

Co-editor
Debbie Jiang
traces her
family's path to
Canada.

MY STORY

This is me in 1977, age 3,
with my mom, grandmother
and brother.

I was born in Montreal, making me a first-generation Canadian of Chinese ancestry. I speak Cantonese plus English and French. My parents came to Canada from Hong Kong in the 1960s. Raised in Ottawa, I missed all the Saturday morning cartoons because I had to attend Chinese school. I live in British Columbia and am a teacher with Heritage Christian Online School. I enjoy playing the game of mah jong. I like Earl Grey bubble tea. I love history.

In my free time, I enjoy working on my family tree. I discovered that my great-great-grandparents had a lot in common with the thousands of immigrants from Kwangtung (now Guangdong) province who came to Canada at the end of the 19th century.

War, famine and the influence of Christian missionaries brought my ancestors to Hong Kong from Canton (now Guangzhou, pronounced gwong-dzoe). My great-great-grandfather, Kwan Yuen Cheung, worked for the London Missionary Society as a printer. He later became Hong Kong's first western-trained dentist.

My great-great-grandmother, Lai Amui, was orphaned during the Taiping Rebellion and adopted by a British couple, Daniel and Mary Ayow Caldwell. Both were English-speaking Christians. Their marriage was arranged by church friends.

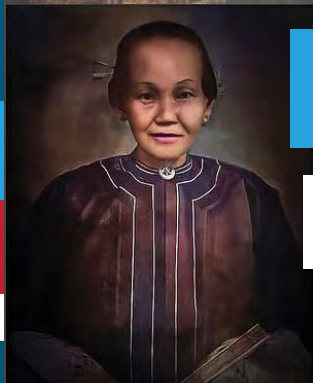
They had 15 children! One son became the Emperor's western doctor. Another son was a medical school classmate of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen.

My great-grandmother married Yung Hoy, who had studied in the United States as a boy. He had been part of the Chinese Educational Mission, which ran from 1872 to 1881. That was a study-abroad program set up by the Qing government to educate 120 boys. They would return to China to help strengthen the weakened country.

My great-grandfather met Dr. Sun through the Kwan family. They were all strong supporters of the man behind the revolution — so much so, they cut off their queues in 1910! It turns out my own family was part of the final days of China's last dynasty and the start of the new republic.



Kwan Yuen Cheung (1832-1912)



Lai Amui (1840-1902)



My husband, my son and me in 2023



These mah jong tiles are from my grandma's set, dating back at least 80 years!

Photographs courtesy of Debbie Jiang

You just never know what you'll find out about your family's past till you put on your detective's hat. I wear mine almost every day!

Unless you are of Indigenous heritage, your family has an immigration story. Ask your elders about your family's unique journey to Canada. When did it start? Where did it start? What things made them decide to leave the country of their birth?