

James Chung Gon arrived with a shilling in his pocket but left his mark on Launceston

ABC Radio Hobart / By Zoe Kean

Posted Wed 3 May 2023 at 10:14am, updated Wed 3 May 2023 at 5:54pm



James and wife Mary Chung Gon and their children in Tasmania. *(Supplied)*

At just 18 years old, James Chung Gon arrived in Australia to try his luck on the goldfields of Bendigo.

Legend has it all he had to his name was a shilling in his pocket upon arrival in 1873, but he turned it into a fortune.

After witnessing discrimination on the mainland, James — who was originally from China's Guandong Province — moved to Tasmania on April 16, 1878.

There he soon joined a community of Chinese tin miners in Thomas Plains, now Weldborough, 117 kilometres north-east of Launceston.

Records show James and a friend found a rich seam of tin at South Mount Cameron and he used the proceeds to buy 81 hectares at Turners Marsh to establish an orchard.

He later moved to Launceston to become a grocer, businessman and philanthropist, living to the ripe age of 97.

With his wife Mei Ying Lee, known as Mary, the couple had 12 children, and the Chung Gons became a well-known family in the island state.

Auspicious date for big occasion

To celebrate his legacy, 110 descendants travelled to Launceston to attend a family reunion on April 15 and 16.

"When I chose the date for the reunion I was not aware of this auspicious date," great-granddaughter Mia Jones said.



James and Mary Chun Gon's descendants from around the world gather to celebrate his legacy in Tasmania.

Mrs Jones said the family continued to have deep connections to the area.

"Tasmania is small," she said.

"When you mention Chung Gon family, invariably there's a connection in some way to them.

"He was really well respected in Launceston, and he was a real mover and shaker with regards to the Chinese community, connecting them with the Launceston community."

James left his mark on the city.

He was a key player in the creation of the Cataract Gorge Reserve and the transportation of the "Joss House" or Guan-Di Temple from Weldborough to the Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery to preserve a key piece of history.



Most of the temples in Tasmania were built in 1883, when people struck it rich.

Trip down memory lane

Mei Ling Niel (nee Chung Gon) was one of seven of James and Mary's grandchildren who attended the reunion.

She said she was pleased her generation was able to share their memories of growing up in Tasmania with their Wàigōng (grandfather).

According to Mrs Niel, when she was little in the 1940s and early 1950s the weekends would often involve being bundled into the back of the family car with her brothers and driving from Hobart to Launceston to visit her Wàigōng.



Seven of James Chung Gon's grandchildren at the reunion in April. (Supplied: Mia Jones)

"We made regular visits up the old Midlands Highway, through spooky Epping Forest," Mrs Niel said.

"We had to get [down] in the back seat of a car so the bogeyman wouldn't get us."

The adventure was not over when they arrived at Chung Gon Grocers on Elizabeth Street.

The children had to walk through the grocery to get to their Wàigōng's residence, which was out the back.

Mrs Niel remembers climbing stairs and finally opening a door to reach her Wàigōng.

"There our Wàigōng would be waiting in a big leather chair, with his Chinese checkers, or snakes and ladders in front of him waiting for us to play," she said.

Behind him on the window was Cocky Chung, a cockatoo that belonged to Mrs Niel's aunty Dolly. The beloved pet would eventually go bald and become famous for wearing hand-knitted jumpers.

Sometimes they would visit the market gardens that supplied the grocer.

She vividly remembers the gardeners on a smoko.

"They'd be sitting there. They had water pipes in these big square kerosene tins bubbling away. I don't know what they were smoking, but I can still visualise it," Mrs Niel said.

"I'd be a bit scared. I'd hang on to my Dad's legs.

"We didn't see many Chinese [people] down here. We were almost the only Chinese in Hobart. To go up there [Launceston and the market garden] is where we mainly saw Chinese."



Mei Ling Niel and her brother Keo-Weng Edward Chung Gon with their Wàigōng in 1946.

(Supplied: Edward 'Ted' Chung Gon)



Mei Ling Niel and her descendants at the old Chung Gon family property in Turners Marsh.

(Supplied: Carl Wong)

Mrs Jones said during the reunion weekend, the family members visited places of significance to the Chung Gons, including the Gateway Baptist Church where James was a lay preacher.

"They were so lovely ... there would have only been about 50 of them (church congregation), so we outnumbered them completely," Mrs Jones said.

The congregation shared lunch and stories about the family.

Mysterious Mary

Mary Chung Gon was from a wealthy and respected silkworm farming family.

Less is known about her, as she died in 1918, and her remains were sent back to China.

The pair met when James was on a return trip to China and were married in 1885.

In recent years, her descendants have pieced together clues of her life by doorknocking around Turners Marsh, where the couple lived, and asking if people had stories about her.

Like many women from affluent Chinese families in that era, Mary had bound feet.

Mrs Jones said one family remembered "they used to be able to hear her on the wooden floorboards in her shoes and that she'd have walking sticks to help stabilise her".



Mary Chung Gon with son Edward (Teddy) at Burrows Studios, Launceston in 1908.

(Supplied: Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery)



These are a pair of Mary's shoes. (Supplied: Mia Jones)

Mary also had a fear of Tasmanian tigers, which were on the property, and there were stories of her shouting out "tigers, tigers, tigers" when they were nearby.

"It must have been so difficult for her coming out to Australia," Mrs Jones said.

"A completely different land."

Mrs Jones said the reunion would be remembered for a long time.

"I knew it was a really important thing for not only the young kids to know and understand [the family history] but it was really special for my aunties and uncles and my older cousin ... because they're all getting old."