the narrative and affective dimensions of family archiving.

A qualitative approach is well-aligned with the aims of this study, which does not seek to quantify behavior or identify causal relationships, but instead investigates the lived, intimate and emotionally resonant aspects of archival practice within diasporic family life through personal narratives. This approach is particularly suited to exploring participants' interpretations of their practices, the meanings they attach to specific objects, and the emotional and cultural significance carried by these materials and the practices surrounding them. Recognizing that Chinese Americans have diverse experiences, this approach allows for attention to complexity, variation, and nuance across family contexts, and centers the importance of listening carefully to how individuals articulate their own narratives. In addition, the flexibility of qualitative methods enables reflexive engagement throughout the research process (Dado et al., 2023), allowing insights to emerge not only through close interaction with participants and iterative interpretation of the data, but also through an evolving research design that responded to new understandings and contextual shifts as the study unfolded.

Research Methods

Building on this qualitative research approach and the constructivist and interpretivist

epistemological stance, the study employs a set of methods designed to investigate three central areas of inquiry. These research questions have been introduced earlier in the dissertation and are therefore not repeated here in full. Broadly, however, they concern how Chinese American families engage in everyday archiving; how archival materials and practices carry emotional significance and foster belonging; and how these insights may complicate and enrich existing professional archival paradigms.

To explore these questions, the study draws on three primary qualitative methods: in-depth semi-structured interviews, object-elicitation inquiry and contextual observation through home visits and virtual walkthroughs. In addition to these primary methods, the study is also informed by an archival processing project I conducted at the UCLA East Asian Library, which involved arranging and describing the family archives of an immigrant family. Although this project did not directly involve Chinese American families and thus does not contribute empirical data to this study, it played an important formative role in my approach to this research. The experience helped shape my attentiveness to the informal characteristics and affective dimensions of family archives—concerns that became central to the conceptual framing and analytical orientation of this dissertation as it progressed.

In-depth Interview

In-depth semi-structured interviews were the central method in this study. This method is well-suited to the study's aims, as it yields deep, rich, individualized and contextualized data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The semi-structured format allows for consistency across interviews while

providing the flexibility to tailor questions to participants' unique experiences. This adaptability also fosters a reflexive research process, enabling ongoing refinement of prompts in response to emerging insights. Moreover, interviews establish an essential foundation for complementary methods, such as object-elicitation inquiry, by helping identify the contours and dynamics of family archiving practices. These insights, in turn, allow for a deeper exploration of the emotional significance of specific objects and their role in shaping intergenerational belonging. These interviews proved to be particularly useful for understanding how Chinese American families engage in everyday archiving and for grounding a theoretical critique of professional archival paradigms, both of these aspects corresponding to the first and third research questions.

Participant Recruitment and Demographics

Participant recruitment for this study combined in-person and online strategies and was supplemented in the later stage by snowball sampling. Together, these approaches, although it took time, helped ensure a diverse sample of Chinese American family experiences across generations, ages, geographic regions and migration backgrounds.

In-person recruitment efforts were conducted primarily in the greater Los Angeles area. First, printed flyers were distributed and displayed in public spaces within the UCLA Asian American Studies Department, the UCLA Asian American Studies Center and the UCLA Asia Pacific Center. Second, I attended campus-based events hosted by organizations such as the UCLA Association of Chinese Americans, where I engaged with student leaders and sought opportunities to recruit participants through their networks and events. Third, flyers were also shared at community events

held in predominantly Chinese American neighborhoods in the Greater LA area such as the San Gabriel Valley. In-person recruitment only yielded a small number of participants, however, and was limited by geographic scope and proved insufficient in generating a diverse sample.

To address these limitations, I used online recruitment to reach a broader and more demographically varied pool of participants. This included outreach to institutional partners and community organizations such as the UCLA Asian American Studies Center, the UCLA Asia Pacific Center, the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California and the Chinese American Librarians Association, whose networks and social media channels were instrumental in circulating the study's recruitment information. I also posted recruitment calls in relevant Facebook groups focused on Chinese American issues. Although online efforts occasionally attracted spam responses, they significantly enhanced the demographic breadth of participant interest and enrollment.

In addition, snowball sampling played a crucial role, particularly in the later stages of recruitment. Participants were invited to share information about the study with others in their networks who might be interested in participating, and I also relied on personal contacts within Chinese American communities who served as gatekeepers and introduced additional potential participants. This approach proved especially effective in enhancing intergenerational diversity since in the earlier phases of recruitment, most respondents were second-generation or later Chinese Americans. The snowball sampling specifically attempted to reach more first-generation immigrants.

These approaches resulted in a total of 20 Chinese American participants being interviewed for this study. Detailed demographic information is presented in Table 3-1. with pseudonyms used to ensure participant confidentiality.

Table 3-1. Demographic Overview of Participants

	Pseudonym	Generation	Gender	Age	Born Location	Current Location
1	Jennifer	Second Generation	Female	33	Los Angeles, CA	Los Angeles, CA
2	Zelda	First Generation	Female	69	Wuhan	Los Angeles, CA
3	Frank	Second Generation	Male	46	San Francisco, CA	Los Angeles, CA
4	Daniel	Third Generation	Male	21	San Francisco, CA	Los Angeles, CA
5	Morgan	Second Generation	Female	27	California	Renton, WA
6	Daisy	Second Generation	Female	30	Chicago, IL	Urbana, IL
7	Sarah	Second Generation	Female	36	Texas	Newark, CA
8	Eric	Second Generation	Male	74	Los Angeles, CA	Bay Area, CA
9	Shirley	1.5 Generation	Female	77	Guangdong	Los Angeles, CA
10	Zoey	Second Generation	Female	35	Rochester, NY	East Lansing, MI
11	Alex	Second Generation	Male	28	Portland, OR	Princeton, NJ
12	Zina	Third Generation	Female	27	San Francisco, CA	Los Angeles, CA
13	Isabel	Second Generation	Female	22	Seattle, WA	Seattle, WA
14	Kelly	Sixth Generation	Female	40	Orange County, CA	Montclair, NJ
15	Elaine	1.5 Generation	Female	76	Nanjing	St Simons Island, GA
16	Kale	Second Generation	Male	28	Salt Lake City, UT	Los Angeles, CA
17	Kathy	1.5 Generation	Female	45	Hong Kong	Seattle, WA
18	Linda	First Generation	Female	77	Hangzhou	Orange County, CA

19	Betty	1.5 Generation	Female	44	Taiwan	Berlin
20	Helen	First Generation	Female	59	Suzhou	New York City, NY

Of the 20 participants, 5 identified as male and 15 as female. Ages ranged from 21 to 77. 7 participants were first- or 1.5-generation immigrants who were born outside the United States, while 13 were second-generation or later, including 1 sixth-generation Chinese American. Participants were geographically diverse, residing in western states such as California and Washington, eastern states such as New Jersey and New York, and midwestern and southern states such as Michigan, Illinois and Georgia. One participant had relocated from the United States to Germany. This range of demographic characteristics reflects a diverse sample of Chinese American family experiences.

Constructing and Conducting Interviews

Following the norms of semi-structured interviews, I developed an interview protocol to provide structure while also allowing flexibility during the interviews. The protocol included core questions that were asked of all participants, along with space for tailored follow-up questions depending on the flow of each conversation. While the protocol served as a guiding framework, it was not a rigid script; the order and phrasing of questions varied to accommodate participants' individual contexts and responses. The interview guide was developed based on a review of relevant literature and closely aligned with the study's research questions. It was also iteratively refined throughout the data collection process. For example, the initial protocol included several questions about transnational archival practices, but these topics proved less relevant in early

interviews. As a result, related questions were revised or omitted in subsequent interviews to better reflect participants' lived experiences. The full interview protocol is included in the Appendix. Prior to each interview, participants were sent an informed consent form to review and sign. At the beginning of the interview, before recording started, I reiterated the voluntary nature of their participation, clarified any questions they had and ensured that informed consent was fully obtained. Only after participants confirmed their understanding and agreement did the interview proceed.

With the exception of a few in-person interviews, the majority of interviews were conducted via online conferencing platforms. This decision was guided by participant preferences as well as the geographic dispersion of interviewees across different regions, which made virtual interviews a more practical and flexible option. Most interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. A few fell outside this range, with the shortest lasting 43 minutes and the longest extending to 126 minutes. To facilitate fuller participation and expression, interviews were conducted in the language preferred by each participant. Most interviews were conducted in English, while a small number were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. For analysis purposes, all non-English interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the researcher.

Object Elicitation

This study also employed object elicitation as a method of participant-guided and object-centered interviewing. As a form of material-based qualitative inquiry, this approach invites participants to select and share an item of personal significance, prompting them to narrate the

memories, emotions and meanings associated with it. This method centers on the relationship between people and their objects, offering insight into how material artifacts embody meaning and reflect broader aspects of lived experience and symbolic connection (O'Brien and Charura, 2024). Rather than focusing solely on verbal reflection, object elicitation leverages tangible materials to support storytelling, particularly around experiences and feelings that may be difficult to articulate or invoke through conversation alone (Willig, 2017). Susan Nordstrom (2013) coined the term “object interviews” to describe a related technique used to explore how family history genealogists relate documents, photographs and other artifacts to their ancestors, thereby providing an alternative to subject-centered conventional qualitative interviews that position participants as the sole producers of meaning. Instead, object interviews challenge the binary separation of subject and object and propose a relational space in which both humans and things co-produce meaning.

This approach was especially valuable for exploring how everyday objects carry emotional significance and contribute to intergenerational belonging—core concerns of the second research question—and for grounding a theoretical critique of professional archival paradigms, as addressed in the third research question.

Rationale for Method Selection

The selection of object elicitation as a research method was informed by several key considerations.

First, this method helps to shift the power dynamics between researcher and participant by empowering participants and facilitating richer, more participant-led storytelling. Object

elicitation has been described as a decolonized approach to research (Charura and Wicaksono, 2023) that demonstrates deep respect for and values participant voice and experience. It adopts a “power-with” rather than “power-over” stance (Proctor, 2021; O’Brien and Charura, 2024), resisting colonizing dynamics in which researchers prioritize answering their own questions over engaging with the diverse worldviews and lived experiences that participants bring to the research process (Charura and Wicaksono, 2023). By supporting participant agency, object elicitation enables more personalized and contextually grounded narratives of archival meaning-making.

Second, object elicitation is particularly effective for exploring the emotional dimensions of family archives. This method has been increasingly employed in research involving marginalized or vulnerable populations such as individuals coping with physical or mental health conditions (Solway et al., 2016; Willig, 2017), those navigating processes of recovery (Romano et al., 2012), as well as refugees and asylum seekers (O’Brien and Charura, 2024), particularly when the research involves emotionally sensitive or potentially traumatic topics. In these contexts, object elicitation offers a gentler and more participant-centered entry point into difficult conversations. By grounding discussion in a self-chosen object, this approach allows participants to maintain a sense of control over what and how they share, while also evoking emotionally rich, deeply personal narratives. Its material focus can help reduce the emotional intensity often associated with direct questioning, creating a reflective space that fosters expression while minimizing potential harm. In addition, engaging with a tangible object that holds personal significance enables participants to ground their reflections in sensory and material experience, which then often

provides a more immediate and embodied access point to memory. In the context of this study, where family archives are intimately tied to affect, identity and belonging, object elicitation provides a powerful entry point into participants' lived experiences.

Third, object elicitation serves as a powerful complement to traditional interviews. Inviting participants to reflect on a personally meaningful object helps elicit memories and emotions that may be difficult to articulate through verbal prompts alone. Studies (Willig, 2017; O'Brien and Charura, 2024) have shown that, compared to conventional interviews, participants often feel more at ease and better able to express themselves in culturally authentic ways when engaging with self-selected objects. Many participants have described object elicitation as a distinct and more empowering experience, which feels less interrogative and more participatory, thus fostering greater openness and freedom of expression.

Implementation and Process

Before the interview, participants were invited to identify an item to which they felt emotionally attached and bring it to the session. During the interview, they were encouraged to share the stories, memories and emotions associated with the object. In most cases, participants introduced the item via online video conferencing, often holding it up to the camera and displaying it. When the selected item was a digital artifact, such as a digital photograph or a 3D model file generated through scanning, it was typically shared through screen-sharing. In a few instances, participants presented their object during in-person interviews. Participants were then encouraged to narrate the memories, emotions and personal meanings connected to the object, as well as its

broader significance within their family or migration histories. Object elicitation was usually introduced in the second half of the interview, after initial rapport had been established and participants had begun reflecting on their family archiving practices. This timing allowed for more open, comfortable engagement with emotionally significant materials. The conversations were open-ended, which allowed participants to guide the depth and direction of their reflections.

As the researcher, I also adopted a stance of empathetic attentiveness throughout the object elicitation process, particularly when participants displayed strong emotional responses such as crying, extended silences or visible distress. In these moments, I paused the conversation when necessary, acknowledged the emotional weight of their sharing and provided space for participants to process their feelings. I reminded them that they could skip questions, take a break or stop the interview at any time. I also remained attentive to participants' comfort levels throughout, offering alternatives when they preferred to describe their object rather than display it on screen. While many participants were able to visually present their objects via video or screen-sharing, others chose to describe them verbally when the items were not readily available or a visual display was not feasible. In each case, participants were encouraged to communicate in whatever mode felt most comfortable to them.

With participants' informed consent, all object elicitation sessions were audio- and video-recorded, which was especially important for capturing visual demonstrations in virtual settings, and were then transcribed and incorporated into the broader data analysis. Participants were also invited to share a photograph of the object, or, in cases where the item itself was a photograph, the

image itself, for possible inclusion in the dissertation. All visual materials were shared voluntarily and with explicit, informed consent.

Contextual Observation

As a complement to in-depth interviews and object elicitation, this study incorporated contextual observation to better understand how participants engage with family archives within their everyday environments. Conducted through both in-person home visits and virtual walkthroughs, this method provided insight into how archival materials are situated, displayed, stored or otherwise integrated into participants' domestic spaces. By observing archival practices, contextual observation helped capture dimensions of family archiving *in situ*, including spatial arrangements, the ways archival materials are collected, organized and displayed.

This approach enriched the analysis by connecting participants' narratives in the physical and social contexts where family archiving takes place, offering a more holistic understanding of these practices. This method contributed directly to addressing the first and third research questions by offering grounded insights into how archiving practices are carried out in everyday life, and by providing contextual understanding that both informs a critique of and enriches professional archival paradigms.

Rationale for Method Selection

The use of contextual observation in this study was guided by two primary considerations.

First, this method situates family archiving practices within their immediate social and cultural environments, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of how meaning is

constructed in everyday life. This aligns with the study's constructivist and interpretivist epistemological stance, which emphasizes that meaning is not pre-given but contextually shaped through lived experience. By observing how participants collect, organize and display family archives in their homes, this method offers direct insight into the spatial and visual dimensions of how family archives are integrated into daily life. For example, how materials are arranged, stored or symbolically positioned within the home.

Second, contextual observation served to complement and deepen the insights generated through interviews and object elicitation. Preliminary interviews revealed that participants often perceived certain practices, such as saving receipts, as so routine that they initially believed they had no relevant family archiving behaviors. Without prompting or visual cues, these practices could easily remain unspoken or overlooked. Contextual observation helped surface these often taken-for-granted aspects of archiving by drawing attention to the small and habitual family archival practices. In doing so, it provided an additional analytical layer that enriched the overall understanding of family archiving as a lived and daily process.

Implementation and Process

Contextual observation was implemented in conjunction with in-depth interviews, either through home visits or virtual walkthroughs, depending on participants' locations and preferences. In one case, a participant described the arrangement of family archival materials in a previous residence and shared photographs taken at the time. With their informed consent, these images were included in the dissertation as part of the data.

For in-person sessions, I was invited into participants' homes, where I observed how family archival materials were collected, stored and displayed within the domestic setting. These observations took place with participants' full consent and often followed the interview, allowing a natural transition into shared exploration of physical spaces. For participants located outside Southern California or those who preferred remote participation, virtual walkthroughs were conducted via video conferencing platforms. In these sessions, participants used their phone or computer camera to guide me through their archival spaces, showing how materials were organized, where they were stored and what kinds of folders or containers were used. They narrated their decisions and everyday archiving habits throughout the walkthroughs. These walkthroughs varied in depth and formality depending on each participant's comfort level and the layout of their space.

Observations were not rigidly structured but remained open and participant-led, responsive to the narratives they offered and their willingness to share. With informed consent, key segments of these sessions were audio- and video-recorded. These contextual details were later integrated with interview transcripts during the analysis phase, providing a richer, more layered understanding of family archiving practices.

Additionally, it is worth noting the steps taken to protect participant rights and maintain ethical integrity throughout the observational process. To protect participants' privacy and uphold ethical standards, all contextual observations were conducted with participants' full, informed consent. Participants maintained control over what to show and discuss and were reminded throughout the process that they could decline to share any space, object or information at any time

without consequence. All recordings and photographs taken during the observations were securely stored, and any identifying details were anonymized or excluded from the final dissertation to ensure confidentiality. Particular care was taken during home visits to avoid an extractive or one-sided dynamic (Igwe et al., 2022; Caswell and Robinson-Sweet, 2024) in the research relationship. When invited into participants' homes, I made thoughtful efforts to express appreciation for their time and hospitality. This included expressing verbal gratitude, bringing small gifts (such as souvenirs brought from China) and, in some cases, offering to share a meal afterward. These gestures were not intended as compensation but rather as expressions of mutual respect and relational care, in line with community-based and culturally sensitive research practices (Caswell et al., 2021).

Positionality and Reflexivity

As a Chinese researcher conducting a study on Chinese American families, I occupy a position that is both insider and outsider. On one hand, I share certain linguistic, cultural and historical referents with many of my participants, which facilitated rapport, fostered trust and enabled a deeper appreciation of the affective textures of their stories. More specifically, sharing the Chinese language allowed me to build closeness and trust with participants who preferred to be interviewed in Chinese, enabling them to express themselves more fully in a familiar linguistic context. My cultural and historical background also allowed me to better understand certain traditions, values and social norms that shaped participants' practices and the emotional significance of their family archives. Furthermore, as someone who was born and raised in China

and later pursued doctoral studies in the United States, I could relate empathetically to the experiences of first-generation immigrants, particularly around the emotional and cultural challenges of adapting to life in a new environment. On the other hand, as someone outside the Chinese American community and without lived experience in a multigenerational immigrant household, my own trajectory shaped the ways I listened, the questions I asked and the interpretive frameworks I brought to the research. My academic training in both Chinese and U.S. academic institutions informed how I understood archiving, memory and diaspora, and inevitably influenced how I interpreted participants' narratives.

Throughout the research process, I adopted a reflexive stance that acknowledged the impact of my social positioning and disciplinary training. Reflexivity in this study was not a one-time acknowledgment but an ongoing, iterative practice embedded at every stage of the research. On several occasions, participants directly asked why I chose to pursue this line of inquiry, prompting me to revisit and refine my motivations and rearticulate my personal and scholarly connection to the topic of Chinese American family archives. This reflexive engagement also shaped the development of the research design. For instance, insights from early interviews led me to revise aspects of the interview protocol and to more consciously consider how to support participant agency, which became especially salient in the implementation of the object elicitation method. These adaptive processes underscored my commitment to conducting research that is both ethically attuned and responsive to participants' lived realities and ways of understanding their own archival practices.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

Given the subjective nature of qualitative findings, this study draws on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework for evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative inquiry. In particular, I focus here on two central dimensions: credibility and transferability.

Credibility refers to “the degree to which the findings accurately reflect the reality that the participants experienced” (Ahmed, 2024). To enhance credibility, several strategies were employed. First, I maintained an open and reflexive stance throughout the research process. This involved acknowledging my own positionality, including both its advantages and potential biases, and engaging in ongoing critical reflection to revise the research design and interview approach accordingly. Participant-centered methods, such as object elicitation, were chosen to empower participants and foster a space where they could express their experiences freely and on their own terms. Second, credibility was strengthened through the development of trust and rapport. Rather than treating participants merely as sources of information, I approached them as relational partners in the research process. I engaged in prolonged and meaningful interactions, including continued contact after interviews and informal gatherings such as meals or coffee, which helped sustain connection and build a sense of community. These relationships enabled deeper, more open sharing during interviews and beyond. Third, I employed methodological triangulation through the use of in-depth interviews, object elicitation and contextual observation. These complementary methods generated multi-layered perspectives on participants' family archives and archiving practices, allowing for cross-verification and a more nuanced understanding.

Transferability refers to “the degree to which the research findings can be extrapolated to alternative contexts or situations” (Ahmed, 2024). While this study centers on Chinese American families, its insights may be relevant to broader investigations of family memory across different immigrant community contexts. Transferability was supported through two primary strategies: sampling diversity and thick description. The participant pool represented a wide range of generational positions (from first to sixth generation), gender identities, age groups and migration trajectories. Participants were also geographically distributed across various regions of the United States, with one now residing abroad. This diversity provides a rich basis for readers to consider the applicability of findings in other cultural or archival contexts. In addition, thick description (Ahmed, 2024) was used to convey the social, cultural and domestic settings in which family archiving takes place. This includes detailed portrayals of participants’ family histories and relationships, immigration backgrounds, archiving behaviors and personal narratives, often presented in their own words and original languages, to preserve the authenticity and context richness of their experiences.

This study also has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, while a total of 20 participants constitutes a reasonable sample size (Boddy, 2016; Hennink and Kaiser, 2022) for qualitative inquiry, the findings cannot be generalized to all Chinese American families. The participants were primarily self-selected individuals who responded to recruitment materials, expressed interest in family history and archiving, and participated voluntarily. As such, the sample may overrepresent those who are already reflective about or engaged with their family’s archival

practices and may not capture the experiences of families who are less inclined to archive or think about their histories in these terms. Second, although methodological triangulation was employed to enrich the data and provide multiple layers of insight, participant-centered methods such as object elicitation and virtual walkthroughs relied heavily on participants' willingness to share and the accessibility of their domestic archival spaces. As a result, some dimensions of family archiving may have remained unseen or unspoken, particularly in cases where participants felt hesitant to disclose. Finally, as noted earlier, my positionality, as someone who shares cultural and linguistic referents with many participants, but who is not a member of the Chinese American community, represents an inherent limitation in interpreting the data. While this position facilitated rapport and understanding in many instances, it also shaped the interpretive lens through which I made sense of participants' narratives and practices. This dual insider-outsider stance, while reflexively engaged, inevitably influenced what I prioritize, perceive and interpret in the research process.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has presented a flexible and reflexive methodological framework shaped by the unfolding dynamics of the research process. By foregrounding and centering participants' voices and lived contexts through qualitative, multi-method strategies, the study sought to gather data, build relationships, co-produce knowledge and remain responsive to the complexities of Chinese America family life. Throughout the research process, methodological decisions were guided by an ethical commitment to care and collaboration, as these values are especially important when

working with family histories and underrepresented communities. The use of interviews, object elicitation and contextual observation enabled layered forms of knowledge to emerge, many of which would have remained obscured in more conventional research designs.

The following chapter builds on the methodological foundation and addresses the first research question: How do Chinese American families engage in everyday archiving, and in what forms do these practices manifest? Drawing on empirical data collected through interviews, object elicitation and contextual observation, it examines key aspects such as what materials are preserved and why, where items are stored and how digital technologies influence these practices.

Chapter IV. Everyday Archives: Family Archiving Practices in Chinese American Life

Chapter Introduction

This chapter addresses Research Question One: How do Chinese American families engage in everyday archiving, and in what forms do these practices manifest? Drawing on empirical data collected through in-depth interviews, home visits and virtual walkthroughs, it examines a series of specific questions: What materials are preserved in Chinese American family archives? Why do families engage in archiving? How do these archives come into being? Where are they stored? How does technology shape archiving practices? And what challenges are encountered in the process?

In addition to addressing these questions, the chapter offers a set of discussions concerning everyday archiving in Chinese American families. It begins by examining how fluid and relational understandings of “family” shape the ways archival boundaries are imagined. It then considers how practices of family archiving intersect with processes of identity construction. The chapter also reflects on how digital technologies, while expanding archival possibilities, may complicate the perceived value and intentionality of what is preserved. Finally, it discusses the gendered dimensions of archival work, highlighting the different roles family members take on in preserving material and narrative forms of memory.

Who Counts? Family, Belonging and the Imagined Archival Boundary

Before addressing specific questions such as what materials are preserved in Chinese

American family archives, what motivates their preservation, and where these archives are stored, it is essential to first articulate several overarching observations, grounded in empirical data, that help contextualize the nature of Chinese American families and their archival practices.

First, the notion of family itself is not fixed or static, nor is it restricted solely to bloodlines. Instead, family boundaries are dynamic, relational and continually negotiated through internal family dynamics. Recognition and acceptance of who counts as a family member directly influences what I refer to as the imagined archival boundary—that is, the implicit line that determines whose stories and materials are deemed worthy of inclusion in the family archive. Second, even when individuals are recognized as family members, they may still be deliberately excluded from the family archive if their behaviors or values are deemed inconsistent with the family’s moral standards and aspirations for social recognition. Therefore, the preservation of family archives is not an objective or neutral act of documentation, but rather a selective process structured around inclusion and exclusion. These perspectives were articulated particularly clearly in my conversations with Jennifer and Kale.

One of the first things that became clear in my conversations with participants was that “family” is not a fixed or universally agreed-upon concept. Rather, the notion of family emerged as fluid and contextually bound, deeply influenced by personal experiences and intergenerational dynamics. Importantly, these differing understandings of who “counts” as family have direct implications for how family archives are formed, including what gets saved, who gets remembered and which stories are considered worth telling. Participants frequently highlighted the flexibility

of their definitions of family. For instance, some participants often adhered to a more traditional, lineage-based understanding of family, emphasizing connections rooted in blood ties and genealogical continuity. In contrast, some participants, particularly young generations, tended to adopt a broader and more inclusive interpretation, viewing family as a network of emotional bonds, chosen relationships and shared experiences that may extend beyond biological kinship.

In many cases, decisions about what to preserve were deeply influenced by how participants positioned themselves, and others, within their family structure. Jennifer, a second-generation Chinese American participant, captured this complexity in a way that has stayed with me. When I asked her what “family archive” meant to her, she paused and then reflected:

When I think of family archive, then I think of like the surname or the last name of our family. Like for us, I consider us the Su family, because my mom’s last name is Su, which came from my grandfather. So Sujiaren (苏家人, Su’s family).

If I think of my fiancé, right? He is not part of the Su family, even though he is part of my family unit. If you consider my dad, he would not be part of the Su family. He is a Chen, that’s why my last name is Chen. Then when I think of my last name, Chen, I don’t really think of anything, because I grew up more like with the mainland Chinese culture and mainland Chinese mentality. And then my dad—because from a young age he wasn’t part of my life; my mom and dad divorced when I was three—I don’t know much about Taiwanese culture, because he came from Taiwan.

This reflection illustrates how fluid and relational the idea of “family” can be, shaped by

names and bloodlines as well as by family history and emotional ties. In this case, Jennifer didn't just describe who felt central to her idea of family; she also actively distinguished who was not part of the "Su family archive." Her father and fiancé, though biologically or emotionally connected, were consciously placed outside of the imagined archival boundary.

Jennifer spoke of making conscious decisions to exclude family members due to conflict and emotional distance; she also reflected on what it means to be excluded, from both the family itself and from its archive. She continued:

Do you want to name the family archive by the last name to represent that, you know, these are the people, the bloodline, right? The directly related people? Or is it like, you know, there's a term called "found family," when people find their family members who are not necessarily related by blood, but maybe because they are, you know, underrepresented, or they're oppressed, or they're unable to be accepted by society—like a lot of people who are in same-sex relationships or marriages. Like, they might not be accepted by their family, but they will find their own family and create their own social family group that they consider close to, versus the people they're related to by blood.

Maybe they'll say, "Maybe my family archive won't include me, because they don't accept me", something like that. So it's a process of, like, a sense of belonging: Do I feel like I'm part of this family, or do I feel like, isolated or not belong from this family? And then that means that, maybe that changes your idea of a family archive.

Kale, another second-generation Chinese American participant, expressed a similar perspective that family is relational and conditional, and therefore, the imagined boundaries of the archive are shaped by who acknowledges and affirms those connections. They said:

To me, like, family is like, especially as a trans and queer person, like, I also think family archives are not necessarily, like... family is not something that's necessarily, like, given and on the same understanding, right? Like, I feel really grateful that my parents have been really accepting of me. But, like, I do think there's also this layer of, like, there's a lot of trauma and, like, hard stuff that comes with the stories of our family.

For Kale, family emerges from ongoing negotiations shaped by personal identity, acceptance and past experiences of trauma. As a queer and trans individual, Kale highlights that archival boundaries are intimately connected to feelings of inclusion and exclusion within the family. Their narrative illustrates that archiving entails more than the preservation of neutral traces of the past; it requires complex negotiations over which experiences, especially painful or challenging ones, are acknowledged and preserved.

In fact, the content of a family archive is shaped by both the recognition of who is considered a family member and the judgment of whose values, actions and accomplishments are seen as appropriately representing the family as a whole. As previously discussed, family archiving is far from a neutral process. It is a highly selective practice that reflects a shared imagination and internal consensus regarding moral values, social recognition and cultural standards. In other words, the boundaries of a family archive are shaped by blood ties and emotional relationships, as

well as by the ways in which family members wish to be remembered, acknowledged or respected by others.

When discussing what should be included in a family archive, Jennifer also pointed out that, even when someone is recognized as part of the family, their records may still be deliberately left out or erased. She remarked:

But like, I think of it more as... I have to really think hard about what I want to include that will represent our family legacy. Because I think of legacy when I think of family... I think in a family archive, you should put things that demonstrate the achievements—you know, somehow—of your family, that show the contributions they made to society.

Cause you think of that, you think of people in the public who may or may not know your family, but they might see it... You're sort of, like, a little bit self-editing, right? You're like, I want to portray my family in a good light. But, you know, there's a lot of things in families that are not good, you know, between family members arguing, fighting, having fallouts. Maybe some member of your family, they've done something that's ethically not right. But when I think of a family archive, kind of like, I don't want to include that in there, because that's not representative of our legacy.

Any family, I think, has their problems, has their arguments, has their people whose character—or whose values—aren't necessarily your values.

These acts of intentional inclusion and exclusion suggest that family archiving is, at its core,

a profound process of intentional selection and identity curation. What is archived and what is left out reveal how families negotiate who they are as well as who they wish to be seen as by others. As Jennifer reflected, creating a family archive involved a process of “self-editing,” motivated by the desire to preserve materials that “portray my family in a good light” and emphasize the family’s “achievements” and “contributions to society.” In doing so, she excluded accounts of interpersonal conflict or morally questionable behavior, considering them misaligned with the legacy she intended to build.

I now turn to a set of more specific questions: What kinds of materials and objects are found in family archives? What motivates families to engage in archiving? How do these archives come into being? Where are they stored? How does technology shape these practices? And what kinds of challenges emerge in the process?

From Photographs to Ordinary Things: The Scope of Family Archives

This section turns to the question of what materials are actually preserved in Chinese American family archives. Rather than being limited to official documents or genealogical records, these archives are composed of a wide array of everyday objects that are difficult to categorize comprehensively. They include physical and digital photographs, handwritten letters, clothing, oral narratives and seemingly ordinary items, such as a handmade card from a daughter to her mother expressing love, or a bucket used for burning joss paper.

Photographs

Among the various types of materials mentioned by participants, photographs—both loose

prints and organized albums—emerged as one of the most frequently cited components of Chinese American family archives. When asked what they considered part of their family archive, many participants instinctively referred to photographs.

Eric, aged 74, a second-generation Chinese American, responded: “In the case of our family, I think just the family photographs were the main things.” Alex, aged 28, also a second-generation Chinese American, mentioned: “The obvious one is pictures, and so there I have a lot of photographs at home.”

Similarly, Shirley, aged 77, a 1.5-generation Chinese American, reflected:

For me, the primary thing is the photo album. My parents, despite having very, very tight means and very low budget for extras in life—my father did have a camera. So he was one of the people among his group of friends in our community who would take pictures at events, at Thanksgiving parties and things like that.

This recurring emphasis on photographs highlights the central role of visual records in preserving Chinese American family memory and documenting family history. Morgan, aged 27, a second-generation Chinese American, emphasized that photographs include both physical prints and digital images: “The biggest category probably is physical and digital photos. At least my early childhood was well documented, with my grandparents taking so many photos.”

Daisy, aged 30, another second-generation Chinese American, noted the transition from printed photographs to digital images and storage:

And then we often take photos, and so in WeChat, like on our phones, for example,

we save a lot of photos there. And then, I mean, I always joke—my mom says, “Why is my iPhone so slow? Why is it so slow?” And I’m like, “It’s because you have, like, 30 gigabytes of photos just sitting there, Mom, cause you save everything.” I think it’s very interesting that the trend has now shifted from paper photographs to just being on phones in cloud storage.

These accounts suggest that photographs are one of the most prominent components of Chinese American family archives. Across generations and ages, participants consistently identified photographs as central to how family history is documented and preserved. With the increasing accessibility of smartphones, digital cameras and cloud storage, there has also been a noticeable shift from physical photographs to digital images.

Letters

Another type of material commonly preserved in Chinese American family archives is handwritten letters. Although not all participants mentioned this category, those who did often described letters as meaningful artifacts of communication across family members, especially from earlier periods when other modes of communication were less accessible.

Kale noted: “My grandpa has a whole bunch of letters between him and his, like, family that we found recently.” Frank also referred to a small collection of letters on his mother’s side: “Mom’s side. There are a bit more letters. I guess, I think that she kept some letters between her and my father when they were courting. And correspondence between her and my maternal grandfather. They’re in Chinese, traditional Chinese, but I can’t read it because it’s in handwriting.”

Alex, too, mentioned looking for letters as part of his family archive:

I also have letters. I have been looking around for handwritten notes and letters. I found a few—not enough and not nearly as many as I hope to—but these are mostly the things that I consider part of my family archives.

Zelda, a first-generation Chinese American immigrant, spoke of discovering old letters she had written to her parents while studying abroad:

This summer, when I went home after my mother passed away, my sister and I were sorting through her belongings, and I found a whole trove of precious archival materials—letters I had written to my parents back when I was in graduate school. I used to write home every one or two weeks, because there were no computers at the time. My mother treasured those letters and kept them all.

These reflections underscore the significance of handwritten letters as historically meaningful components of Chinese American family archives. In earlier periods, especially during times of geographic separation or limited technological access, such letters often functioned as the primary means of communication across family members. Although, as Frank noted, “They’re in Chinese, traditional Chinese, but I can’t read it because it’s in handwriting,” these letters have nonetheless been preserved as important components of the family archive and as documentation of familial history, even if they are no longer fully legible in some families due to language barriers and cultural discontinuities.

Clothing

Another category of material that surfaced in Chinese American family archives is clothing. Although some participants expressed uncertainty about whether clothing could be considered part of a “proper” archive, particularly when speaking to me as an archival scholar, they nonetheless referred to garments that held deep personal and familial meaning.

Zoey, whose mother is a first-generation Malaysian Chinese immigrant and whose maternal grandfather migrated to Malaysia from China, reflected:

This is weird maybe, but clothing was the thing I thought of for this kind of thing, which I don’t know if that’s really an archive, but like clothing that I took from my grandparents’ house or whatever that has significance to me when I wear it.

When asked to elaborate, she continued:

There’s a few different things, but like there’s a hat over there that I wear when I garden that I got from my grandfather, and like this is his hat from like 1957 or whatever. But then also just like sarongs. I wear a lot around the house, and I took them from my grandfather’s drawer because he wore them a lot around the house too.

Zoey’s comments highlight how the value of clothing as a form of family memory is activated through everyday use, especially through acts such as wearing and touching. As she noted, the garments carry “significance to me when I wear it,” suggesting that memory is expressed and reinforced through physical interactions. Her emphasis on sarongs, which are closely tied to her family’s cultural background, illustrates how clothing can serve as a medium of identity. In this context, garments function as cultural signifiers that connect individuals to ancestral heritage and

diasporic belonging.

A similar perspective appears in Daisy's reflection:

I don't know if this counts, but clothing. And so I think in my family as well, I've only ever seen it like twice, but like my grandma, she does have a suitcase of like really old things that she's like, "I just keep this because it helps me to remember where I'm from." Her mother's jacket, like a silk jacket—it's just one of those things that, like, I—like, now I feel really bad, like I actually don't know what condition it's in. But I know that like of the few things that she could have packed in her suitcase, that was one of them.

Similar to Zoey's account, the act of keeping a single silk jacket in this case serves as a symbolic expression of diasporic memory and belonging. Clothing functions as a tangible link to identity, connecting the keeper to a remembered sense of origin and place.

Beyond cultural and ancestral identity, clothing also emerged as a repository of emotional attachment. Morgan reflected on how clothing items in her household remained preserved long after their practical use had faded:

The second category I notice is like clothing items. At least, I feel like I try to... I was the first one in my family to learn to just get rid of clothes. But I noticed, like, the habit I got from my mom is like—even in clothes that don't fit anymore or like you don't wear them, but they just hang there. So I feel like that's sentimental. It's not clothing anymore. It's not useful. It's just sentimental.

Morgan's account illustrates how clothing can transition from a utilitarian object to a symbol of sentiment. The garments, though unworn, are retained not for their original functionality but for their emotional resonance.

Oral Storytelling

Oral storytelling is another category frequently mentioned by participants as a key component of Chinese American family archives. For example, Isabel reflected, "And also we are a family of storytellers—like my grandpa is a storyteller, and my mom is a storyteller. And like that's just how we sort of preserve our memories."

Similarly, Jennifer described how her uncle became the central figure for preserving family knowledge through oral storytelling:

So my uncle, I think, he is the storyteller and archive, like he holds the stories of my grandfather, so I think he is a big knowledge of our family. He does a lot of the storytelling. Once, on my mom's birthday or something, we were having lunch, and my uncle just started telling stories. I still remember I just opened my phone recorder like this, and then I recorded a whole segment, like dozens of minutes long.

These accounts underscore the important role that oral storytelling plays in the transmission of family history and memory within Chinese American families. In some cases, the prominence of oral storytelling is directly tied to the historical experiences of displacement and migration that have shaped Chinese American family histories. For example, Kale, a second-generation Chinese-Vietnamese American, described how war and forced migration influenced their family's approach

to memory and recordkeeping:

There is a less focus on like the material items and more about like the stories they can tell. There is a more oral tradition of memory work with that generation of my family. And like, I think it really has to do with the fact that they fled war. And there's like, really no mark, like material possessions were so hard to keep and so like. And I think that also influenced how my grandpa kept things because he would tend to, tended to hoard a lot. I think it has to do with that trauma of like leaving your country and like not having to be—not being able to bring everything.

Kale's account illustrates that oral storytelling can also emerge as a response to material vulnerability and historical rupture, rather than simply reflecting a cultural preference. In situations where written records are lost or never created, due to war or other forms of upheaval, oral accounts often serve as the primary means of transmitting family histories.

While participants did not consistently identify a clear gender division in the responsibility for oral storytelling, some accounts nevertheless pointed to gendered dynamics in how family memories are passed down. Daisy, for example, reflected on the intergenerational transmission of stories through the women in her family:

I think a lot of the oral history is passed down to me and I think again, I think it's a lot of women, especially who carry on that history because they clean the house, raising the children, so anything that my grandma told to me or told to my mom, my mom would tell me as well.

When I asked her to elaborate, she continued:

I absolutely believe it is a gender role thing... Even though it's very patriarchal in China, I really do think like—even though my dad is in charge, he's like head of the family—my mom is the one who does all the accounting. My mom's the one who says, "Honey, I don't think you should do that. That's a bad idea. Here's why I think so." And he will say, "Okay, let me think about it." And then he'll say, "Okay." So I think maybe that's my family dynamic. My dad's very nice, so he's always like, "Your mom's probably smarter, she knows better. I'll just listen to her, not worth fighting about it." I definitely think, because they're also the ones cleaning the house and maintaining it... you know, really, they are in charge of those stories then.

Although this perspective was not widely echoed, it raises an important consideration about the intersections between memory work and gendered divisions of care and domestic responsibility, particularly in family contexts where women traditionally take on a larger share of domestic and caregiving roles. Daisy's account suggests that such roles may position women as key custodians of family stories. Meanwhile, other interviews indicate that men, especially eldest sons, may be more involved in managing or claiming physical family belongings after a parent's death. These patterns reflect a gendered division in how memory is preserved, with women tending toward storytelling and men toward material stewardship.

Random Objects

Another common component of Chinese American family archives includes everyday objects

and artifacts that are difficult to categorize yet deeply reflective of lived experience and cultural practice. As Daisy put it, these are “just random things, but everything has a story.”

For example, during a home visit observation, one participant showed me a handmade card created by her daughter during early childhood (see Figure 4-1). The card read “Why my mom is special” and included a drawing of a heart with the words “I [heart] mom.” Though seemingly ordinary, this object held deep personal meaning for the family. It served as a record of the daughter’s growth, as well as a tangible expression of her affection for her mom.



Figure 4-1. Handmade Card from Daughter’s Childhood

In addition, Daisy described a piggy bank, one of the first things her parents acquired after immigrating to the United States, as part of her family's archive. She also mentioned a music box from a dollar store that her mother insisted on keeping through every family move: "You know, it's from the dollar store, but throughout all of our family movings and everything, [my mom] has always kept that music box." While objects like a piggy bank or a music box may seem ordinary or insignificant, they often carry personal memories or symbolic meanings for the families who preserve them.

Isabel also shared a few seemingly ordinary and random items in her family archive that reflect Chinese cultural practices. As she described, these items are very "immigrant and pragmatic." One example she gave was:

Another object that we have that I am a really big fan of is the bucket that my grandpa had to burn joss paper in. It's just like this plain steel bucket, but it's the one that we always do our... burn our offerings in.

Her description reveals how everyday items, like the steel bucket, take on symbolic meaning through repeated ritual use, serving as material links to cultural and ancestral traditions in Chinese diasporic families. Similarly, other participants mentioned keeping traditional Chinese items such as calligraphy scrolls and ink paintings—objects that explicitly embody cultural heritage and identity.

Generational Connection and Emotional Continuity: Motivations for Family Archives

This section discusses Chinese Americans' motivation to engage with family archives. When

asked “why does your family collect, curate or preserve family archives?” individual responses varied, but two primary themes consistently emerged across the interviews.

One of the most salient motivations for Chinese American families to preserve family archives is to establish a connection across generations. This intergenerational link operates bidirectionally: reaching backward to maintain ties with ancestral histories and cultural roots, while also projecting forward to help future generations understand their heritage.

Daniel, a 21-year-old third-generation Chinese American, reflected:

I think... especially for my grandpa’s generation or even generations before them... when they immigrated to America and had children, there became a disconnect with the culture that they grew up with and the culture that their children are currently growing up with. So I think just from reading documents that like a great-great uncle wrote or my grandfather wrote, there’s... a sense of responsibility to preserve or at least record certain aspects about their life that they know will no longer be passed down... just as a way to share more about family history, especially when it gets harder, the further along down the generations it goes.

Daniel’s reflection illustrates how immigration can create a perceived disconnect with the culture between generations. Reading the writings of earlier family members prompted in him a sense of responsibility to ensure that future generations would understand the lives and experiences of those who came before.

Betty, a 44-year-old 1.5-generation Chinese American and a mother of two young daughters,

echoed a similar motivation. Positioned between aging parents and still-young children, she described feeling an urgency to preserve family stories before they are lost: “My parents are getting older, so I kind of feel like, oh, you know, yeah, like maybe I don’t have so much time to get these stories down.” At the same time, she expressed a desire to create a cultural and familial context for her daughters, even if they are not yet old enough to ask about it: “They’re still too young to kind of ask, but I think it will be good for them to have some sort of context.” For Betty, family archiving is a proactive effort to bridge generational gaps.

The motivation to build intergenerational connection also appeared in another interview. Morgan, a 27-year-old second-generation Chinese American, shared a moment when her father, with whom she is not particularly close, articulated a desire for her to understand their family lineage. As a child, Morgan spent part of her early years in China with her grandparents. After her parents divorced, she was raised primarily by her mother in the United States. As she recalled:

I’ve also noticed like on my dad’s, I’m not as close to him because I grew up with my mom, but he did share with me like, “I want you to know who you are, or I want you to know who your parents are, or I would want your future children to know who your parents are.”

Despite its simplicity, this statement encapsulates a fundamental motivation behind many family archiving practices: the desire to know one’s roots and to pass down a sense of familial identity and origin.

The second motivation that emerged from the interviews involves the emotional and

commemorative dimensions of archiving: a desire to remember and stay close to loved ones, particularly those who have passed away or whose presence holds special significance.

For some participants, especially those who experienced physical separation from loved ones, family archives offered a way to remain emotionally close despite distance and absence. Morgan, reflecting on her relationship with her mother, shared:

And on my mom's side, I guess... it was never discussed as openly. But just in my opinion, I think a way to feel close to your family even if you're overseas, because there's so much sadness in my family, I think being far apart is hard. So, or feeling like you're missing out on someone's life, like I didn't have my mom or my parents for a long time. So they like sending photos or videos, or like even my mom used to send me like little cassette tapes, that she is like talking or singing and like, I could like, connect with my mom that way. Like as a kid, I would like, listen or dance or whatever to it.

In Morgan's account, the things she considered as family archives—photos, videos and cassette tapes—were created and sent by her mother and kept by Morgan because they helped her feel close to her mom across both physical and emotional distance. Through her mother's voice, singing and the moments captured in those materials, Morgan could feel her presence, especially when, as a child, she listened, danced and held onto those small forms of connection.

For some, family archives serve as a means of maintaining emotional continuity amid fractured relationships. Isabel, whose family experienced a painful rupture during her childhood, reflected on motivations for her mom to preserve family archives:

My parents divorced when I was about eight. That was like a really big rift in our family. My mom's parents were pretty upset and her brothers really upset, they are 9 and 7 years older than her... So that kind of cut off a lot of my contact with my grandparents and my uncles... That period of estrangement was really hard on my mom... And my eldest uncle we don't really communicate with. He's sort of a personality, and he's got some unique politics that we just sort of don't mess with. And I think the family archives are really important to my mom to keep that kind of linkage and the relationship alive. And in our like family shared consciousness, I guess.

Isabel's account highlights how family archives can serve as emotional bridges, helping to maintain a sense of connection with family members even when relationships have become distant or strained. In this context, archiving is about holding onto relationships and keeping a sense of kinship and care alive, even when family members are no longer in contact.

Shirley, a 77-year-old 1.5-generation Chinese American, also spoke to the emotional motivations behind preserving family archives. When asked why these materials matter to her, she responded: "I think for me, it's definitely moments of happiness and moments of joy, but also moments of pride in achievements." She shared memories of her father's later years, when he would hang his own watercolor paintings and his children's accomplishments on the walls of their home. These displays, she noted, brought him joy and became a way for him to express his pride. As she put it:

The motivation was really that, you know, he could take joy in that. I guess in a

way, it was a motivation for us too, that he could express his happiness with us. Because otherwise he was a very stern kind of father. We didn't get that kind of... you know, it's not like being raised these days where the parents are very, very supportive of the kids and bend over backwards. He was very strict. He was very tyrannical. He was a dominating figure. But when we did well in school, he was happy to compliment us. I think that was motivation for us too.

For Shirley, family archives are tied to rare but meaningful moments of recognition. In her family, the preservation and display of these materials were ways of showing affection that was otherwise difficult to express. In this context, archiving becomes a way to remember those moments and to stay close to a parent who was, in many ways, emotionally distant.

Unplanned Archives: Between Incidental Accumulation and Intentional Preservation

This section turns our attention to how Chinese American family archives come into being. What I found across interviews and observations is that these archives rarely emerge from deliberate and long-term strategies. Instead, they are gradually assembled through ordinary acts of keeping, storing, revisiting and sometimes simply forgetting to discard. While lacking a formal system or archival blueprint, this process is not entirely incidental; the accumulation is often shaped by selective judgments about what feels meaningful, memorable or worth holding onto.

Daisy described this very clearly when reflecting on the informal and unintentional nature of how her family archives come into being:

I think unintentionally, over time, people just collect things and they accumulate.

Like, I don't think my family just assumed, "Oh, we're gonna start a family archive—let's start collecting." I think it's very unintentional that these things come about. You know, something even silly in my mom's drawer. She said that the first thing she bought in America at the airport was a Butterfinger, and she still has it. She said, "Oh, it just seemed like I was able to pay for this one thing when I first stepped foot in America." And so, really, things like that, like, that candy bar is long expired.

And unfortunately, I think they do get purged over time. But there are certain items that have such a lingering memory that they don't throw them away. So I think there is a sort of unintentional collecting happening, because they're like, "This is a milestone," or, "This is a very specific memory." Yeah, so those kinds of things are unintentionally collected.

This example illustrates the unplanned yet selectively meaningful nature of many Chinese American family archives. As Daisy explained, "it's very unintentional that these things come about," and "there is a sort of unintentional collecting happening." Objects like the Butterfinger candy bar her mother bought upon first arriving in the United States have been kept for years because they carry what Daisy called "a lingering memory." While these objects were not preserved with an explicit archival intent, their continued presence reflects subtle and affective decisions about what feels too meaningful to discard.

Another participant, Jennifer, also discussed the unplanned and unstructured nature of how family archives gradually accumulate over time. She observed:

We have a collection of items that are loosely associated with our family. We haven't really gone in and organized things and said, "Oh, let's set these aside because we want future generations to see them and understand who we were as a family." When I think about our belongings or items, I don't really have a plan for how to preserve them or take care of them. Some things might get thrown away. Some things might stay. And sometimes, the things you keep aren't even kept on purpose—it's just that you didn't have time, or you forgot, or they ended up in a drawer.

Jennifer pointed out that archiving and organizing tend to surface at particular moments, especially when something shifts in life:

Sometimes, people only start thinking about this stuff—about saving and preserving things—because something suddenly happens. Like maybe me, or my mom, we suddenly find out we have a terminal illness, right? Somebody gets cancer. Then we are thinking, oh I don't have that much time left. I need to think about what I want to save and what I want to preserve as a legacy has to pass down, because I'm not gonna be here in a very short time.

If I was told I only had six months to live, then I think I would consider it a lot more seriously. I'd be like it's much more urgent that we have a concentrated something, what we call family archive, because that way everything is in one place, it's safe, it's preserved, and then people know what to do about it.

Jennifer's reflection illustrates how the impulse to deliberately and systematically organize

family materials often arises during moments of crisis or anticipated loss. Similarly, several older participants noted that reaching certain life stages, such as approaching retirement or preparing to move homes, can prompt a more conscious engagement with what to keep, discard or pass down. These transitional periods serve as moments of reflection, when the idea of family archiving gains sharper focus. Such reflections suggest that the idea of family archiving often gains clarity at key turning points in life. When time feels more finite, whether due to illness, aging or major life changes, questions of memory and legacy come to the foreground. In these moments, individuals begin to think more deliberately about what should be saved, how it should be preserved and which stories will remain for future generations.

While there is often no formal system or explicit archival plan, this does not imply a complete absence of intentionality. Families may purposefully retain certain objects because of their emotional resonance or symbolic significance. However, such acts of deliberate preservation typically occur outside a cohesive or long-term archival framework. As seen in Daisy's example, although the accumulation of her family archive was not guided by a clear plan, her mother still chose to keep the Butterfinger candy bar she bought upon first arriving in the United States—a decision grounded in personal meaning rather than archival strategy. Other participants also expressed similar forms of selective keeping, reflecting moments of intentional judgment about what is worth preserving, even in the absence of a formalized approach.

Isabel shared a particularly moving example of intentional yet informal family archiving by her grandfather. She elaborated:

When we were cleaning out my grandpa's house, we opened the—like I don't know if it's a CD case or a planner or a folder or something. And tucked inside the pocket was, you know, those page-a-day Chinese auspicious calendars with the really thin onion skin paper. He had saved the sheets from the days that my cousins and I were born, and my sibling as well. And he just like had kept them for, you know, 20-plus years in like just a safe spot at his desk. Not like—I didn't think my grandpa didn't care that I was born or something—but just to know like, it was so important. He saved this flimsy little piece of paper, because this is like one of the most important days of my life, my grandkid was born.

While there was no formal system or structured plan for preserving family materials, the grandfather's decision to preserve the calendar pages reflects a conscious act of remembering and a deliberate recognition of intergenerational continuity. This seemingly simple gesture illustrates how Chinese American family archives often emerge through personally meaningful moments and decisions made in the course of ordinary life, rather than being guided by any formal archival plan or systematic preservation strategy.

Kathy, Isabel's mother, also reflected:

I think my dad had a little bit of intentional[ity], like, I realized he was so sentimental. I think Isabel might have told you. I didn't realize until after he died—like all the days, the calendar, that's right, that they got—whenever it's their birthday, he saved that. So he had some intentional things where he was very sentimental about

collecting. But no, I think it's just [that things] accumulate.

While Kathy describes the accumulation of objects in her family as largely unstructured—"I think it's just accumulated"—she also recognizes moments of intentionality in her father's archival practices, particularly his deliberate choice to save calendar pages from family members' birthdays. This illustrates the interplay between unplanned accumulation and selective preservation in the formation of Chinese American family archives.

Scattered Yet Meaningful: The Spatial Arrangement of Family Archives

This section explores where Chinese American family archives are stored. Drawing from in-depth interviews as well as both in-person home visits and virtual walkthroughs, it becomes clear that these materials are rarely kept in a single and purpose-built location. Instead, they are scattered throughout the home, often blending into the routines and spaces of daily life.

Zoey, for example, candidly described the fragmented nature of her family's archival materials:

I have terrible archival practices. I'm not organized at all. They're everywhere. They're on different hard... like for if they're digitized, they're on different hard drives. Paper stuff is like in a box or maybe in a filing cabinet. Like some the recordings I have backed up in multiple places, because I was like those can get lost easily. But like the photos, I only have in one place because I figure someone else has the photo somewhere else but.

This quote highlights the scattered nature of how family archives are often stored. Zoey's

description of her materials being “everywhere”—across different hard drives, boxes and filing cabinets—illustrates a common archival practice in Chinese American families: the dispersed storage of items across domestic spaces. This pattern closely aligns with the earlier observation about the absence of a formal or systematic archival plan.

Jennifer echoed a similar perspective during our interview, noting that her family’s archival materials are dispersed throughout the house rather than concentrated in one place:

Some are hung on the wall, some are in albums, some might be in a filing cabinet with important documents. But those documents might just be things like car insurance or cat insurance. Hospital visits, car maintenance, all kinds of passwords, and WiFi info—things like that. We don’t really think of those as important family archives, and we might just shred them at some point. So there’s nothing concentrated anywhere that we call an archive. If you talk about people who are still living and using those items, then oftentimes they’re just hanging around the house in different locations.

Jennifer’s description highlights the scattered nature of archival storage in her family. Items are “hanging on the wall,” “in albums,” “in a filing cabinet,” or mixed with paperwork like “car insurance,” “cat insurance,” and “Wifi info.” As she noted, there is no concentrated place in the home designated as “the archive”. Rather, what might be considered archival is diffused across different locations and surfaces, often remaining in use or in sight. In this view, archiving becomes a way of living with memory. The archive isn’t a separate space—it’s part of the home.

In my home visit observation, I also observed how Chinese American family archives are

dispersed throughout the home. As shown in Figure 4-2, the shelving unit in the garage was situated alongside other everyday household items such as a bicycle, paint buckets and ladders. It held a variety of materials, including documents, folders, manuscripts and books, as shown in closer detail in Figure 4-3.

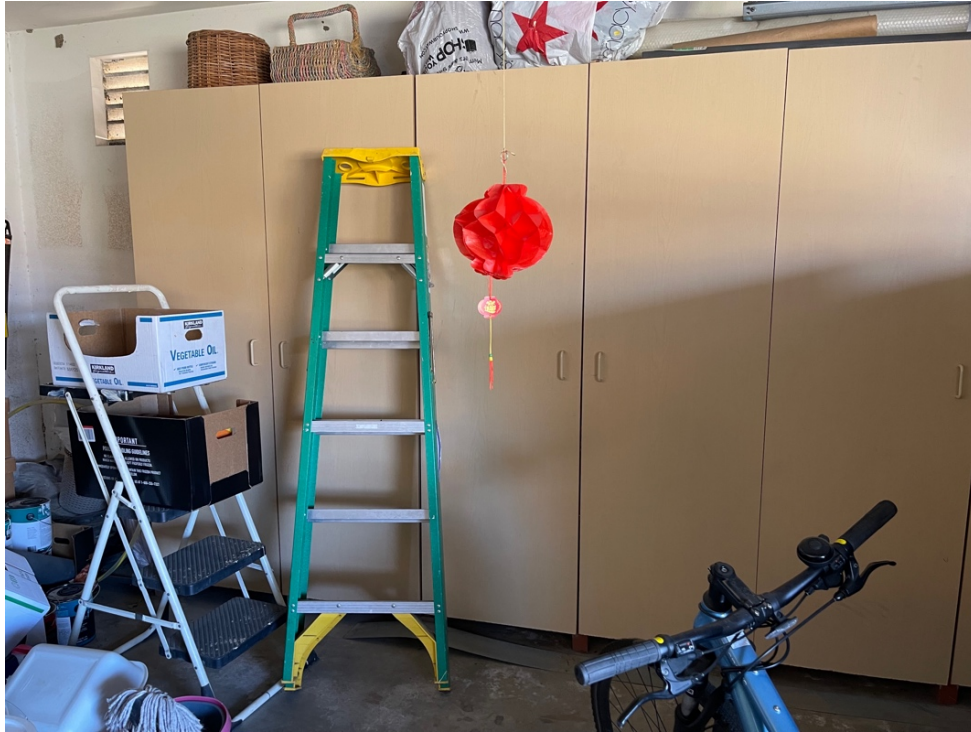


Figure 4-2. Shelving Unit in Garage Surrounded by Everyday Household Items



Figure 4-3. Materials Stored on the Garage Shelving Unit

During a home visit with Zelda and Jennifer, a mother-daughter pair, I observed that the spatial arrangement of family archival materials was not arbitrary but instead carried affective and symbolic significance. Items that were especially valued by the family were intentionally placed in highly visible locations within the home. As shown in Figure 4-4, one wall was dedicated to displaying holiday cards received over the years from relatives and friends. Directly beneath the wall, a cabinet was positioned against it, holding framed family photographs, group portraits and trophies commemorating individual and familial achievements. This spatial configuration reflects an approach to family archiving that emphasizes both storage and visibility, incorporating memory

and recognition into the daily living space.



Figure 4-4. Display Wall and Cabinet with Family Memorabilia

(This image has been intentionally blurred to protect the privacy of the participants.)

Another compelling example of intentional spatial arrangement in family archiving emerged in my interview with Shirley, a 77-year-old 1.5-generation Chinese American. In this case, the placement of archival materials within the home reflected a father's pride in his children's accomplishments, as well as the family's enduring love for him. As Shirley recalled:

My father ran a laundry, he didn't have high social status, I mean, he did in the

Chinese community. He was very active and he had friends. But, you know, in society at large, he was a laundryman. So he had very little to be proud of, I think, or to show, but he was always very glad to show his children's achievements. And later in life, he became a water painter. He painted a lot and so slowly the walls started filling up with his paintings and all that. But he always had a place of pride for the diplomas. And my sister gave me a couple of pictures that I'd be happy to send to you that showed when he had four children, so every year that there was a new diploma, he'd add it to the wall. And when my youngest brother graduated, then we had this perfect symmetry of the four diplomas. And then once he passed away, my mother or somebody rearranged it so that my father's portrait was in the middle, and then the two diplomas on either side. It's very touching to see that.

After the interview, Shirley generously shared several photographs with me. As shown in Figure 4-5, one wall of the living room is decorated with her father's watercolor paintings, while another wall features his portrait alongside the diplomas of his four children.



Figure 4-5. Display of Diplomas and Portrait in a Chinese American Home

(This image has been intentionally blurred to protect the privacy of the participants.)

Shirley's account offers an illustrative example of how family memory and recognition are both materialized and spatialized within the domestic setting. Her father, who worked as a laundryman and held limited social status in broader American society, derived pride and identity from his children's academic accomplishments as well as his own creative pursuits later in life. As Shirley recounted, the diplomas were displayed prominently in the home, added sequentially as each child graduated. After his passing, the display was rearranged to place his portrait at the center, flanked by the diplomas, creating a tribute that affirmed his crucial role in the family's path toward a better future. This spatial arrangement exemplifies how Chinese American families transform

domestic spaces into sites of symbolic meaning, where everyday environments become spaces for preserving memory and honoring legacy.

Technology in Use: Possibilities and Concerns in Chinese American Family Archiving

This section explores the impact of technology on Chinese American family archives and archiving practices. Across the age range of my participants, from as young as 21 to as old as 77, technology emerged as a recurring theme in their reflections on archiving. In particular, smartphones, cloud storage and social media were frequently cited as key tools shaping how family archives are created, preserved and shared. These tools have changed both the material forms of family archives and the everyday practices through which memories are maintained and communicated across generations and geographic distances.

During our interview, Linda, a 77-year-old first-generation Chinese American grandmother, shared a telling example of how smartphones have shaped her family's archiving practices over time. She showed me a carefully crafted photo album made for her granddaughter, who is now fourteen years old. "My son's first child was a daughter," she explained. "At that time, we didn't have smartphones yet, so we printed all the photos and made a beautiful album." She then contrasted this with how her grandson's memories were handled: "But later, when my grandson was born—he's now eleven or twelve—we already had phones, so we didn't make an album for him. All the photos are just kept on the phone. I probably have thousands of them on mine." Linda's account illustrates how technological shifts have transformed both the creation and storage of family archives. When her granddaughter was born, the family took her to a photo studio, where

professionally taken photographs were printed and carefully arranged into a physical album. This process required intentional planning and reflected a clear desire to commemorate the occasion in a tangible form. In contrast, by the time her grandson was born a few years later, smartphones had begun to replace professional photography in everyday family life. Family photos were increasingly taken informally at home or during daily activities, stored directly on personal devices and rarely printed. This shift lowered the threshold for producing family archives—anyone with a phone could now generate and accumulate digital images with minimal effort. At the same time, it marked a move away from deliberate curation toward more routine and less visible forms of archival documentation.

This shift was echoed in another interview with Shirley, a 77-year-old 1.5-generation Chinese American, who reflected on the profound impact of smartphone technology on family photography. She contrasted the abundance of images generated today with the scarcity and intentionality that characterized earlier family documentation practices:

Now, because what people do now with, you know, their iPhones is like a plethora of documentation, all the time and accessible, whereas then sometimes, you know, film was precious. My father had a camera that he wound the film into. Maybe it would have like 12 photos or 24 photos. And it might be a year before he finished it up, because he would take a picture, and then he would, you know, wait until the next birthday or the next occasion before taking another picture, and he'd take it to the drugstore and have it developed. My parents would carefully stick them in the album.

Shirley's account reveals how, before the advent of smartphones, the cost and material limitations of film photography often resulted in more selective and ceremonial documentation. Photographs were taken sparingly, usually on special occasions, and their physical development and careful placement in albums imbued them with a sense of significance. However, the ubiquity of smartphone photography has enabled what she calls a "plethora of documentation," raising concerns about the diminishing value of individual images and the ways in which abundance may blur the boundaries between what is meaningful and what is mundane.

In addition to smartphones, cloud storage emerged in several interviews as a method for preserving family photographs, though not without hesitation. Helen, a 59-year-old first-generation Chinese American, shared her mixed feelings about her husband's reliance on the cloud: "My husband put a lot of our photos in the cloud. I joked with him the other day, 'What if one day the cloud disappears?' I still feel like having a disk seems safer." Her comment reflects both the increasing use of cloud-based storage in everyday archiving and the uncertainties it introduces. The intangible and seemingly inaccessible nature of the cloud raised concerns for her about potential loss or system failure. A disk, by contrast, offered something she could see and touch, which conveyed a stronger sense of security and control.

Social media has also significantly influenced the archiving behaviors of Chinese American families. On the one hand, it serves as an effective tool for communication across generations and geographic distances, enabling archival sharing among family members and, at times, triggering collaborative memory work. On the other hand, social media is often used as a form of everyday

documentation, capturing moments that might otherwise go unrecorded. Zoey, a 35-year-old second-generation Chinese American, described how digital platforms facilitate archival sharing within her family: “So like sometimes in a family group chat, they’ll send an old photo and then they’ll all be like who’s this person, who’s that person, and so that sort of thing.” Sharing archival materials such as old photographs through family group chats encourages collective identification and opens up opportunities for collaborative memory work. These exchanges often prompt recollections, invite storytelling and help reconstruct family histories across generations. In addition, social media has also become an important means for some Chinese Americans to document their lives and experiences. Zelda, a 69-year-old first-generation immigrant, described her use of WeChat Moments as a form of everyday archiving: “I’m more outgoing by nature, so you’ll see that I post a lot on my Moments. I just feel the need to record things as they happen. It’s like a diary, really—whenever I attend an important event or meet good friends, I’ll document it and post it there.” For Zelda, social media functions as a space of everyday documentation. Beyond communication, it allows her to document significant events and meaningful encounters, preserving moments she finds worth remembering. In this sense, the platform itself becomes her archive.

Interestingly, some younger participants with higher levels of technological fluency are incorporating innovative tools into their family archiving practices. Daniel, a 21-year-old college student majoring in design, described using 3D modeling technology to digitally construct and preserve the architecture of his ancestral home in a rural village in China. During the interview, he

shared his screen to show a 3D model of the house (see Figure 4-6) and reflected on the possibilities that technology offers for documenting family history:



Figure 4-6. 3D Model of Daniel's Ancestral Home in China

I think technology just gives more... I think it gives me more ways to preserve things. Like as I mentioned, the 3D modeling thing—like, I can do that on my phone. I probably couldn't have done that 10 years ago, like it's just... different. I feel like the way in which you document something will affect what information it conveys. So like, I think, I mean, a 3D model—you'll get a different sense of what it's like than a photo or video. They're different in their own ways, and having as many different ways to document things as you can—I feel like that'll just give a better picture of what that thing is.

Daniel's reflection highlights the expanded technical possibilities available to younger generations and those with greater technological fluency. He remarked that "the way in which you document something will affect what information it conveys," emphasizing that the choice of technology influences both the preservation of information and the meaning that emerges from it. In his view, technologies such as 3D modeling offers richer and better forms of documentation and engagement than more conventional formats like photographs or written narratives. A 3D model, for example, can communicate spatial relationships and offer a sense of immersion, opening up new ways of connecting with and interpreting family history.

Barriers to Connection: Challenges in Chinese American Family Archiving

This section examines the challenges Chinese American families encounter in the process of family archiving. Somewhat surprisingly, and contrary to my initial expectations that some participants might face difficulties with digital tools, technological barriers were not identified as a major obstacle. As discussed in the previous section, technologies are widely used by individuals across different generations and age groups in their family archiving practices. Instead, the difficulties most frequently mentioned in the interviews relate to language, geographic distance, family dynamics and a general neglect of family archives within the family.

Language barrier

Among these, language emerged as one of the most commonly cited challenges, particularly among second-generation and later participants. Kale, a second-generation Chinese-Vietnamese American, shared:

I think one thing is the language barrier, because I don't have literacy in Chinese or Vietnamese. Actually, some of my grandpa's stuff is also Vietnamese. So, I think one thing is like, I literally cannot read letters or anything like that have been written to him and that he's kept.

In this case, the inability to read the language used in his grandfather's records makes it difficult for Kale to engage meaningfully with the content, affecting both their understanding of family history and their perception of the archive's value.

Similarly, Daniel, a third-generation Chinese American, spoke about dialectal differences as a form of linguistic disconnection:

I speak a little bit of Cantonese. So that's how me and my grandpa can communicate. But there's... again, he speaks the village dialect in addition to Cantonese, so that village dialect, because it's not like similar to Cantonese, it's not like mutually intelligible. I can't understand anything. I do often wonder like, what are they talking about? What am I missing? Because my grandparents speak to each other in the village dialect, and they speak to us in Cantonese. I think there is that language barrier still, even though I can speak Chinese, just because it's a different type of Chinese.

In Daniel's case, the language barrier is not just about generational difference, but also about intra-linguistic complexity. Although he has some Chinese language skills, the use of a specific village dialect excludes him from fully accessing the oral storytelling practices that occur between his grandparents.

Isabel, a second-generation participant, described a difficulty involving written text. She reflected, “Yeah, I guess the challenge of... my language skills are not very strong. So there’s like some photos that have names and things written on the back that I can’t read currently.” For Isabel, her limited reading ability in Chinese prevents her from understanding the annotations on photographs, reducing her capacity to interpret and contextualize them.

Zoey, also second-generation, described a related experience that blends language with cultural knowledge. She encountered difficulty understanding kinship terms commonly used among older family members when sharing family photos through social media:

I guess one thing that’s an obstacle is they’re using kinship terms that I don’t know. Right? Because I know like actually very few kinship terms, basically what my mom calls her sister, like I understand that one. But they have so many more because there’s so many aunties and uncles, right, to refer to each other, and then to refer to their aunties and uncles. So they’re talking about the picture and who are these people, but I’m like, I have no idea like what you’re saying. So that is, I guess, a linguistic barrier.

Rooted in language, Zoey’s experience also points to the cultural specificity of kinship naming conventions. Her unfamiliarity with the terms used among older relatives made it difficult to follow or contribute to conversations about family photographs. In this way, linguistic barriers are often intertwined with cultural norms, which create further challenges in navigating and interpreting family archives.

Geographic Distance

Another challenge frequently mentioned by participants is geographic distance. The separation of family members, often living in different cities, countries or even continents, makes it difficult to maintain and expand a coherent family archive over time. When archival materials are physically dispersed and family members are separated by space and circumstance, the continuity of family archiving practices is significantly disrupted.

Shirley reflected on this issue by saying:

I think the interesting obstacle would be just separation of the family. You know, distance. Once we grew up, the four siblings lived in different parts of the country and me, outside the country. So the obstacle, I think, in keeping the old one, it was just the distance and not being able to kind of add to it or continue.

Her words highlight how the geographic dispersion of family members makes it difficult to preserve older materials and to contribute new ones over time.

Kale, similarly, described the challenge of accessing family materials that are stored overseas:

The other thing is like the challenge like I said, like the actual materials live, for my maternal side, in Hong Kong. And like, they're just like, access of like being able to go and actually see them has been a little hard.

In Kale's case, archival materials exist but are out of reach, limiting opportunities for use or engagement.

Family Dynamics

Beyond geographic separation, emotional distance also emerged as a significant challenge in

Chinese American family archiving. Participants noted that fractured or tense family relationships often made it difficult to coordinate the sorting, keeping and division of family archives. This theme surfaced clearly in the interview with Isabel and her mother, Kathy.

When asked about challenges in family archiving, Isabel recalled how her family handled her grandfather's belongings after his death:

I would say that, like after, when my grandpa was dying and after he passed, was a pretty tense time for our family. And like negotiating the sale of his house and getting everything moved out. In that time frame, I think my mom and all her siblings had keys to the house. My first uncle went to the house and took what he wanted. And I didn't really know what even he took. And like, you know, it's his father. So he does have like some claim to those items, but it was sort of like, like I know, he took some of my grandpa's shirts that were special to him. Like those are his to have. But I think that, I guess I would sort of frame that as a challenge, like we weren't able to sort of go through it as a family. It was kind of like every person for themselves, take what you want now. And don't ask questions kind of thing.

Isabel's account reveals how the absence of collective decision-making and open communication can result in fragmented archiving, where personal claims override mutual agreement. The lack of a coordinated approach to handling their grandfather's belongings caused confusion. At the same time, it also prevented the development of a collective approach to family archiving.

Kathy, Isabel's mother, echoed this difficulty when she reflected on broader family tensions:

Like I said, like there's so much family disagreement on stuff that, I feel like, if we work together, we would get such a better picture of everything, you know, a better story and what's what, and description. But since there's so much family disagreement that I don't think we'll get there. I think the other thing, like I said earlier, like who owns the photo was kind of a fight between me and my brothers.

Kathy's words suggest that disagreements over ownership and control of family materials can turn archives into sites of conflict rather than shared memory. In this context, interpersonal tensions and dynamics become central to understanding the challenges of family archiving.

Neglect of Family Archives

Another recurring challenge mentioned by participants is the general neglect of family archives by some family members. This kind of neglect is not limited to any specific age group or generation. It can be observed among both first-generation immigrants and their descendants. In many cases, the difficulty comes from a lack of time, energy or intention to engage with family materials, even when their value is recognized. This also reflects an earlier point in the study: family archives in Chinese American families rarely emerge from deliberate and long-term strategies.

Frank, a second-generation Chinese American, described his frustration with the lack of response from family members when he tried to gather archival information:

I guess the only challenge is just like they don't give me anything. Or it's like asking,

did this happen? The answer, there's no response. So therefore, the challenge is more like maintaining an accurate, up-to-date archive. There are challenges that really... I gave up, because it's like, how do you maintain that? It's impossible. I have to maintain whatever I have in my own possession. But then across the border, like this source is difficult to find, a source that will be considered not tangible but credible.

Frank found it difficult to continue when his efforts were met with silence or disinterest. Maintaining a family archive became a solitary task, with little support or communication from others.

Kale, also second-generation, made a similar observation. They reflected on how busyness and everyday responsibilities often take priority over engaging with family history:

Also, I think part of it is also that, like, you know, it's not that the generation above us doesn't understand the importance of the materials and stuff. It's just like life happens, and they're so busy that there's like... it's a box that's living in their closet, you know like that, will eventually come down, but like it's not like they're building intentional time on the weekends to go through it.

For Kale, family archives exist and are recognized. However, they are often left untouched due to a lack of time or attention.

Helen, a first-generation Chinese American, offered a perspective from a different life stage. Speaking about her own children, she said:

Now that we are older, we have more time and tend to reflect more on the past. But

younger people are so busy. I feel like they need time. Maybe when they reach our age, they will want to know more about their parents' lives. My daughter is quite close to me, so she sometimes talks about family stories or asks questions. But my son is different. He never really talks about these things. Maybe he's just too focused on his work and not thinking about any of this right now.

Helen's reflection suggests that whether people pay attention to family archives often depends on what's going on in their lives, how close they feel to other family members and what stage of life they're in. Even if someone cares about family history, they might still put it aside for the time being, thinking they'll return to it later.

Chapter Discussion

Building on the findings presented above, this section turns to broader discussions concerning everyday archiving in Chinese American families. First, it considers the varied and sometimes unconventional understandings of "family" and their implications for imagined boundaries. Second, it explores the deep entwinement between family archiving and identity construction. Third, it examines how the ease of documentation enabled by technologies affects the intentionality and perceived value of family archives. Finally, it reflects on the gendered dynamics of archival labor within families.

First, while the notion of family archives may appear straightforward at first glance, it is in fact layered and complex. This complexity begins with the concept of "family" itself, which cannot be understood as fixed or singular (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Miller, 2016). In the interviews I

conducted, participants spoke of found families, adoption and familial estrangement, pointing to a fluid and relational understanding of who counts as family, rather than one grounded solely in biological or genealogical ties. This more expansive view of family has direct implications for family archiving: it affects who is included in the archive, whose stories are preserved and who is left out.

Moreover, even those regarded as family members may only be included in the archive if their behavior and values align with the family's moral standards and desired self-representation. As Jennifer, one of the interviewees, noted: "Think hard about what I want to include that will represent our family legacy," and "You're sort of, like, a little bit self-editing, right? You're like, I want to portray my family in a good light." Here, the emphasis is on the issue of representation. Such choices, as revealed in many interviews, are shaped by a family's own values and ethical judgments. In this light, Chinese American family archives cannot be seen as neutral historical documentation. Rather, they are selective constructions of identity, assembled with an imagined audience in mind. As Jennifer reflected, "You think of people in the public who may or may not know your family, but they might see it..."

Second, Chinese American family archives are deeply intertwined with the making of identity (Cook, 2013; Caswell et al., 2016; Woodham et al., 2017). This is particularly evident in what is included, what is excluded and what is displayed, each shaping "who we are," "who we are not" and "how we want to be seen by ourselves and others."

What is included reflects how families understand themselves. On the one hand, many

participants emphasized their Chinese identity by preserving items with strong cultural significance, such as watercolor paintings, calligraphy or steel buckets used to burn joss paper. These objects carry visible traces of Chinese heritage. On the other hand, they are also American. Daisy, for example, recalled how her mother, upon arriving in the U.S., bought a Butterfinger candy bar at the airport, a bar she kept for decades despite its expiration, saying, “I was able to pay for this one thing when I first stepped foot in America.” Though seemingly trivial, the candy bar became a marker of belonging, symbolizing a personal milestone in her migration journey and integrating Americanness into the family narrative.

What is excluded signals who the family does not see itself as or does not want to be. These omissions are, in many cases, intentional. As one participant put it, “I don’t want to include that in there, because that’s not representative of our legacy.” Such decisions often reflect a desire to protect or curate the family narrative, removing aspects that feel shameful or misaligned with the family’s values. In this way, the act of exclusion in family archives becomes a process of selective identity construction and boundary-making, defining who we are not and do not want to be.

What is displayed shows how the family wants to be understood by themselves and by visitors. Unlike items that are simply stored, displayed materials carry a performative function. Trophies, diplomas and family portraits hung on walls are curated to convey pride, accomplishment and cohesion. Through these visible arrangements, families construct a desirable image of themselves—often that of a successful, hardworking and upwardly mobile immigrant household. As one participant noted, the choices behind display are often shaped by an “imagined audience”,

as others who may one day see these items and draw conclusions about the family's character and legacy. Together, through the inclusion, exclusion and display of family archives, Chinese American families shape "who we are," "who we are not" and "how we want to be understood."

Third, the growing ease of documentation enabled by technologies raises questions about how such convenience may affect the intentionality and perceived value of family archives. As several participants reflected, the widespread use of smartphones has dramatically transformed how Chinese American families record and preserve memories. Shirley, for example, observed "a plethora of documentation, all the time and accessible," contrasting this with earlier times when "film was precious." In the past, photographs were typically reserved for special occasions. Families would "wait until the next birthday or the next occasion before taking another picture," then "take it to the drugstore and have it developed," and finally "carefully stick them in the album", with a clear intent to document and preserve. Now, documentation happens frequently and casually: people can take a photo at any moment, often without much thought, rendering the archival intention more invisible or ambiguous. This shift from deliberate to incidental recording also has implications for how memory is valued. When everything can be recorded, fewer moments are marked as especially meaningful. The sheer abundance of digital traces may make individual photos feel less unique or less worthy of long-term preservation. As a result, family archives risk becoming overwhelmed by volume, lacking the selectivity and intentionality that once distinguished meaningful artifacts from the ordinary.

Forth, family archiving practices may involve a latent gendered division of labor, with men

tending to assume responsibility for the management and claim over physical materials (material stewardship), while women are more often positioned as transmitters of family stories (narrative transmission). This division appears closely linked to traditional gender roles and cultural conventions.

When discussing oral storytelling, Daisy remarked, “I think it’s a lot of women,” and added, “I absolutely believe it is a gender role thing.” She attributed this pattern to women’s domestic responsibilities: “They clean the house, raising the children, so anything that my grandma told to me or told to my mom, my mom would tell me as well.” While this perspective was not widely echoed across interviews, it raises a compelling point about the gendered dynamics of oral storytelling within families. A similar pattern emerged in another interview with Kathy and her daughter Isabel, particularly regarding the management of family belongings following the death of Kathy’s father. Kathy noted, “My brother wants to keep all the pictures, because he took a lot of them... I think my oldest brother felt more possession over it, because he’s the oldest son, so everything should belong to him.” Isabel echoed this observation: “My first uncle went to the house and took what he wanted. And I didn’t really know what even he took. And like, you know, it’s his father. So he does have like some claim to those items, but it was sort of like, like I know, he took some of my grandpa’s shirts that were special to him. Like those are his to have.” These accounts resonate with patrilineal inheritance norms commonly found in Chinese cultural traditions, particularly the expectation that the eldest son inherits and safeguards the family’s tangible legacy.

Taken together, these examples suggest a possible gendered division of archival work within Chinese American families—where men, especially eldest sons, may take on roles of material stewardship, while women, shaped by caregiving responsibilities, are more often involved in narrative transmission. While this observation remains preliminary and requires further empirical validation, it offers an important insight into how traditional gender roles may continue to influence family archiving practices, both implicitly and explicitly.

Chapter Conclusion

Drawing on in-depth interviews, home visits and virtual walkthroughs, this chapter explored how Chinese American families engage in everyday archiving. It examined the imagined boundaries of family archives, what materials are preserved, why and how archiving occurs, where archives are stored, how technology shapes practices and what challenges families encounter.

The data suggest that the concept of “family” is neither fixed nor universally agreed upon. Instead, understandings of family are shaped by family dynamics and personal histories, which influence who and what gets included or excluded from the archive. The materials preserved go beyond official documents to include photographs, handwritten letters, oral narratives, clothing and seemingly ordinary objects. Archiving is often motivated by a desire to connect across generations or to honor the memory of loved ones. Family archives tend to emerge through a process situated between incidental accumulation and intentional preservation, gradually formed through everyday acts of keeping and revisiting that involve selective judgment. Though informally organized, their spatial arrangement often holds symbolic meaning. Digital tools such

as smartphones, cloud storage and social media have expanded archiving possibilities, while the ease of documentation has also raised concerns about the perceived value and intentionality of what is preserved. Participants identified several challenges encountered, including language barriers, geographic distance, strained family dynamics and a general neglect of family archives.

The next chapter builds on these insights to explore the emotional weight of small and seemingly ordinary things in Chinese American family archives, focusing on how such objects carrying emotional meaning and fostering a sense of belonging across generations and geographies

Chapter V. Affective Archives: Small Things, Emotional Meaning and Intergenerational Connection

Chapter Introduction

This chapter addresses Research Question Two: What role do small, ordinary things play in carrying emotional meaning and fostering a sense of belonging across generations and geographies? Drawing on in-depth interviews and object elicitations, the chapter presents two paired examples—Zelda and Jennifer, and Kathy and Isabel, two mother–daughter pairs—who reflect on the emotions and memories evoked by their family archives.

These narratives illustrate how ordinary objects, often overlooked by conventional archival frameworks, can become living archives, and how even archives that have been lost or never physically existed can continue to convey care and love through remembrance and storytelling. The narratives also reveal how the acts of revisiting, narrating and engaging with these materials can become a form of grief work and emotional processing, as well as an intimate process of mourning for the beauty of the past and the affections lost amid changes in family relationships.

A Note on Narrative Method

This chapter is written in a narrative and storytelling style. Without resorting to abstract theorization or overtly analytical language, I present the stories of two mother-daughter pairs in the shape and texture in which they were shared with me, through conversation, memory, objects, silence, and at times, tears. The writing seeks to hold space for emotional nuance and allows each person's voices and lived experiences to unfold on their own terms. This approach has been

increasingly adopted in archival scholarship that explores the personal, emotional and traumatic dimensions (Gilliland, 2014; Douglas and Alisauskas, 2021) of memory and recordkeeping.

This narrative approach reflects both a methodological and ethical commitment. I do not write to speak for the participants, but to honor their own ways of meaning-making. These are not “representative” cases, nor are they offered for generalization. Instead, they are situated accounts of how ordinary objects can become containers of emotion, connection and belonging across generations and geographies. In addition, as a Chinese male researcher working closely with Chinese American women and families, I am aware of the asymmetries embedded in these research interactions. I do not attempt to resolve or erase them; instead, I remain attentive to the ethical responsibilities of listening. The narrative form allows me to stay close to their words and experiences, avoiding overinterpretation or the imposition of meaning. At times, the line between storytelling and analysis is deliberately blurred. This reflects a conscious decision to let emotional meanings surface through stories rather than through categorical claims.

I invite the reader to listen closely: to what is said, what is held back and what is carried in the weight of small things.

Zelda and Jennifer

Setting the Stage

I first met Zelda and her daughter Jennifer at a Christmas party hosted by a mutual friend in late 2022, and we have stayed in touch ever since. The two of them are incredibly warm and welcoming. They invited me to join their Lunar New Year celebration, and I also visited their home

on another occasion, where they hosted me with great generosity. Since Jennifer and I are close in age, we often met up for meals or coffee. Through these informal yet meaningful encounters, I gradually came to learn more about their family's migration journey and intergenerational experiences.

Zelda, now 69, is a first-generation Chinese American immigrant and a highly respected retired professor from a university in Southern California. She was born in Wuhan and, due to her parents' work assignments and her own career moves, lived in cities such as Nanjing, Shanghai and Beijing before immigrating to the United States. She came to Seattle for her doctoral studies and, thanks to an impressive publication record during her Ph.D., secured a faculty position in Los Angeles upon graduation. Zelda met her then-husband, originally from Taiwan, in the United States, and together they had their daughter, Jennifer. After their divorce, Zelda raised Jennifer on her own and later brought her parents from China to live with them. This brought companionship into her household and, at the same time, provided help with caring for young Jennifer.

Jennifer, now 33, is a second-generation Chinese American who was born, raised, educated and now works in Los Angeles. She grew up surrounded by the love and care of her maternal grandparents until she left for college, at which point they returned to China. In 2019, Jennifer moved to Nanjing to care for her aging grandmother after her grandfather had passed away. She remained in Nanjing until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when she returned to the United States. Her grandmother passed away during the pandemic, and since then, Jennifer has not had the opportunity to return to Nanjing.

Living Archives and Ephemeral Scripts: Memory Work Through Ordinary Things

Over time, through a combination of in-depth interviews, home visits and informal interactions such as sharing meals and having coffee, I came to better understand how emotional meaning is conveyed through this family's everyday archival practices. What moved me most was how small, seemingly ordinary things carried profound emotional weight and served as powerful forms of connection across generations.

Jennifer shared with me two such objects. One was the rose bush her grandmother had planted in the yard of their family home in Los Angeles, which Jennifer tended with care and affection. The other was a handwritten note taped behind the door of her grandmother's home in Nanjing, listing reminders that supported her grandmother's daily routine as she coped with early-onset dementia. Though simple in form, these two objects exemplify how memory work is enacted through living archives and ephemeral scripts, sustaining care, longing and continuity in everyday life.

The Rosebush: A Living Archive of Longing and Continuity

During the interview, Jennifer spoke movingly about how ordinary things can carry the weight of emotions and memory. She described the roses her grandmother had planted and the space they once shared together:

My grandma planted rose bushes in the yard of our family home. The photos I took of those roses, and even the roses themselves, maybe the dried flowers too, all feel like archives to me. They are memories of my grandparents. You could even say the whole

house is part of my family archive, because it holds all of the memories. That's also why my mom really doesn't want to sell the house in the future. It was her first home, and when my grandparents came to live with us, there were so many shared memories from that time.

This account illustrates how memory and emotion shape the very notion of what a family archive can be. For Jennifer, an archive is defined through the affective presence of memory embedded in the ordinary objects of everyday life, rather than through institutional structure, professional definition or formal categorization. The rose bush, planted by her late grandmother and cared for across seasons and years, becomes a living archive—more than a static repository of the past, it is a dynamic site where memory is enacted through acts of care and emotional resonance.

The significance of the rose bush lies not so much in its material form as in its role in sustaining intergenerational connection. It carries emotional meaning because it is situated within lived relationships and intimate histories. Even after loved ones have passed away, such objects serve as tangible touchpoints through which memory is kept alive and familial ties are sustained.

Moreover, Jennifer and Zelda don't just hold onto objects; they also engage in everyday archival sharing by expressing their memories and processing their grief in digital space. Their care for the rose bush and their love for late family members, extend beyond the physical space of the garden, becoming part of broader practices of remembrance and longing mediated through social media. They frequently photographed the roses in bloom and post these images with brief reflections that captured both beauty and memory. On WeChat, I came across two such posts

they had shared. Though simple in form, the images and captions were deeply moving.

As shown in Figure 5-1, Jennifer once shared a photograph of a blooming rose, accompanied by a short post. Originally written in Chinese, the caption reads: “It’s been three years since Grandma passed. The roses she planted are still blooming. And I still long to return to Nanjing.”

外婆已走了，她种的玫瑰还在🌹三年过去了，还是想回南京。



Figure 5-1. Screenshot of Jennifer’s WeChat Post

Similarly, as shown in Figure 5-2, Zelda posted pictures of the roses blooming in the garden, writing: “Each two-toned rose displays a unique blend of colors and patterns, worthy of close appreciation. Of all the flowers, the one we cherish most is the pink rose my mother planted here (Photos 7, 8, 9). It will forever bring back the memory of her kind smile and her hardworking spirit.”

双色多彩玫瑰 🌹 每一朵都有不同的色彩和花纹，值得细细去观赏👍！我们最钟爱的当然还是妈妈❤️生前在这里栽种的粉色玫瑰（图7、8、9），永远会让我们想起她那慈爱的笑容和勤劳的身影！ 😊



Figure 5-2. Screenshot of Zelda’s WeChat Post

The rose bush, planted by Jennifer’s late grandmother and continuously cared for by her and her mother, functions as a living archive, where memory and emotion are cultivated across generations. By posting images of the blooming roses on WeChat, Jennifer and Zelda engage in a form of archival sharing, which makes visible the emotional dimension of memory work and transforms private grief into a form of affective expression. This practice illustrates how memory and emotion are not only “preserved” in objects, but also continually reactivated and recontextualized through digital mediation.

While the rose bush exemplifies how memory and emotion can be cultivated, sustained and also shared through a living archive situated in both physical and digital spaces, not all archival gestures take such visible or symbolically rich forms. Some are quieter, more ephemeral and embedded within the unnoticed acts and routines of daily care and affection. Jennifer shared another small yet deeply meaningful archival object that no longer exists but that continues to carry emotional weight in her memory.

The Note Behind the Door: Everyday Care as an Archival Gesture

When I asked Jennifer if she could choose one item from her family archive to which she felt most emotionally attached, and share the memories, stories and feelings connected to it, she paused for a moment, then began to speak.

I remember an object, although I don't have it with me anymore. It was from the time I was living with my grandmother in Nanjing. I worked there for a while and visited her every weekend. This was in late 2019, around September or October. I stayed in Nanjing from the end of September or early October until sometime after January, for about five or six months. I had planned to stay longer, but the pandemic interrupted those plans.

I remember that every time we went out, I accompanied my grandmother on her walks. She went out twice a day, once at 6:30 in the morning and again around 4:00 in the afternoon. These walks helped her stay active, and I always joined her. At the time, we already knew she had pancreatic cancer, and we understood that she might not have

much time left. I was there on behalf of my family to spend time with her. I also shared lots of photos in our family WeChat group—selfies, videos of her stretching her legs. Those were really memorable items for us.

As she recalled this, Jennifer smiled, visibly amused by the memory. She continued:

So every time we were about to go out, there was a piece of paper taped to the door reminding her not to forget anything. She had early-onset dementia, so every few minutes she would forget things. Her long-term memory was fine, but her short-term memory would reset constantly. People often had to remind her.

I remember that piece of paper. I feel it's very special to me. But my mom would probably throw it away if she saw it and say, "What is this?" After my grandma passed away, they had to clean up the whole house. So I'd say it's an object that no longer exists. But if I held it in my hand now, I know I would feel sad.

As Jennifer spoke, I could see the tears welling up in her eyes and hear the slight catch in her voice. Listening to her recount such a tender story, I couldn't help but be moved. She went on to share more memories of growing up with her grandmother, recalling:

From my perspective, my family has always been my mom, my grandmother and my grandfather. But I wasn't particularly close to my grandfather.

I often think of my grandmother when she was younger, when she was full of energy and strength. Later on, she began to suffer from nervous exhaustion and early-onset dementia. She changed. It wasn't that she became someone else, but things were

different. For example, she would eat a boiled egg and then forget and eat someone else's egg. She completely forgot she had already eaten. That's also why she had such a big appetite. Because of the cancer, the tumor disrupted her hunger signals. Part of it was that she forgot she had eaten, and part of it was that she always felt hungry.

You know, even though she was still my grandmother, the version of her I remember most clearly is when she was at her healthiest. That image of her is what stayed with me the most.

Jennifer's story prompted me to reflect on how emotional meaning can transform the status of an everyday object. The note itself was simple—just a daily reminder of routine. But through acts of care, repetition and shared memory, it became something far more meaningful.

This example also illustrates how subjective and relational archival value can be. As Jennifer herself noted, the note might have seemed insignificant to others and would likely have been discarded during the house clean-up. Yet for her, it held shared moments with her grandmother, carried the emotional imprint of their relationship and embodied her sense of responsibility to her family. In this case, archival value does not arise from what is materially preserved, but from how an object is remembered and what it evokes in the person who remembers.

Jennifer's account ultimately raises a broader question: what does it mean for something to be archived? Is it the physical survival of an object that defines its archival status or the affective force it carries in memory? Although the note no longer exists in material form, it continues to live on as an emotional trace. Its archival power resides less in physical survival and more in the

intimate acts of recollection and meaning-making.

A similar dynamic emerged in the story of another mother and daughter I interviewed, Isabel and her mother Kathy. In their case, it was three photographs that carried the emotional weight of intergenerational connection. Through their reflections, we see how visual records, too, become affective archives.

Kathy and Isabel

Setting the Stage

I first came into contact with Isabel after she completed my participation form, and we soon scheduled a time to meet for an interview. During our in-depth conversation, I was deeply moved by the stories she shared. At the end of our discussion, Isabel mentioned that she had actually discovered the recruitment post for my study on Facebook. Interestingly, it was her mother who had first come across the post and forwarded it to her, thinking she might be interested in the topic. During the conversation, I learned that Isabel was in the process of helping her mother digitize a collection of old family photographs. She also spoke with warmth and admiration about her mother's deep emotional connection to their family archives. These details prompted me to ask whether her mother might be open to participating in the study as well. Isabel said she would ask. A few days later, I received a completed participation form from her mother, Kathy. I reached out to her and soon had the privilege of conducting an in-depth interview with her.

Kathy, now 45, is a 1.5-generation Chinese American. Her parents migrated from Toishan, Guangdong to Hong Kong, where she was born a year after their relocation. She grew up in a

family where son preference was deeply entrenched. Kathy explained that neither her father nor her grandfather were born into their families by blood but instead were brought in through customary arrangements that reflected the traditional importance placed on having male heirs. In Hong Kong, her family lived in the Kowloon Walled City, an area then known for its poverty, lack of formal governance and high levels of crime. Life was difficult, and economic resources were scarce. When Kathy was ten, the family immigrated to Seattle. Life in the United States remained financially constrained, somewhere between poverty and working-class conditions. Her mother, often in poor health, stayed home to care for the children and rarely held steady employment, though she occasionally took jobs at a clothing factory, sewing garments to help support the family. Her father worked long hours in construction.

Despite these challenges, Kathy described her upbringing as relatively easy. She noted that by the time she was growing up, the pressure of son preference had become less pronounced in her household. With two older brothers who were nine and seven years older than her, along with the care and protection of her parents, she felt well shielded from the family's struggles. Looking back, she reflected that she did not fully understand how difficult life had been for her family until she reached adulthood. In her adult life, Kathy married a white American man and had two daughters. After the marriage ended in divorce, Kathy raised her daughters on her own. Over the years, a series of changes within the family, including the passing of her parents and other personal challenges, reshaped family dynamics in significant ways. Her relationships with her brothers, especially her eldest brother, became strained.

Isabel, now 22, is a second-generation Chinese American. She was born and raised in Seattle to a Chinese mother and a white father. In her early childhood, Isabel lived with her maternal grandparents in a detached unit of their family home. Her parents and she shared that space until her younger sibling was born, when she was five. At the time of Isabel's birth, her mother was still in school, so her grandmother took on the primary role of caregiver. This early caregiving relationship created a deep emotional bond between Isabel and her grandparents. After graduating from college, Isabel began working at a nonprofit organization dedicated to encouraging public appreciation for the natural beauty of public lands, such as national parks, rivers and lakes. In her own words, Isabel describes herself as a very sentimental person, someone who has "a hard time letting go of things." Like her mother Kathy, she has a deep interest in family history and archival materials.

Following the death of her grandfather, Isabel and her mother brought home several family photo albums with the intention of scanning and digitizing them. One night, after Isabel had taught her mother how to scan the pictures, Kathy came across the recruitment post for my study and forwarded it to Isabel, thinking she might be interested.

Archiving as Emotional Work: Visual Records of Grief and Intimacy

Through in-depth interviews and object elicitations, I witnessed the profound emotional responses that Isabel and Kathy experienced in engaging with their family archives. On one hand, this was evident in the emotionally charged process of scanning the photographs they had retrieved after Isabel's grandfather passed away. As Isabel reflected during our interview, "I think it's a big

part of our grief processing,” and “for a while, it was just too emotionally raw for my mom to scan them.” On the other hand, the depth of their emotions also surfaced as they reflected on and narrated the stories behind these archival materials. Feelings of loss, sorrow, longing and tears were woven into their storytelling.

Isabel and Kathy shared three photographs and the personal histories attached to them. Through their accounts, we can see how family archives become intimately tied to emotion, identity, intergenerational love and lost affections. Their story telling also reflects the broader lived experience of Chinese Americans and the everyday resistance to cultural and racial othering.

Connecting Past and Future: Photographs as Vessels of Intergenerational Love

My in-depth interview with Isabel lasted for an hour and twenty minutes, during which we talked at length about her upbringing, family history and archiving practices. Throughout our conversation, I was deeply moved by the affection she held for her family and the emotional weight that family archives carried for her. The photograph she shared with me was not only emotionally significant, but also deeply connected to her sense of identity as a mixed-race and Chinese American individual. As she explained:

When I was probably two or three, my mom and my grandparents, and I think my first uncle, maybe more people, we went on a trip to Washington, D.C., and there are a handful of photos of me and my grandparents from that trip.

As she spoke, Isabel searched for the photo (See Figure 5-3), then began screen sharing. She continued:

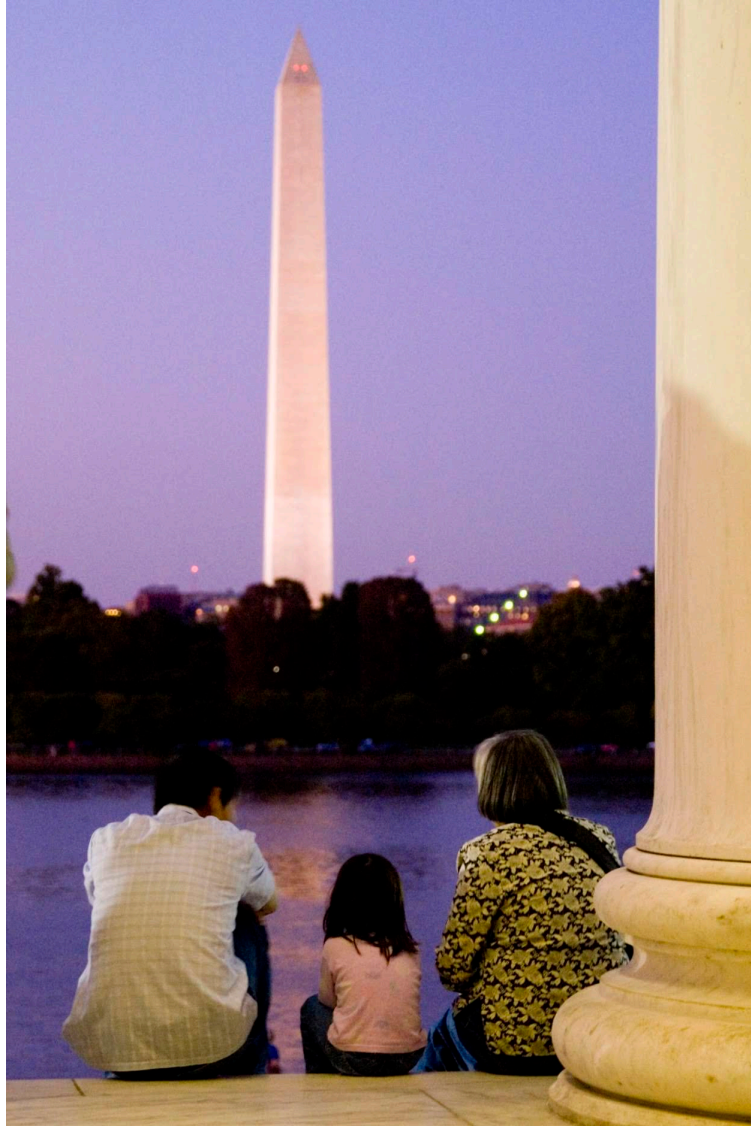


Figure 5-3. Isabel with Her Grandparents at the Washington Monument

That's me in the middle. And sorry, I'm definitely gonna cry at this part.

Her voice trembled as she tried to hold back tears.

I really feel like this... it's just like so quintessentially American, like we're staring at the Washington Monument, and it makes me think about how hard my grandparents worked to get us here.

She paused, her voice shaking audibly.

And also like my sort of career path that I'm on is with national parks and national monuments. So this is like... I don't know, it's sort of like foreshadowing something. They're kind of—they're like looking at my future with me, even though they're not physically with me to see it.

Tears welled in her eyes as she continued,

I think I—as I've become an adult, I'm really appreciating just how much my grandparents did for me and how much they shaped me... as a person. Like my mom pointed out to me, I think it was after my grandpa passed away, like through most of middle and high school, I had a lot of like inner turmoil about, like, my mixed race identity. Like people don't consider me Chinese, or I feel really white. And my mom pointed out that my grandparents never... they never said like, "This is my half-Chinese grandkid." I was just their grandkid. And I, like, was just as meaningful and special to them as my cousins who are full Chinese.

She paused briefly, reflecting:

I had never really, like, noticed or thought about that. But not like my identity wasn't important to them—but it wasn't like... or not my racial identity—it wasn't like... it didn't cause them to treat me any differently or treat me special. Like, they didn't hold me on any kind of pedestal for being part white, as I know like some families are... weird about that, not weird, but different about that.

She thought for a moment before adding:

Yeah, so I think this photo represents my identity in that it sort of... (pauses, thinking) ... shows what shaped me and where I'm going.

In this photograph, and in Isabel's moving account, I deeply felt the emotional power that family archives can carry. Within both the image and her narration, I saw multiple forms of connection: across generations and between the past and the future. As a visual record of a family trip spanning three generations, the photo continues to convey enduring intergenerational love, even though Isabel's grandparents have since passed away. Isabel also described this photo as a meaningful link between her personal past and professional future. In the image, the little girl she once was sits with her grandparents, gazing toward the Washington Monument—a symbol that now resonates with her current career, which centers on national parks and public lands. As she noted, it almost feels like a moment of quiet foreshadowing, with her grandparents “looking at my future” alongside her.

Moreover, this photograph is deeply connected to Isabel's sense of identity. As a mixed-race Chinese American, she experienced moments of inner turmoil growing up—feeling at times “really white” or not fully seen as Chinese. But her grandparents never made such distinctions. As she emphasized, she was “just their grandkid,” “just as meaningful and special” to them as her full-Chinese cousins.

I listened quietly as Isabel spoke, allowing space for pauses and silences to settle. I thanked her for her openness and the generosity of sharing such private and heartfelt memories. Sensing the depth of her emotion, I gently affirmed her narrative, telling her that her grandparents would

surely be proud of the person she has become. Isabel nodded softly, and then continued:

I think they'd be pretty proud. My grandpa, before he passed, my mom helped him with his will. And he said that he wanted his ashes and my grandma's ashes to be scattered at Yellowstone National Park. So we haven't yet done that, but it's gonna be really impactful for me when we are able to do that.

Wanting to understand more, I asked why her grandfather cared so deeply about national parks. Isabel replied:

I think he just really liked to travel. And I think that's a common... the experience for a lot of immigrants to the U.S.—to, like, go experience public lands. Sorry, I'm, like, kind of gonna nerd out a little bit. But, like... (pauses, thinking) yeah, like I know they went to Yellowstone. I'm not sure what other parks they were able to go to. But just that they valued those experiences. Like, I don't think actually any of our, like, family archives have photos of those trips or anything.

There's a pretty significant proportion of Asian immigrants, especially, who go to national parks. And there's a huge, like, racial element to it—like the workforce versus the visitation. And, like, one thing I really enjoy seeing in my family and other families is, like, Asian immigrant families who go to national parks, or just, like, city parks, to have, like, a cookout. Like, that's the event. We want to eat together. We want to, like, have a picnic or a barbecue. But we want to do it in this, like, public lands space that is... that is ours to use. We came to this country, and we're gonna use it. We're gonna

enjoy it.

When Isabel said, “I don’t think actually any of our family archives have photos of those trips or anything,” she simultaneously acknowledged the absence of physical documentation and the continued presence of memory. This illustrates once again that archival meaning does not always depend on material preservation, but rather on the act of remembering and narrating. Her story of those family trips, though undocumented by photographs, is actively archived through her telling.

In addition, Isabel’s reflection reveals how public lands hold deep symbolic resonance for Asian immigrant families. Her grandfather’s wish to have his ashes scattered at Yellowstone, and her family’s gatherings in national or city parks, are not merely leisure practices. They are affective acts that claim space, express cultural continuity and articulate a sense of belonging in a country that has often racialized and marginalized them.

In Isabel’s family archive, whether through material photographs or oral storytelling, what emerges is a rich record of Chinese American lived experience, which captures not only migration and memory, but also care and resilience.

At the end of our interview, I thanked Isabel for her time and for sharing such meaningful reflections. I also asked whether she might be willing to share the photograph with me for inclusion in my dissertation. She said she would think about it. A few days later, she generously sent me the photo and added the following note in her email:

If it’s relevant, the photo was taken by my first uncle (my mom’s eldest brother) on October 15, 2005, the day after my third birthday. My grandparents and I are sitting at

the Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC, looking across the Tidal Basin at the Washington Monument. (Another thing I noticed in revisiting the photo was that my grandma has a bag strap across her shoulder. A running joke in my family is that in almost every photo of my grandma she has a bag of some kind.)

In fact, Isabel is not the only one in her family who feels deeply connected to these materials. A few days after our interview, I had the opportunity to speak with her mother, Kathy. In the next section, I turn to Kathy's reflections as she shared two photographs from her childhood in Hong Kong. Her memories, shaped by migration, sacrifice and sibling affection, offer a different yet equally poignant, perspective on how family archives carry emotional weight and how love and care can be quietly preserved in small and everyday images, even in the face of familial rupture and change.

Remembering through Archives: The Beauty of the Past and Lost Affections

During our in-depth interview, Kathy shared two photographs that held special emotional significance for her, along with the memories, stories and feelings they carried. Both images had been digitized and saved in a cloud drive. As she began screen sharing, she brought up the first photo (see Figure 5-4) and introduced it by saying:



Figure 5-4. Childhood Photo of Kathy in Hong Kong

So this is a picture of me in Hong Kong. I was probably like seven months, nine months, something like that. Growing up there in that small, little, tiny space. The TV was always on, which I liked, cause now I always like to have something on. I love cats, and you can see that there's a cat there. We always had cats. We didn't really own them. They just came and lived with us, and then they'd go away, and another one would come. Because of where we were, my mom was always like, "Oh, it's good. It's good luck when a cat comes to live with you. They're a good luck symbol." She was like, "And they help hunt the rats," which they did. So I always had cats. But they weren't really like pet cats like we have in America—they just came and lived.

And then you see here on the left side. These are grapes. And then there's some by

the cat here. So I guess I really liked squashing grapes. I would take grapes and just do this when I was little.

As she spoke, she mimed the squashing motion with her hands, and continued,

My mom, when she goes to the grocery, when she goes buy groceries, she says she always has to buy two bags. She has one bag for us to actually eat, and then she'll have a smaller bag that she just gives me to, like, squish and play. I like this because I'm so happy. It shows where I grew up. I have the cat who's looking at the fish tank. But it really kind of shows how my family—I was, like, I am the baby. They let me do anything (laughs), anything I like.

My mom didn't care that it was wasteful of food. She was just like, "Go ahead, play with it. You're happy." So I like this picture cause it really just shows me, like, how much I was loved as a little kid.

She then pulled up another photograph from her cloud drive and explain:

There is a similar picture. These are my two brothers, the older one and the second older one, and they're playing a little piano there.

I guess my mom said that the two of them, when they walked to school, she would give them money to buy breakfast on the way, like go buy a little bread, and buy a little drink, you know, the Vita mixed drinks that come in a box. And they would skip drinking them, they'll just drink water, so they would save up a little bit of money every day. And they would buy toys for me. So this was a little piano that they had bought for me,

because they would skip part of their breakfast to save money. So another like, that's how much my family loves me. I was the baby. I was the princess.

So I feel like (laughs) these two pictures kind of really tell my identity, like why I'm confident now, why I'm the person I am now. It's because I've always just been so loved.

When I asked Kathy what emotions she experiences when reviewing these pictures, she paused for a moment, then reflected:

I think a lot of it is I feel really sad. There's so much I don't remember, and so much that I wish I asked my parents about, so that I would, you know, have those stories. So I do feel some sad and loss there. But I also see like... (pauses, organizing her thoughts)

So because right now, our family, like one of my brothers doesn't talk to me. When my parents died, like everything was really bad, and people were fighting. I think sometimes the archives just remind me of like when that was good... (voice trembles slightly)

Like there's so much evidence of it when it was good. And the pictures I showed you, like, I was loved. I was the princess. (laughs) So I find a lot of happy in it. And I find... what's the word I'm looking for... I find it's like it helps me kind of like find my place in the world. Like where I belong and what my story is, and what... like just my own history. Like I feel... I don't know what's the emotion with it. Like comfort? To know my own story? I think that those are kind of the big things I feel.

What Kathy's account illustrates is how archives can serve as evidence of love, which carries and extends emotional memory. Throughout the interview, she repeatedly used phrases such as "I was loved," "I've always just been so loved," and "I was the princess," signaling that these photographs go beyond documentation. They become affective artifacts, which serve as material expressions of care and affection.

The seemingly mundane elements in the photographs, such as the cat, the grapes and the toy piano, captures her early experiences of being nurtured and protected. These everyday scenes hold deep emotional significance, as they reflect a sense of safety and familial love.

At the same time, the emotions these photos evoke are not singularly warm. Kathy's reflection—"the archives just remind me of like when that was good"—reveals how archival materials can also surface feelings of loss and longing. Beyond preserving joy, the photos also point to what has been lost and highlight the emotional consequences that follow familial rupture and grief.

Final Reflections on These Examples

The two examples—Zelda and Jennifer, Kathy and Isabel—reveal many parallels across generational, migratory and familial experiences. Both Zelda and Kathy were born and raised in China before immigrating to the United States. Their daughters, Jennifer and Isabel, are second-generation Chinese Americans who were born and raised in the U.S. As children, both spent significant time living with their maternal grandparents due to their mothers' work, education or marital transitions. These experiences fostered deep emotional bonds with their grandparents,

which in turn became central to how they engaged with and interpreted their family archives. In both families, the archives functioned as sites of intergenerational connection, mediating relationships across three generations.

At the same time, there are important differences in their migration trajectories, family dynamics and life circumstances. These differences inevitably shaped how they narrated the meaning and impact of their family archives. For instance, Isabel, as a mixed-race individual, spoke about how family photos helped her navigate questions of identity and belonging.

Having shared these two examples, I now turn to four key reflections that emerge from them.

First, what is an archive and where does its value come from? These examples challenge the traditional conception of archives as static, neutral and official. Instead, they foreground the idea that archives are dynamic, emotionally charged (Russell, 2018; Caswell, 2019; Regehr et al., 2023), and embedded in everyday life. For instance, the rose bush planted by Jennifer's grandmother can be seen as a living archive, one that connects Jennifer to her grandmother in a tangible yet evolving way. Archival value, then, does not reside in evidential or historical worth. Rather, it often emerges from personal and affective attachments (Caswell et al., 2016; Douglas et al., 2022), through memory, sensory experience and emotional resonance. These values are multilayered. As the stories show, family archives carry warmth, joy and love, but also grief, longing and emotional ambivalence. These values are also subjective. A handwritten note that Jennifer treasures, for example, might appear trivial to others; as she reflected, "My mom would probably throw it away if she saw it and say, 'What is this?'" These examples demonstrate that both what counts as an

archive and where archival value derives from differ from traditional institutional archive-centric understandings. I will further elaborate in the next chapter on how the study of Chinese American family archives complicates and enriches dominant archival assumptions.

Second, does the physical existence of an archive determine its significance? These examples suggest that the affective and mnemonic power of an archive does not always depend on its material presence. Jennifer, for instance, spoke movingly about a handwritten note that used to hang behind the door to remind her grandmother, who had early-onset dementia, about everyday tasks. Although the note no longer exists, Jennifer still selected it as the family archive she felt most emotionally attached to. Its absence did not diminish its archival value. Rather, the act of remembering and recounting the story became a form of archiving in itself. Similarly, when Isabel reflected on family trips to national parks, she acknowledged the lack of photographic documentation but emphasized the emotional weight those experiences continue to carry. “I don’t think actually any of our family archives have photos of those trips or anything,” she noted, yet the memories remained vivid.

Third, engaging with family archives can be an act of emotional work (Regehr et al., 2022; Regehr et al., 2025; Sexton, 2025). The process of organizing, scanning or even simply revisiting family materials often entails a deep emotional toll. After Isabel and her mother brought home photo albums from her late grandparents’ house, she described their efforts to digitize them as “a big part of our grief processing.” For Isabel’s mother, the emotional weight was especially heavy. As Isabel recalled, “For a while, it was like just too emotionally raw for my mom to scan them,

and I was doing the scanning.” Only after some time had passed did her mother “finally feel ready to do it.” These accounts remind us that archival work is not just technical or intellectual; it can also be emotionally demanding (Cifor, 2016; Cifor and Gilliland, 2016; Gilliland, 2024). Thus, emotional dimension is not incidental to family archiving; it is often central to the work itself. In addition, this example also points to differences between grandparent–grandchild relationships and parent–child relationships. In the latter, children often find it more difficult to cope with the loss of their parents, whereas in the former there seems to be a more natural acceptance of a grandparent’s eventual passing. Grandparents, for their part, also tend to show greater tolerance and affection, and sometimes even indulgence, toward grandchildren compared to their own children, a pattern that is particularly evident in Chinese cultural contexts. Understanding these relational distinctions has important implications for family archiving: they influence the pace, methods and emotional burdens of archival processing; the degree and manner of engagement by different family members; and the kinds of narratives that are constructed around them.

Fourth, storytelling itself is a form of emotional work and co-creation of new archives. Throughout the interviews, participants expressed a range of emotions. Sometimes they laughed at fond memories; other times, they became tearful when recalling moments of love, loss or longing. I see the act of storytelling not only as a way of engaging with archives, but as a form of archival creation (Douglas, 2018; Caswell and Robinson-Sweet, 2023). Through careful listening, intentional pauses and affirmations during the interview process, the archive becomes something co-constructed between the participant and me. This collaborative process calls for heightened

ethical sensitivity on my part as the researcher. In writing this chapter, I have made a deliberate effort to offer thick description, preserve the integrity of their voices and resist the impulse to overly analyze, theorize or abstract their narratives. Instead, I aim to honor the emotional truth expressed in their stories and recognize the act of narration as part of what makes the archive meaningful.

Chapter Conclusion

Drawing on the paired examples of Zelda and Jennifer, and Kathy and Isabel, this chapter has explored how Chinese American family archives function as emotionally charged sites of memory, identity and intergenerational connection. In these narratives, what counts as an archive is not defined by institutional norms or professional standards, but rather by shared memory and emotional resonance. Archival value is likewise not fixed in institutional authority, historical objectivity or neutrality, but instead resides in the subjectivity of those who remember and speak.

Engaging with family archives is emotionally demanding and narrating the stories behind them becomes a co-creation of archives of emotion. These examples foreground the personal, affective and relational dimensions of archival work

In the next chapter, I will further expand on these insights, examining how the lived experiences and everyday archival practices of Chinese American families complicate and enrich dominant archival assumptions and practices.

Chapter VI. Reimagining Archival Norms: Insights from Chinese American Family

Archiving

Chapter Introduction

This chapter addresses Research Question Three: How can the study of Chinese American family archives complicate and enrich dominant archival assumptions and practices? Grounded in the framework of archival pluralism, it begins by critiquing dominant archival understandings and practices that focus primarily on records held in state institutions and public bodies, while neglecting the archival possibilities generated by individuals, families and communities. Second, drawing on examples from Chinese American family archives, the chapter reconsiders the question of what constitutes an archive, arguing that archives can be changing rather than fixed, in use rather than archived away, interaction-centered rather than object-centered and reproducible rather than necessarily original. Third, it centers on the affective dimensions of archival work, examining how emotions can transform an otherwise ordinary object into a meaningful archive and shape the values attributed to it. Finally, the chapter reconsiders the role of archivists, advocating a shift from passive custodianship to community-engaged practice. Such an approach operates on three dimensions: raising awareness of family archives and archival practices, equipping Chinese Americans with the skills needed for family archiving and engaging with family members with sensitivity and emotional care.

Beyond Institutional Norms: Family Archives and the Promise of Archival Pluralism

Archival scholarship has traditionally concentrated on the records of governments and public bodies, particularly in its early development, where the evidential value, official and formal attributes of records, and their service to the state and public were emphasized (Jenkinson, 1937; Muller et al., 2003; Douglas and Mills, 2018). This emphasis on institutional recordkeeping has often resulted in the marginalization of records created by individuals and families (Douglas, 2017; Douglas and Mills, 2018). However, engaging with non-institutional archives, particularly those created and maintained in everyday life, offers critical opportunities for rethinking archival theory and practice. As Douglas (2017) argues, such engagement “can provide a means of highlighting gaps in and challenging traditional archival theory” and can contribute to “the developing understanding of the affective dimensions of archives and archival work.” Throughout the course of my research on Chinese American family archives, I have encountered numerous moments in which everyday archival practices diverge, subtly or significantly, from traditional archival assumptions. These encounters expose the limitations of dominant frameworks and underscore the need for a more expansive and inclusive understanding of archival work. Such observations resonate strongly with the core ideas of archival pluralism.

This chapter is therefore grounded in the framework of archival pluralism, which, as articulated by Michelle Caswell (2013), entails “the acknowledgement of and engagement with multiple coexisting archival realities—that is, fundamentally differing but equally valid ways of being and knowing—most commonly made manifest in the archival realm by (sometimes) irreconcilably divergent—but still credible—ways of defining, transmitting, and interpreting

evidence and memory.” Drawing on the everyday archiving practices of Chinese American families, I aim to complicate and enrich dominant archival understandings that have historically centered on state institutions and public bodies. More importantly, by acknowledging these coexisting archival realities, this chapter embraces the vision initially articulated by Anne Gilliland and Tyrone Howard as workshop leaders during a convening on archival pluralism at UCLA. This vision was later further developed and collectively authored in a piece published by the Archival Education and Research Institute (AERI) and the Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group (PACG) in *The American Archivist*, which calls on the field to “move from an archival universe dominated by one cultural paradigm to an archival multiverse; from a world constructed in terms of ‘the one’ and ‘the other’ to a world of multiple ways of knowing and practicing, of multiple narratives co-existing in one place” (AERI and PACG, 2011).

What Is An Archive? Rethinking Archival Definition

In the interviews, when I asked participants what they considered to be part of their family archives, they often mentioned items that fall outside traditional archival definitions as discussed below. These responses expand our understanding of what an archive can be. Across these cases, we see that archives are changing rather than fixed, in use rather than archived, interaction-centered rather than object-centered, and reproducible rather than necessarily original.

From Fixed Record to Changing Presence

Archives are traditionally understood as fixed and unalterable records. This assumption is rooted in the idea that authenticity requires unchangeability. Once a record is created, it should

remain unchanged. However, the everyday archival practices of Chinese American families challenge this assumption. In my interview with Jennifer, a 33-year-old second-generation Chinese American, she recounted growing up under the care of her grandmother and shared a story about the rose bushes her grandmother had planted in the yard of their family home. She said:

My grandma planted rose bushes in the yard of our family home. The photos I took of those roses, and even the roses themselves, maybe the dried flowers too, all feel like archives to me. They are memories of my grandparents.

Traditional archival theory has long been grounded in the assumption that records must be fixed and unalterable in order to preserve their authenticity and evidentiary value. However, in this example, the object Jennifer identifies as part of her family archive, the roses, is inherently alive and changing. They grow, bloom and change with the seasons, yet this living quality does not diminish their archival significance. On the contrary, the roses' presence in her family's yard serves as a potent trigger of memory—"They are memories of my grandparents." Jennifer's framing invites us to reconsider whether archives must be fixed to be meaningful. It suggests that archival value can reside in things that live and change, which challenges the assumption that archives must be static to matter.

Jennifer continued:

You could even say the whole house is part of my family archive, because it holds all of the memories. That's also why my mom really doesn't want to sell the house in the future. It was her first home, and when my grandparents came to live with us, there

were so many shared memories from that time.

The house, regarded as part of Jennifer’s family archive, has also undergone continual change. Over time, furniture has been rearranged, decorations updated, and rooms repurposed to meet new needs. Yet these changes do not diminish its archival significance. The evolving house continues to hold deep memories and meaning for Jennifer, becoming a living and changing archive. This insight resonates with a body of scholarship in Australian archival studies on the records continuum. As Sue McKemmish (2001) observes, “in terms of its contextualization, a record is always in a process of becoming,” rather than fixed. Frank Upward (2000) further elaborates that records “are stretched into new shapes and structures during the filing and aggregating processes that form them, and by disposal and new administrative patterns, which alter their physicality and the control and attention that they receive. Even disposition is cyclical and never final.” Whether a rosebush or a house, objects regarded as family archives are constantly in flux, providing a concrete illustration of the records continuum in the context of Chinese American family archiving.

From Archived Away to Actively in Use

Do archives have to be things that have been archived away—objects that have lost their original function and are now carefully preserved, removed from everyday use? This assumption is challenged by the archival practices of Chinese American families. In an interview with Isabel, a 22-year-old second-generation Chinese American, she shared a story about a plain steel bucket that once belonged to her grandfather. The bucket was used to burn joss paper, a ritual offering in Chinese ancestral practices, and continues to be used by her family today. She recalled:

Another object that we have that I am a really big fan of is the bucket that my grandpa had to burn joss paper in. It's just like this plain steel bucket, but it's the one that we always do our... burn our offerings in. And I was looking for it. I couldn't find it. I don't know where it's living right now, but...

When I asked her to elaborate, she continued:

I don't know at what point he acquired it. But it's what he would use to burn offerings. He was pretty like traditional, religious and like did incense every day and had all the shrines in his house. We're not quite that dedicated, but we do have the bucket and we use it to burn offerings at Lunar New Year. And like Qingming. Other like sometimes just if we feel like it—we haven't like deposited any money in his savings recently. We should send him something.

In this example, the steel bucket is regarded by Isabel as part of her family archive. But unlike records that are stored in institutional archives, set aside and preserved merely as evidence of the past, this object is still in use. As Isabel described, her family brings the bucket out to burn offerings during Qingming, a traditional Chinese festival specifically dedicated to honoring deceased ancestors, and also during Lunar New Year, when ancestral rituals are included in family celebrations. They may also use it on other occasions, whenever they are reminded to reconnect with her grandfather. In this case, the archive is not stored away for safekeeping. It is actively used, integrating into everyday life and acts of remembrance.

In another example, we see a similar situation in which archival objects remain in active use

rather than being sealed away. Daisy, a 30-year-old second-generation Chinese American, spoke about the jewelry her parents wore at their wedding, which, though considered part of the family archive, is still worn today:

And then one more thing I just remembered—jewelry. So, like, little jade bracelets, like those are collected, like they still have their wedding jewelry. And I think to me that is an artifact that can be considered archival, because again, that is something that is culturally relevant, still utilized.

For Daisy, these pieces of jewelry are “artifacts that can be considered archival,” yet they remain “still utilized.” This illustrates that family archives are not necessarily archived away in storage but can remain actively in use. Such active engagement challenges conventional notions of archives as a static repository, positioning them on the blurred line between preservation and active use in everyday life.

From Object-Centered to Interaction-Centered

Traditional archival theory often centers on archival materials, defining archives by the object itself. However, in many of the interviews I conducted, Chinese American participants described archives in ways that foreground their personal engagement with these materials. Rather than focusing solely on the object itself, they emphasized the interactions and emotions that give these items meaning.

This view is clearly articulated by Daniel, a 21-year-old third-generation Chinese American. When I asked him what materials he considered part of his family archive, he responded:

I feel like this is not a good answer, but literally anything... I don't know, I think the way in which I interact with these archives could also become part—can also become an archive in itself. I think what I mean by that is the way I interact with these documents or how I personally capture them, whether in photos, 3D models or personal writings about my thoughts about it. I think it all just becomes part of the same story.

Daniel's account draws attention to the process of engaging with records. In his framing, archives emerge both from what is kept and from how one relates to what is kept. As he explained, "the ways in which I interact with these archives... can also become an archive in itself." For Daniel, the notion of the archive extends beyond the object itself to encompass the interaction with it. As he puts it, "it all just becomes part of the same story." Interaction, in this view, is not secondary to the record—it is part of what constitutes it.

In another interview, a participant also articulated a definition of archives that goes beyond the preserved object itself, emphasizing instead the emotional experience of interacting with it. Zoey, a 35-year-old second-generation Chinese American, remarked:

This is weird maybe, but clothing was the thing I thought of for this kind of thing, which I don't know if that's really an archive, but like clothing that I took from my grandparents' house or whatever that has significance to me when I wear it... I wear a lot around the house, and I took them from my grandfather's drawer because he wore them a lot around the house too.

Here, the archive is not the clothing alone, but the combination of the material object and the

feelings it evokes when worn. As Zoey explained, “clothing that I took from my grandparents’ house or whatever that has significance to me when I wear it.” The garments, originally belonging to her grandfather, take on personal and emotional meaning through her continued use of them in a similar domestic setting. Wearing them becomes a way to recall and relive memories of him. In this sense, the affective experience associated with the object may carry more archival significance than the object itself.

From Original to Reproducible

Traditional archival theory and practice place a premium on the “original,” often treating it as more authentic, authoritative and valuable—whether in terms of historical or evidential worth. In the Chinese American family archives I studied, however, there was less insistence on possessing the original than in institutional contexts. Kathy, a 45-year-old 1.5-generation Chinese American, reflected on the handling of her late father’s photographs:

My brother wants to keep all the pictures. Because he took a lot of them. So after my dad died, I took all the pictures, and I was like, ok, I’ll scan it and then you can have it. So he would like to be the one to keep it, but I wanna copy because I feel like I’m more like the academic side to it. Like I, you know, look at stories, I look at trends, I look at like, what was happening in the world when these pictures were taken, kind of put it in context like that. But I think my oldest brother felt more possession over it, because he’s the oldest son, so everything should belong to him.

For Kathy, her brother’s wish to keep the originals was understandable—on the one hand,

because “he took a lot of them,” and on the other hand, due to the influence of a traditional Chinese inheritance custom in which the eldest son assumes both responsibility for and ownership of family property. As she explained, “because he’s the oldest son, so everything should belong to him.” Kathy chose to scan the photographs and then return the originals to her brother, which allows her to continue working with the images while honoring his sense of custodianship. This arrangement reflects that, in the case of family archives, the value lies in the content’s preservation and accessibility rather than in the exclusive possession of the physical materials. Whereas Kathy’s decision to retain reproducible rather than original family archives was shaped by both the fact that her brother had taken the photographs and by respect for traditional inheritance customs, Zelda’s choice to rely on digitized archives rather than originals was motivated by the practical challenges of transporting archival materials across transnational contexts.

Zelda, a 69-year-old first-generation Chinese American immigrant, also described a form of post-custodial archival practice within her transnational archiving. When transporting materials from China was impractical, she opted to preserve them through scanning and digitization, discarding the physical originals. While sorting through her late mother’s belongings in China, she came across the handwritten manuscript of her own translation of *A Tale of Two Cities* from her university days, along with several photographs. She recalled:

When I was in college, I got a copy of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and I liked it so much that I started translating it into Chinese as I read... and it was all handwritten, because there were no computers back then. I used an app called CamScanner—it can scan

dozens of pages at once—and saved it as a PDF. So I kept a copy that way. When I was cleaning the room, I thought, these things are impossible to bring back, but it would be such a pity to throw them away. Some of them are really meaningful. Later, a friend taught me this method, and I used it for some of my parents’ photographs and other items too, because they were too heavy to carry.

For Zelda, digitization became a practical and effective solution within her transnational archival practices, enabling her to retain access to the content in a more convenient and enduring way. In her case, even when the original objects could not be physically transported, keeping a digital scan was considered sufficient. Reflecting on the logistical challenges of moving archives across borders and during relocations, she remarked, “In the future, everything will have to be digital. My principle now is that I absolutely do not keep or collect any paper-based materials.” Her remark highlights a contrast with institutional archival norms, where the original is often prioritized as the most authentic and valuable form. In family archiving, however, a reproducible digital version may be sufficient, and in many cases even more practical, especially when space limitations or cross-border movement make the custody of physical originals difficult.

“Looking with Love”: Centering the Affective Dimensions of Archival Work

In the study of Chinese American family archives, the affective dimensions of records and recordkeeping are clearly evident. This perspective is central to understanding the nature and significance of these archives. Canadian scholars Jennifer Douglas and Alexandra Alisauskas (2021) call on archivists to “look with love,” noting that “looking with love can lead to recognition

of a wider range of record types and to acknowledgement of creators' agency in defining for themselves what constitutes a record," and that it "can lead to... new recognition of record values."

This study takes up and extends this call by examining how the lens of "looking with love" can illuminate the ways affect is manifested within Chinese American family archives. In this context, adopting what Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell (2016) describe as a need to challenge traditional perspectives on the "nature and authoritativeness of the record" and to embrace "alternate constructions" reveals a broader range of possible archival forms, as discussed in the previous section. Building on this, the following section applies the "looking with love" perspective to examine how affect enables Chinese Americans to assert agency in defining what constitutes an archive and in shaping the values attributed to those archives.

In an interview with Morgan, a 27-year-old second-generation Chinese American who spent part of her childhood being raised by her maternal grandparents, she recalled an object her grandfather had kept from her early years—a child's training potty.

This is like in the past, I guess something that stood out to me. I don't think they have it anymore, but my grandpa, when he was still alive and I visited him as an adult, he still brought out my little training potty toilet for a kid. And he was very emotional, saying, "I raised you and I still have this." He brought it out to show me he still had it. I'm sure they don't have it anymore, but I remember feeling surprised—like, I was in college then, and I went back to visit, and they still had that item from when I was a baby or toddler.

From the perspective of conventional archival theory, this training potty would not be classified as an archival item, as it holds no recognized historical, economic or evidential value according to mainstream appraisal criteria. For Morgan's grandfather, however, it embodied the memory of raising his granddaughter—the everyday acts of care and the love he witnessed as she grew. The significance of its preservation stemmed primarily from the affective bond it embodied, rather than from official recordkeeping standards.

When discussing the family archives she has preserved, Morgan went on to describe the voice memos of her grandfather, recorded on her phone, and what she called a “sentimental item”—a card commemorating her 100-day celebration:

I did have, like, my grandpa—dad's dad. When my grandma passed away, my dad's only surviving parent was his dad. And he was trying to communicate with me about my family history, and he was very emotional, but I couldn't understand him. So I decided to record his talking on voice memos—like iPhone voice memos—so that at least I could have that documented, what he's telling me orally. He also showed me, he gave me some, like, physical, like sentimental items—like a card that was like a wedding invitation for them, or like some kind of... either it was their wedding invitation or my 100-day celebration as a baby. It had everyone's names, the location, the date. So I think that's an important piece of, like, thing.

Both the voice memos and the 100-day celebration card fall outside the categories typically privileged by institutional archival appraisal. Nevertheless, these materials carry deep personal and

emotional significance for Morgan. Even though she could not understand what her grandfather said in the recordings, and thus had no clear knowledge of the information conveyed, she still chose to record and preserve them because they represented her affective connection with him. The card, commemorating her 100-day celebration, which is a tradition in many Chinese families marking a baby's first 100 days of life and wishing for the child's health and happiness, was still preserved by her grandfather. Its value, for Morgan, lies in the love and care it represents rather than in any conventional historical or evidential worth.

Similarly, in Isabel's account, a 22-year-old second-generation Chinese American, the transformative power of love in turning an ordinary object into an affective one becomes evident. She spoke about the key to her grandfather's house:

I guess another one would be my house key when we moved into our current house. I think some of the money we used may have been from selling my grandpa's house, I can't recall. But we had to reset the locks and the locksmith came. And he said, like, do you have a key that you want me to set this to? And the only key my mom had on her that was different was the house key for her dad's house. So she gave that to the locksmith. And so he set the locks to the lock that was at my grandpa's house. And hopefully the people who live there now have reset their locks. But I think my mom has the original still, I just have a copy of it. It might have actually been his key that she had the locksmith use. So that's very special to me—to have my grandpa kind of like watching over our doorway and our safety and protection in a sense.

In her narrative, an everyday object, a key, was given emotional and symbolic meaning. As Isabel noted, “my mom has the original still,” indicating that the key is preserved and also remains in use. Yet, its significance derives less from its practical function than from the love and remembrance it evokes; in her words, it is “my grandpa kind of like watching over our doorway and our safety and protection in a sense.” This example illustrates how family members, through affective attachment, can redefine what constitutes an archive and the archival value of otherwise ordinary objects, positioning them as both functional and symbolic artifacts within the family archive.

This emotional power was also evident in my interview with Shirley, a 77-year-old 1.5-generation immigrant, who vividly described a teapot her mother had used when she and her siblings were children to prepare herbal tonics, which she has kept to this day:

We have a couple of special items. My mother used to have—well, I have it now—a teapot from China. So those are things that we saved and that it brings back for me, a memory of something that she actually stopped doing, which was she used to take these herbs, ginseng and different roots and leaves, and she would steam them and boil them and cook them in this pot. She would make a kind of a tonic or a stew. We hated it because it tasted really nasty and it was a lot of trouble, and she had to go to Chinatown and get the roots. And... but, so at some point in our lives, she stopped doing that. And that was too bad, but that was also the pressure we had of saying like we really prefer to have peanut butter sandwiches. So please don't make us that stupid stuff. So she stopped

doing it, but when I have that teapot and I know that it's what she used to use to steam those... There are certain items that bring back memories, and I think that's important.

Although at the time Shirley neither understood the purpose of the tonic nor recognized it as an expression of her mother's care, she recalled that she "hated it because it tasted really nasty." Nevertheless, she kept the teapot and treasures it as something that "brings back memories." It is the fond recollections from that period, intertwined with her mother's love for her children and her own remembrance of her mother, that have elevated the teapot beyond its original utilitarian function. This affective connection, rather than any practical use, is what underpins its preservation within the family archive.

From Passive Custodianship to Community-Engaged Practice

At the end of each interview, I asked participants: "What kind of support or resources would you like to see in the future to help Chinese American families with archiving and preservation?" Their responses informed my view that archivists should take a more active role in community-engaged archival work, participating in the construction of memory with communities such as Chinese Americans and other under-documented groups (Han, 2025). This stands in contrast to the traditional conception of archivists as primarily responsible for receiving, processing and preserving materials that have already been transferred into institutional custody. Without such proactive engagement, a significant amount of history and records may be lost.

This community-engaged participation, as reflected in my interviews, operates on three dimensions. The first involves raising awareness among Chinese Americans about the importance

of preserving their own family histories and archives. The second entails hosting events and activities that enable participants to engage directly in family archiving while also equipping them with the necessary skills to do so. The third requires cultivating sensitivity and emotional care when engaging with community members in archival practice.

Helen, a 59-year-old first-generation Chinese American, emphasized the importance of the first level—raising awareness:

If there are certain triggers or something that could help people start thinking in the direction of preserving family archives... Some people may just feel that life goes on as it is. But if there is some external force or a project to encourage people to do a little bit, then maybe, as an Asian American, to document, I think it might be a bit better.

In this case, as Helen noted, “some people may just feel that life goes on as it is,” and an “external force or a project” could help prompt people to engage in family archiving. Her comment underscores the need for archivists to adopt a more proactive role in community engagement. Such efforts could include organizing workshops, marking International Archives Day with community events or developing programs around culturally significant occasions such as the Lunar New Year or Qingming, both of which are closely associated with honoring ancestors. These initiatives would raise awareness of the importance of family archives within the Chinese American community, thereby fostering broader participation in their preservation.

Several Chinese American participants spoke to the second dimension: organizing workshops or events to support family archiving and provide skills training. Isabel, a 22-year-old second-

generation Chinese American, explained:

It'd be cool for like libraries or historical societies—and maybe I'm sure these probably exist already in some places—but like in locations with the large Chinese diaspora to help people do genealogy and translations, I think, is really big, especially for like people younger than me who don't necessarily have the language skills. And like, I don't know, maybe just like events where people can gather and discuss their family archives or do like a little show and tell. So I know there's certainly things that I wanna show off. And yeah, like I don't know if any of the Chinese family associations have like some kind of archivist position or archivist support, but I think that would be really cool.

Her comments highlight the importance of archivists' active involvement in communities, particularly those with expertise in Chinese language and culture, in assisting Chinese Americans with family archiving. Such support can include helping with genealogy research and translations, as Isabel suggested, as well as organizing “events where people can gather and discuss their family archives or do like a little show and tell.” These gatherings can facilitate the preservation of family archives, and at the same time, foster community building, which in turn strengthens the collective commitment to sustaining Chinese American heritage.

In her interview, Isabel noted that “people younger than me who don't necessarily have the language skills” may face particular challenges in engaging with their family archives. This concern was echoed by Sarah, a 36-year-old second-generation Chinese American, who explained:

But I don't know how it's possible to help people do that, unless... yeah, there are like volunteers who can come to your house and help you sort through the materials and maybe ask better questions to the older members of the family. I think something that could be a barrier for a lot of people is a language barrier, because if you don't speak the language that your grandparents... you can't really interview them.

Sarah's comments highlight the importance of shifting the archivist's role from passive custodianship to community-engaged archival practice. In her view, supporting community archiving should include hosting events as well as providing direct assistance, such as helping families sort through materials and asking meaningful questions of elder family members. Language barriers were identified by multiple participants as a major challenge in preserving Chinese American family archives. Addressing this challenge requires archivists working in these contexts to have familiarity with Chinese language and culture, and, ideally, proficiency in multiple dialects, as many earlier Chinese immigrants to the United States came from regions such as Guangdong and Fujian where dialects other than Mandarin are spoken.

In addition, providing skills training is essential for supporting the archiving of Chinese American family materials. Eric, a 74-year-old second-generation Chinese American, reflected:

I think, so a lot of training. I mean, people are starting to do this, have workshops on it—like how to use a scanner... And you can actually restore photos when you scan. So you can do color correction and all kinds of stuff. You can just sort of get rid of all the lines and cracks using filters. You can actually restore a lot of photos just using a

cheap little scanner. But people don't know how to do it. It takes some group encouragement.

Eric's comments highlight the importance of offering practical training, such as scanning and photo restoration, to equip community members with the skills needed for family archiving. As he noted, "people don't know how to do it," underscoring the role archivists can play in working directly with Chinese American communities to build these competencies. Skills workshops also contribute to community building, which, as Eric suggested, can foster "group encouragement" and motivate individuals to participate in family archiving within a more supportive environment.

In addition, several participants identified a third dimension of community-engaged archival work: the need for archivists to approach their work with sensitivity and emotional care. This is particularly crucial in the context of Chinese American family archives, given the diverse migration experiences of community members and the profound emotional weight carried by these archives. Daisy, a 30-year-old second-generation Chinese American, explained:

I think that would be training those kinds of people to be sensitive, to be understanding, and to be, how do I kindly work with different Chinese Americans and understand it, you know, make them feel comfortable and befriend them to share their experience and help them feel valued in sharing their experience.

She continued,

So you're not just some stranger asking you, "Tell me about your immigration status, tell me about how you got here." Because that definitely will make some people

panic. But having that sensitivity and understanding to then be able to go out into those communities and collect that information would be really beneficial.

Daisy's comments underscore the importance of moving beyond the perspective of a "professional" instructing how things should be done, and instead approaching Chinese American communities with respect that fosters a sense of equality and helps participants "feel comfortable" and "feel valued." At the same time, such work requires deep dedication, demanding significant time, patience and commitment to rapport-building and community-building.

Similarly, Kale, a 28-year-old second-generation Chinese American, reflected on the emotional responses that can arise in family archiving and emphasized the need for archivists to account for these dynamics:

Yeah, I think also like providing services to actually hold people through the complex emotions that come up with looking at family archives, like in processing those things, whether that's peer-to-peer support or actual trained professionals.

He continued,

But I do think there's a lot that can be uncovered that maybe people aren't ready for. And I think that's a huge thing about the affect of archives that people sometimes neglect—there are a lot of things that may come up that you can't predict, and being able to have the resources to actually hold people through that is really important.

As the examples discussed earlier in this dissertation have shown, affect is often at the center of family archival work. Archivists engaging with family members must be aware of the emotional

reactions that may surface during the process of working with these materials, allowing space for silence, validating participants' responses and providing necessary emotional support.

Taken together, insights from this study suggest that working with Chinese American families requires a shift from the traditional model of archivists as passive custodians to active and community-engaged practitioners. This involves raising awareness about the importance of preserving family histories and archives, providing relevant skills training and approaching the work with cultural sensitivity and emotional care. Although the concept of participatory archiving (Gilliland & McKemmish, 2014; Cushing, 2018) has been proposed and advocated for more than a decade, interviews and conversations with Chinese Americans revealed that professional archivists remain largely absent from their family archiving practices. Yet, as the quotations presented in this study demonstrate, such professional involvement is crucial for the preservation of Chinese American family archives and histories. This raises an important question: does the challenge lie in the effective implementation of participatory archiving, or are Chinese Americans themselves marginalized within participatory archival initiatives?

Chapter Discussion

Dominant archival theory and practice have been largely grounded in “records of government and public bodies” (Douglas & Mills, 2018), neglecting the multiple possibilities of what archives can be within an archival multiverse (Gilliland, 2017). In light of this, I turn to several points of discussion and reflection informed by the findings of this study.

First, what is an archive? Must archives be fixed, archived away, the object itself and original?

Findings from this study of Chinese American family archives challenge these assumptions. Archives can be changing, actively in use, constituted by the combination of the object and the interactions and feelings it evokes, and can be reproducible rather than necessarily original. Over the past few decades, scholarship has increasingly focused on non-organizational archives, examining records created by individuals and communities. Such research (Zavala et al., 2017; Douglas, 2018; Sutherland & Purcell, 2021) has challenged dominant archival theories and practices, expanding our understanding of the possible forms, values and practices of archives. For example, Zavala et al. (2017) explore the diverse models of practice employed by community archives, many of which depart from standard institutional approaches. They identify post-custodial practices in community-based settings. This observation resonates with my findings on Chinese American family archives. In both family and community archival contexts, originality is not always a prerequisite for something to matter as an archive. This is partly because, for family and community members, evidential value does not hold the same priority as it does in institutional archives. Instead, emotional value, particularly the memories an item carries, may be what turns an otherwise ordinary object into something meaningful.

Second, McKemish and Piggott (2013) critique how dominant archival theory and practice have often neglected the emotional dimensions of recordkeeping. Building on this, Douglas and Alisauskas (2021) introduces the concept of “looking with love,” which emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing emotional connections in archival work. Viewed through this lens, Chinese American family members in my study exercised the agency to define what they

considered archives—often items that fall outside dominant archival categories, such as a child’s training potty, a 100-day celebration card, a house key or a teapot. In these cases, it is the emotional value attached to the object that drives its preservation.

These value judgments are highly subjective, shaped by individual experiences, the memories the item carries and the emotions evoked when revisiting it. An object that is deeply significant to one person may hold little meaning for another. In my interviews, for example, Jennifer described the emotional value of a note she had used to remind her grandmother, who had early-onset dementia, of her daily schedule: “But if I held it in my hand now, I know I would feel sad.” Yet she also noted that when her mother went through her grandmother’s belongings after her passing, “my mom would probably throw it away if she saw it and say, ‘What is this?’”

This raises important questions for archival appraisal when family archives are transferred into institutional custody. On what basis should archivists decide which items deserve long-term preservation and which should be discarded, particularly when storage space and resources are limited? Should these decisions be made in consultation with family members, and if so, with whom, given that even within a family, perceptions of value may also diverge? Or should institutions rely solely on their existing appraisal frameworks, despite the risk of overlooking items of deep emotional yet personal significance?

Third, what should the role of archivists be? When asked what resources they would like to see to support the archiving and preservation of their family archives, many Chinese American participants in my study implied that if archivists are positioned solely as passive custodians,

receiving and preserving records that have already been transferred, significant portions of family memory and history risk being lost. This points to the need for archivists to participate more actively in community-engaged work, assisting families in preserving and organizing their archives before they disappear. However, this raises questions about the appropriate scope and scale of such involvement. To what extent should archivists be involved in community work? Given limited resources, how much time and funding can institutions realistically allocate to such engagement alongside the core responsibilities of acquisition, processing and preservation?

Equally important, several interviewees emphasized that when archivists support family members in this work, they should do so with sensitivity and emotional care. Making participants feel respected, valued and emotionally supported is crucial for fostering engagement with family archives. This suggests that, in addition to archival knowledge and technical skills, archivists may also need competencies in emotional care, particularly as the profession increasingly acknowledges the potential emotional responses and secondary trauma that can arise from archival engagement (Wright and Laurent, 2021; Regehr et al., 2025; Sexton, 2025). In this regard, Michelle Caswell and colleagues (2021), in their article *Come Correct or Don't Come at All*, outline nine key principles for building ethical and equitable partnerships between academic researchers and community-based archivists, including mutual benefit, accountability and reparation. These principles can serve as valuable reference points for professional archivists working with families to support the preservation of family archives in ways that are both ethically sound and mutually respectful.

Fourth, this study demonstrates that archives can be changing, in use, interaction-centered and reproducible, thereby providing further empirical illustrations of the records continuum theory, which originated and has been widely discussed within the Australian archival scholarly community. Specifically, the records continuum “drew on the ideas about the ‘fixed’ and ‘mutable’ nature of records” (McKemmish, 2001), emphasizing that “records are always in a process of becoming” (McKemmish, 1994). In the context of Chinese American family archives, we see a similar pattern: objects regarded as archival—such as a rosebush, a house, or a bucket used for burning joss paper—are continually changing, supporting the continuum view of archives as ever-mutating and always evolving through ongoing interactions between users and content. In addition, by foregrounding the affective dimensions of archival work, the study demonstrates how emotional connections can elevate ordinary things beyond their utilitarian functions. These findings, perhaps unsurprisingly, affirm much of what community archives scholarship has revealed. At the same time, it extends the newest scholarship on the role of affect by showing that family archives, at least in the Chinese American context, are distinctive: in part because of their object orientation, in part because of their intangible and affective qualities and in part because of how they reflect particular elements of Chinese culture.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter addresses the question: How can the study of Chinese American family archives complicate and enrich dominant archival assumptions and practices? Drawing on examples from Chinese American family archives, it complicates dominant notions of what constitutes an archive,

revealing that archives can be changing rather than fixed, in use rather than archived away, interaction-centered rather than object-centered and reproducible rather than necessarily original. Focusing on the affective dimensions of archival work, the chapter further examines how emotions shape both the definition of what counts as an archive and the values attributed to such archives within Chinese American families. Finally, it considers the role of archivists, arguing for a shift from passive custodianship to community-engaged practice. Such an approach raises awareness of the importance of preserving family histories, provides relevant skills training and approaches engagement with community members with sensitivity and emotional care.

The next chapter presents the dissertation's conclusion. It begins by summarizing the key findings and discussing the study's theoretical and methodological contributions. It then considers the practical and societal implications, reflects on comparisons between family archives and community-based archives as well as between Chinese American and Chinese family archives, acknowledges the study's limitations and outlines potential directions for future research.

Chapter VII. Conclusion

This dissertation research investigated the everyday archiving practices of Chinese American families and examined how seemingly small and ordinary objects can carry deep emotional significance, shaping a sense of belonging and intergenerational connection. In doing so, it engaged with broader questions of memory, affect, identity and archival practice within the contexts of migration and diaspora. Specifically, the study addressed three interrelated research questions:

First, how do Chinese American families engage in everyday archiving, and in what forms do these practices manifest? Second, what roles do seemingly small and ordinary things play in carrying emotional meaning and fostering a sense of belonging across generations and geographies? Third, how can the study of Chinese American family archives complicate and enrich dominant archival assumptions and practices?

Summary of Key Findings

Chapter IV addresses the first research question, which encompasses several sub-questions. First, what materials are preserved in Chinese American family archives? This study finds that the scope of family archives in Chinese American families is highly diverse. Rather than being limited to official documents or genealogical records, these archives encompass a wide range of everyday objects that resist neat categorization, including physical and digital photographs, handwritten letters, clothing, oral narratives and seemingly ordinary items, such as handmade cards, buckets

used for burning joss paper, rose bushes and house keys. Second, why do families engage in archiving? One of the most salient motivations is the desire to establish connections across generations. This intergenerational link operates bidirectionally: looking backward to maintain ties with ancestral histories and cultural roots and projecting forward to help future generations understand their heritage. Another key motivation involves the emotional and commemorative dimensions of archiving—a wish to remember and remain close to loved ones, particularly those whose presence still holds deep significance. Third, how do these family archives come into being? The findings reveal that family archives emerge at the intersection of incidental accumulation and intentional selection. They are rarely the product of deliberate and long-term strategies; instead, they take shape gradually through everyday acts of keeping, revisiting and sometimes simply forgetting to discard. Yet this process is not entirely accidental: accumulation is often guided by selective judgments about what feels meaningful, memorable or worth preserving. Fourth, where are these family archives stored? The spatial arrangement of family archives tends to be dispersed yet meaningful. Rather than being housed in a single, purpose-built location, materials are scattered throughout the home. However, this dispersion is not arbitrary. Items especially valued by the family are often placed in highly visible locations, where they carry affective and symbolic significance. Fifth, how does technology shape archiving practices? Technology today plays an integral role in Chinese American family archiving. Smartphones, cloud storage and social media are frequently cited as essential tools. Some younger participants with greater technological fluency also employ innovative methods, such as 3D modeling, to document and preserve family

heritage. Sixth, what challenges are encountered in the process? Four major difficulties emerge: language barriers, geographic distance, family dynamics and a general neglect of family archives within the household.

In addition, this chapter highlights that the notion of “family” itself is neither fixed nor universally agreed-upon, but instead is shaped by family dynamics and shared experiences. Different understandings of who “counts” as family directly shape the imagined archival boundaries. These imagined boundaries also exclude those whose values or actions are seen as misaligned with how the family wishes to represent itself. Such acts of inclusion and exclusion reveal that family archiving is, at its core, a process of intentional selection and identity curation. The findings further show how Chinese American family archives are closely tied to the making of identity. This is especially evident in what is included, what is excluded and what is displayed—each shaping notions of “who we are,” “who we are not” and “how we wish to be seen by ourselves and others.” However, the growing ease of documentation and its transportability enabled by technology raises questions about how such convenience might influence the intentionality and perceived value of family archives, possibly resulting in the creation and endurance of more documentation but a less “curated” archive. Finally, the study identifies examples of a latent gendered division of archival work. Men, particularly the eldest son, tend to assume responsibility for the management and custodianship of physical materials (material stewardship), while women are more often positioned as transmitters of family stories (narrative transmission).

Chapter V addresses the second research question: What role do small, ordinary things play

in carrying emotional meaning and fostering a sense of belonging across generations and geographies? Drawing on two mother–daughter pairs as examples, this chapter illustrates how ordinary objects, often overlooked within conventional archival frameworks, can become living archives. It also shows how archives that have been lost or never physically existed, can continue to convey care and love through acts of remembering and storytelling. These examples illustrate that revisiting, narrating and engaging with such materials can constitute a form of grief work and emotional practice, as well as an intimate process of mourning both the beauty of the past and the affections lost amid changing family relationships. In Chinese American families, archives are thus dynamic and emotionally charged; their value does not necessarily lie in evidential or historical worth but often emerges from personal and affective attachments. These attachments are multilayered, encompassing warmth, joy and love, but also grief, longing and emotional ambivalence. They are also deeply subjective, tied to the experiences and memories of those who cherish them, and may thus be understood and valued differently by various members and generations within the same family. The findings further suggest that the affective and mnemonic power of an archive does not always depend on its material presence. Rather, the acts of remembering and recounting stories can themselves become a form of archiving. In both examples, engaging with family archives proved to be emotionally demanding, resonating with previous scholarship (Cifor and Gilliland, 2016; Douglas et al., 2022; Regehr et al., 2023) on the affective nature of archival work. Finally, reflecting on the interview process, this chapter acknowledges the collaboratively produced archival records generated between participants and the researcher,

underscoring the need for heightened ethical sensitivity in conducting such work. These records, such as interview recordings, transcripts and photographs, are created in the course of researcher–participant interactions within the research setting and are simultaneously research data and newly formed archival materials.

Chapter VI addresses the third research question: How can the study of Chinese American family archives complicate and enrich dominant archival assumptions and practices? Grounded in the framework of archival pluralism (AERI and PACG, 2011; Caswell, 2013; Gilliland et al., 2020), this chapter asserts that dominant archival understandings and practices that focus primarily on records held by state institutions and public bodies (Douglas and Mills, 2018) often neglect or overlook the archival practices of individuals, families and communities and how these might complexify archival thinking. Challenging conventional lifecycle definitions of what constitutes an archive, this research highlights how archives can be changing rather than fixed, in use rather than archived away, interaction-centered rather than object-centered and reproducible rather than necessarily original. By foregrounding the affective dimensions of archival work, this research demonstrates how emotional connections and values can transform ordinary things beyond their original utilitarian functions, making them part of the family archives that are preserved and valued. The chapter also reconsiders the role of professional archivists in terms of how they relate to community members and their archives, advocating for proactive engagement rather than passive custodianship (e.g., waiting for families to approach them about donating their archives). It proposes three dimensions of community engagement by professional archivists: raising

awareness within Chinese American communities about the importance of family archiving; equipping community members with the skills needed to take on their own archival activities; and cultivating sensitivity and emotional care when engaging with community members. Finally, the chapter raises important practical considerations regarding the scope and scale of such involvement. To what extent should professional archivists be involved in community work? Given limited resources, how much time and funding can archival institutions realistically devote to such engagement in addition to responsibilities to the acquisition, processing and preservation of their core holdings? If family archives are donated to institutional repositories, on what basis should archivists decide which items merit long-term preservation and which should be discarded, particularly when storage space and resources are constrained?

Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

Situated at the intersection of archival studies and migration studies, this research examines Chinese American family archives—a context shaped by both intergenerational transmission and cross-border movement. As the first systematic study in archival scholarship to focus on Chinese American family archives, it enriches understanding of the archival practices of an under-documented community (Han and Han, 2025) and expands research on archives situated in domestic and familial settings, which have also received relatively limited attention. Specifically, it makes the following theoretical contributions:

First, it applies and extends the framework of archival pluralism to the setting of Chinese American family archives. By foregrounding the agency of Chinese American families in defining

what constitutes an archive and in shaping judgments of archival value, this study adds more understanding of the archival multiverse (McKemmish and Piggott, 2013; Gilliland, 2017) and moves beyond classical archival understandings that privilege evidential and historical value grounded in institutional archival practice. Second, it introduces the concept of imagined archival boundaries—the often invisible but powerful lines that determine whose stories are considered part of the family archive. These boundaries are shaped by relational and dynamic understandings of “family,” rooted in family and generational dynamics and emotional connections. Third, it supports records continuum conceptualizations by demonstrating how archives can be changing rather than fixed, and continuously in use rather than dormant, and it expands the definition and boundaries of the archive as an entity that can be interaction- rather than object-centered and reproducible upon demand rather than necessarily original. The latter challenges traditional definitions that derive from evidentiary requirements that prioritize qualities such as authenticity, originality and unchangeability. Fourth, it forefronts the affective dimension in the study of family archives, highlighting its significance in shaping the sources of archival value and the emotional contingency of the archive to different family members. Drawing on new empirical examples, the study shows that archival value in family contexts is inherently subjective and personalized, offering further considerations for appraisal theory in archival science.

Methodologically, this research contributes to the recent body of archival scholarship that has employed ethnographic elements and foregrounding affect and reflexivity in the research process, with the innovation of employing object elicitation. Although ethnographic methods have seen

some established applications in archival studies (Gracy, 2004; Gilliland, 2014; Lee et al., 2023), they are still far from ubiquitous. This study is, to my knowledge, the first to incorporate *in situ* observation of family archives within domestic spaces, examining how they are preserved, displayed and engaged with in the context of everyday life. Although not framed as a formal ethnographic study, this research integrates ethnographic elements, including field engagement, observation and the use of thick description. It is among the first studies in archival scholarship to employ the method of object elicitation. As a form of material-based qualitative inquiry, this approach is more often applied in museum studies but is particularly well-suited to archival research that focuses on the experiences and practices of ordinary people and daily life, since it examines both the materiality of objects and their interactions with people. Object elicitation also shifts the balance of power between researcher and participant: rather than the researcher leading the discussion and directing the questions, it supports participant agency, allowing participants to guide the narrative. This is especially significant for archival research engaging with the “affective turn” (Cifor, 2016), as it enables participants to maintain a sense of control over what and how they share. The additional benefit of this approach is that it can reduce the potential risk of discomfort or distress during emotionally sensitive discussions. Finally, the research emphasizes affect and reflexivity throughout the fieldwork process. In particular, when participants shared the emotional significance embedded in their family archival materials, the researcher acknowledged moments of being moved or resonating with their accounts, incorporating these experiences as a form of affective reflexivity. These emotional responses were not viewed as interruptions to the

interview but rather as integral moments of meaning-making that reveal the emotional weight carried by the archives.

Practical and Societal Implications

This research offers several practical insights for archival institutions and professionals. First, it expands the scope of archival collection and appraisal criteria. It underscores the need to recognize the diverse understandings within cross-cultural and immigrant communities of what constitutes an archive and what gives it value. When acquiring collections, as appropriate to their mandate, archival institutions should consider incorporating family archives, such as everyday objects and oral narratives, into their potential acquisition scope. In appraising their value, emotional value should be recognized as an important criterion, with careful attention to the emotions these materials evoke and the memories they carry, and how these might be reflected in the descriptions prepared for the materials. Second, archivists should shift from being passive custodians to becoming community-engaged practitioners. This involves proactively entering communities to raise archival awareness through workshops, exhibitions and other outreach initiatives. It also requires providing community members with essential archival knowledge and the skills needed to create and preserve their own family archives. Equally important is maintaining sensitivity and emotional care throughout the process, fostering relationships grounded in trust and equality. Third, the application of technology in archival work should be approached with both opportunity and caution. As this study found, some participants expressed concerns about the security of cloud storage and about how the ease of digital documentation could lead to “a plethora

of records”, potentially undermining perceived archival value. Therefore, when teaching communities to use such technologies, archivists should also communicate the potential risks associated with different tools and formats. Likewise, institutions should adopt a thoughtful approach when integrating technology into their own archival practices. This is particularly crucial at a time when discussions and initiatives around the use of generative artificial intelligence in archives are rapidly expanding (Rolan et al., 2019; Cushing and Osti, 2023; Mannheimer et al., 2024). I argue that technological developments should be welcomed with cautious optimism: while we should embrace the convenience and efficiency that technology brings to archival storage, description and access services, it is equally important to ensure that such applications do not come at the expense of users’ privacy and information security.

Beyond the archival field, this research carries broader societal implications for public memory, cultural identity and social justice. First, it contributes to and enriches public memory and historical narratives. Chinese American family archives, as records of social and historical development from the micro-perspective of the family unit, address gaps in official archives and public history that often overlook individual and domestic experiences. By incorporating family stories, everyday objects and other forms of family memory, these archives help move public history beyond singular, mainstream-centered narratives toward more inclusive and diversified accounts. Second, Chinese American family archives can strengthen cultural identity and intergenerational belonging. They provide tangible entry points and mediating objects for dialogue across generations. By preserving and engaging with archives connected to language, customs and

migration experiences, younger generations gain a more immediate and comprehensive understanding of their older generations' histories, fostering a deeper sense of identity and belonging. Third, the preservation of archives from minority and under-documented communities advances social justice. In the case of Chinese American family archives, participants did not frame them as acts of resistance; nonetheless, these practices challenge the omissions and misinterpretations often present in dominant institutional archives and mainstream histories (Caswell et al., 2017). Moreover, such practices empower Chinese American communities with the agency to record and preserve their own histories, rather than remaining passive subjects of documentation by mainstream institutions.

Family Archives and Community-based Archives: A Reflective Comparison

This study focuses on Chinese Americans family archives rather than on Chinese American community archives. At this point, it is necessary to undertake a reflective comparison between family archives and community archives. These two forms of archives share certain commonalities while also exhibiting important differences.

In terms of similarities, both “family” and “community” can be understood as fluid rather than fixed categories, and their definitions shape whose archives are included and preserved, as well as who is granted access to them. The present study illustrates the fluidity of Chinese Americans' understandings of “family,” while research on community archives has similarly emphasized the shifting and contingent nature of community boundaries (Brilmyer et al., 2019). Second, family archives and community archives are also similar in terms of the types of materials

they preserve. Beyond official records, both often contain items that institutional archives may overlook, such as clothing and other everyday objects. This similarity is not surprising, especially given that many community archive collections originate from the donations of family or personal archives by community members. Third, as this study and other scholarly discussions on community archives (Roeschley and Kim, 2019; Poole, 2020; Gabiola et al., 2022) demonstrate, both family and community archives are deeply intertwined with issues of emotion and identity.

At the same time, there are also clear differences between family archives and community archives. First, their motivations diverge. As demonstrated in this study, the motivation behind family archives often stems from a desire to foster generational connection and emotional continuity, with the purpose of remembering and staying close to loved ones. By contrast, community archives are primarily driven by goals of social justice and empowerment, seeking to challenge the overlooking and distortion of marginalized histories in mainstream archival institutions—motivations that are not typically present in family archives. Second, in terms of how archives come into being, family archives typically emerge somewhere between incidental accumulation and intentional preservation. They are often informal and lack the deliberate intentionality of establishing an archive, whereas community archives are consciously created by activists. This distinction also shapes a third difference, namely where archives are stored. Family archives generally have no single, purpose-built location; rather, they are dispersed across various places within the home. Community archives, by contrast, tend to be housed in centralized locations, whether in a physical space or in the form of a digital repository. Last but not least, the

audiences and uses of the two differ. Family archives are primarily accessed by family members, and their use is often private and intimate, serving to sustain familial ties. Community archives, however, engage broader audiences, ranging from community members to the general public, and their use is frequently advocacy-oriented, aimed at challenging dominant narratives.

Chinese American and Chinese Family Archives: A Reflective Comparison

As one of the few archival scholars who has received academic training in both China and the United States, my perspective extends beyond the Chinese American family archives examined in this study to include some knowledge of family archives in China. This positioning allows for reflection on the differences in how family archives are understood and practiced in Chinese American and Chinese contexts—a question closely tied to the broader issue of what migration changes. Although my archival education in China did not involve specialized research on family archives, and I do not claim expertise in this area, it nevertheless seems important to offer some reflections here, drawing on my understanding of Chinese family archives alongside the findings from my doctoral research on Chinese American family archives.

First, the motivations and values differ. In Chinese families, family archives are more deeply rooted in lineage, with the purpose of ensuring continuity and providing moral education—often expressed through the transmission of family values, or *jiafeng* (家风)—thereby reinforcing both family continuity and social legitimacy. In Chinese American families, by contrast, family archives are motivated by questions of identity and belonging in a diasporic context. In this context, they function not only as a means of transmission but also as a way of emphasizing both “Chineseness”

and “Americanness.” This is particularly evident among second-generation and later descendants, who frequently referenced their roots and the origins of their ancestors during interviews.

Second, the forms and materials of archives differ. In Chinese families, family archives tend to privilege formal and official records, placing particular emphasis on documents, certificates, photographs and genealogies. Considerable importance is attached to original copies and their provenance, especially in the case of official documents and certificates. In Chinese American families, by contrast, although some formal records are preserved, a wide range of ordinary objects with strong emotional value are also regarded as archival. Moreover, archival materials do not always have to be originals; they are often reproduced or digitized, partly due to the realities of transnational contexts.

Third, both gender and generational roles reveal elements of persistence and change. In Chinese families, traditional authority has been male-dominated, particularly with elders holding genealogical authority and responsibilities related to ancestral records and lineage. In practice, women often take charge of preserving everyday documents, such as records of children’s milestones and household matters. In Chinese American families, these gendered divisions of archival work largely persist: as this study illustrates, men are often associated with material stewardship, while women are linked to narrative transmission. Generational roles, by contrast, diverge more noticeably. First-generation immigrants tend to prioritize proof and cultural survival, whereas later generations place greater emphasis on identity and belonging.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged, including those related to sampling, methodology and researcher positionality.

First, regarding sample representativeness, participants were recruited on a voluntary basis, meaning that those who expressed interest and ultimately took part were likely to have a pre-existing interest in, or prior experience with, family history and family archiving. As such, the findings may not reflect the perspectives of individuals with little or no engagement in family archiving practices. In addition, although the sample included participants from across the United States, and one located outside the country, the number of participants from the East Coast, particularly from New York, where a large Chinese American population resides, was lower than anticipated. Moreover, the researcher's inability to speak Cantonese, Hokkien or other Chinese dialects meant that interviews could only be conducted in Mandarin or English, potentially limiting the participation and representation of older generations from Guangdong and Fujian who speak only their regional dialects.

Second, the use of object elicitation, a participant-led method, relies heavily on participants' willingness to share. Similarly, home observations and virtual walkthroughs depend on participants' openness to sharing their spaces. While in-depth interviews were employed alongside these methods as part of a methodological triangulation strategy, and rapport-building was undertaken prior to observation, it is inevitable that some participants had concerns or felt uncomfortable sharing certain materials or spaces, particularly when these involved private domestic settings or emotionally sensitive disclosures.

Third, the emotional responses expressed by the researcher during interviews may have influenced participants' emotions and expressions, as well as the interpretation of their narratives. In Chapter V, which focuses on the emotional significance of small and ordinary things, the two examples presented were not intended to be representative or generalizable. Instead, they were deliberately conveyed through a narrative, storytelling approach. From the standpoint of researcher positionality, this may be viewed as a departure from a strictly neutral or objective stance.

While these limitations set certain boundaries for the scope of the findings, they also open possibilities for future research.

Future Research Directions

First, future research could broaden the demographic and geographic scope of sampling to capture greater variation in Chinese American family archiving practices. Expanding participation to include more communities in the U.S. East Coast, including cities such as New York and Boston where large Chinese American populations are concentrated, would make it possible to examine how regional cultural climates and different migration histories shape the nature and use of family archives. At the same time, the Chinese American community itself is highly heterogeneous, with archival practices closely tied to periods of migration and family experiences. Future studies could adopt a more targeted focus on particular subgroups, for example, individuals who lived through the Cultural Revolution, to explore how specific historical and life experiences influence their awareness of and attitudes toward archival preservation and the ways they engage in family archiving.

Second, although the concept of participatory archiving (Gilliland and McKemmish, 2014; Rolan, 2017) has been proposed and advocated for more than a decade and has been increasingly recognized and applied among archival professionals, gaps remain in its effective implementation (Štefanac & Gilliland, 2025). Future research could explore how to strengthen and enhance engagement with Chinese American communities, particularly by developing ethically grounded and mutually beneficial relationships between professional archivists and community members. Such work could also investigate the factors that influence decisions to donate family archives to institutions, including what would motivate such donations and what considerations or concerns might arise.

Third, future research could further examine the impact of technology on family archiving. In particular, it could investigate whether and how digital archives influence the intergenerational transmission of family memory, and whether they reshape the gendered roles identified in this study in relation to the inheritance of family legacies. Another promising area of inquiry concerns the role of generative artificial intelligence in family archiving and emotional expression. On some short-video platforms, for instance, users employ generative AI to animate old family photographs, making the figures appear “alive” and even “interactive,” as a way of expressing longing and remembrance. As generative AI continues to develop and become more widely used, it will likely create new possibilities for the preservation and use of family archives, as well as open further avenues for scholarly exploration.

Appendix: Interview Protocol

Everyday Archiving in Chinese American Families: The Affects of Ordinary Things

Date: _____

Time: _____

Length of interview: _____

Location: _____

Interviewer: _____

Interviewee: _____

Opening statement: brief descriptions of this project, purpose of study, expected length of interview, privacy and confidentiality, willingness to continue participation, use of data, access to the interview transcript and research findings, permission to record interview and so forth.

Participant Background

- Can you briefly introduce yourself, including your age, occupation, immigration background (if applicable) and upbringing?
- What is your family's immigration history in the U.S.?

Understanding and Practices of Family Archiving

- How do you define "family archives"? (What constitutes family archives for you?) Does this concept exist in your family?
- What kinds of materials or records do you consider part of your family archives (e.g., photographs, diaries, letters, videos, etc.)?
- Why does your family collect, curate and preserve family archives?
- Where do these archives come from? Are they intentionally collected or are they passed down through generations?
- Who is responsible for collecting, curating, preserving and sharing or providing access to family archives?
- Where do you keep family archives? Do you keep family archives in more than one location?
- How are these archives stored? Are there any special methods, rituals or traditions associated with them?
- Have you personally engaged in collecting or organizing family archives? Why or why not?
- Do different generations of your family view family archiving differently? How do these perspectives affect the way archives are maintained?

Transnational Family Archiving Practices

- Does your family collaborate with relatives in other parts of the world to collect, curate or preserve family archives? If so, how do you coordinate these efforts?
- Are there any differences in how family archives are preserved between your family members in other places and those in the U.S.?
- Have your family's archiving practices changed due to migration? For example, are certain traditions or materials preserved in one country than the other?
- How do you and your relatives in other places share archival materials, such as photos, letters or documents? Do you use digital platforms, physical emails or other means?
- What challenges have you encountered in maintaining or accessing family archives across borders?
- How does maintaining a transnational family archive help you stay connected with your cultural heritage and relatives in other places?

Challenges and Futures of Family Archives

- Have you encountered any challenges or obstacles to collecting, preserving and providing access to family archives in and over time? If so, what are the challenges and obstacles (e.g. space, technology, disagreements among family members)?
- Are you concerned about the long-term preservation of these archives?
- Have you taken any steps to ensure that your family archives will be preserved in the long term (e.g., digitization, documentation, oral history projects)?
- Do you intend to share these archives with future generations? If so, why and how do you plan to do so?
- What aspects of your family's archival materials do you think are the most important to pass on to future generations?
- Should family archives be made public or preserved in institutions? Why or why not?
- Has modern technology (e.g., cloud storage, social media, digital archiving) played a role in your family archival practices? If so, what have been those affects?
- What are your thoughts on the impact of digitalization on family archiving?

Significance and Impact of Family Archives

- Do you think family archives can convey messages about identity? If so, what messages about identity do family archives convey?
- Can you choose an object in your family archives that can best represent your identity? Why do you think this object can best present your identity?
- Please tell me the history, story and your memory associated with this object.
- How have family archives shaped your sense of identity as a Chinese American?
- Do you feel that family archives play a role in maintain a sense of belonging to be Chinese American community? If so, how?

- Do you feel a deeper connection to your family history or cultural heritage when engaging with these archives? If so, how?
- Have you ever discovered something surprising or previously unknown about your family through these archives? How did it impact you?
- Have you ever had conversations or learned family stories through these archives that you otherwise wouldn't have known?
- What emotions do you experience when reviewing your family archives (e.g., nostalgia, pride, grief, curiosity)?
- Are there specific items (such as letters, photos or objects) that carry strong emotional significance for you? Why?
- Do you ever use family archives as a source of comfort, guidance or reflection during significant life events (e.g. weddings, funerals, family reunions)?
- How do family archives contribute to communication and bonding between different generations and locations in your family?
- Have you ever shared your family archives with people outside of your immediate family, such as friends and community members? If so, what was that experience like?
- Have your family archives influence any major decisions in your life, such as career choices, personal values, or cultural practices?

Conclusion and Open-Ended Questions

- After today's discussion, do you have any new thoughts or realizations about family archives?
- Is there any additional story or experience related to family archives that you would like to share?
- What kind of support or resources would you like to see in the future to help Chinese American families with archiving and preservation?

Additional comments, feedback, or questions from the interviewee

Probing and follow-up questions

Post interview comments

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