

超越唐人街



Beyond  
Chinatown

*Diana Giese*

Some content in this online publication may be in copyright. You may only use in copyright material for permitted uses, please see <http://www.nla.gov.au/copiedirect/help/copyright.html> for further information. If in doubt about whether your use is permitted, seek permission from the copyright holder. In addition, please follow the links or otherwise contact the relevant institutional owners of images to seek permission if you wish to use their material.

© National Library of Australia 1995

Cover: *Reverend Shiu Kwong Lo and Mrs Lo (centre);  
Jane and Mark Chin with baby Sophy and Mark's mother Joyce Cheong Chin (top right);  
Yuen Yet Hing (second from right) in this 1905 picture of a gathering for the Governor of South Australia at Darwin's  
Government Residency (lower left)*

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Giese, Diana

*Beyond Chinatown: changing perspectives on the Top End Chinese experience.*

Bibliography.

ISBN 0 642 10633 0.

1. Chinese—Northern Territory—History. 2. Chinese—Northern Territory—Social Conditions. 3. Chinese—Northern Territory—Social life and customs. I. National Library of Australia. II. Title.

305.8951094295

Publisher's Editor: Leora Kirwan

Design: Andrew Rankine

Printed by Goanna Print Pty Ltd, Canberra

## Preface

**H**ow are the stories of history told, and by whom? The Chinese have been in the Top End of Australia from the very beginning of European settlement. After the first man stepped ashore in Port Darwin in 1874, they moved into every kind of industry and service, including mining and building. But in early accounts of Northern Territory history, they are silent. They are observed by Europeans, 'looking in'.

*Beyond Chinatown* begins with European documents—official health reports, Administrators' letters, nineteenth-century newspaper articles and contemporary theses—which are sourced from the excellent collections being built up round the country. But its major storytellers are Chinese Australians themselves who, through oral history interviews, family histories, photographs and their own accounts of their lives, traditions and achievements, place themselves in the mainstream of Australian history. They show how they have moved beyond Chinatown.

I chose to speak to some 20 Chinese Australians. These people are not 'representative', not a scientific sample. Rather, their experiences exemplify some of the major themes of Top End history. They were also chosen because they epitomise the courage, determination, boundless optimism and sheer guts that have made the Top End Chinese the success they are.

*Beyond Chinatown* is part of the continuing process of collecting and highlighting the often hidden history of Chinese Australians. The National Library's oral history project stands alongside those of Melbourne's Museum of Chinese Australian History and work in particular communities, such as Sydney's Chinatown. It supplements collections all over the country, from the Cairns Historical Society to Perth's Battye Library.

Now that we are all 'looking out' together into our region, where our Asian neighbours are playing an increasing part in world affairs, Chinese Australian voices are bound to become stronger and more audible in our national life.

D.G. 1995



## Acknowledgments

Many people have helped make this work possible. Ian Templeman and Paul Hetherington published in the National Library's journal *Voices*, the article on which all my subsequent work on the Top End Chinese depends. Mark Cranfield, Shelly Grant, Steve Taylor and Amelia Arcidiacono of the Oral History Section of the Library provide strong support and guidance for my continuing project on Chinese Australians. Ros Bowden made my two ABC Radio programs, 'Top End Chinese', possible. Jan Payne in *Migration* and Helen Trinca in *The Australian* published earlier versions of some of the material included here. Yasmine Gooneratne offered useful editorial suggestions. Carol Miller and Leora Kirwan, my editor, provided encouragement and highly professional support. Andrew Rankine designed the book with the help of Beatrice Tan, who provided the calligraphy for the cover.

In the Northern Territory, my parents, Nan and Harry Giese, as a result of their 40-year involvement with the Top End community, made it easy for me to arrange my initial interviews. Their knowledge of Chinese friends and colleagues, and my father's major role in setting up the Territory's oral history program, facilitated my work. Margaret Clinch, with her specialist knowledge of Territory history, helped with information and introductions. Michael Loos and Jenny Armour at the Northern Territory Library have been productively involved with the project from the outset. Francis Good and Greg Coleman at the Northern Territory Archives continue to provide unique support. All these guardians of Northern Territory history have shown me its rich potential. Above all, I would like to thank the Chinese Australian interviewees mentioned by name in the text. Without their generously contributed time, resources and memories, none of my work would have been possible.

Diana Giese 1995

# Looking in

What do 'they' see? Many different things. Here are some:

- In the window of the street-front room, a woman works by a kerosene lamp's soft light. Around her hovers a cloud of buzzing insects. Her heavy charcoal iron drags at her shoulders. She sets it down to mop at the sweat dripping from her face onto the white drill suit spread out before her. The cloth comes away wet, as if newly washed.
- The procession is over a mile long, gongs beating for three hours, a couple of thousand decorative devils frisking behind a yellow dragon belching fire and glory with his tail out of joint.<sup>5</sup> Exploded firecrackers carpet the street. Pigtailed men in tunics and trousers throng in front of the shops, laundries and restaurants. The biggest group gathers near the imposing emporium, Fang Cheong Loong. On work days it displays the imported East: carved ivory and pearl shell, embroidered silk and fragrant camphorwood boxes. 'At every shop you pass are to be seen the shrines and images of the celestial deities, books are kept in brush lettering with scented inks; in the dark interiors, guarded from the eyes of men, you may see the smiling lips and frangipani complexions of trousered women...'<sup>6</sup>



*Festival procession down  
Cavenagh Street, 1915  
Picture collection,  
National Library of Australia*

- 'In the light galvanised iron house sat Chinese families, men with wives and a flock of pretty little slant-eyed children. They were happy. They had religion, sympathy and unity. But the Europeans of Palmerston had very often no home, only a house.'
- The shops and tenements are in most cases built as one large structure which is divided by rough galvanised iron partitions about eight feet in height, into more or less numerous compartments...In some cases they are built almost over the open drains, and in more than one case I have found a close, ill-ventilated sleeping den hemmed in on two sides by a filthy evil-smelling drain which takes a right angle turn round the outer edge of the floor of the room.<sup>7</sup>

These are Western images of Darwin's vanished Chinatown. 'They' were 'us', the non-Chinese Australians of whom I am one. The descriptions presented a place at once exotic and alien, inviting and enclosed. Chinatowns were inhabited by others, who worked too hard, too long. Here were people who subsisted in conditions European workers might despise. Yet, these views concede, their festivals were colourful and lively, their family life close-knit and supportive.

Established only in 1869, Darwin, the northernmost settlement of the British in Australia, was a strange place. Its Chinatown, like others, became a European metaphor for difference. Often, it was presented as threatening, sinister, a kind of forbidden city. It existed for years: from the time 186 Chinese workers arrived in 1874 by ship from Singapore, right up until World War 2. Then it disappeared.

At the time Darwin's first rough huts were being cobbled together, black slavery had been outlawed. But the relative merits of 'coloured races' as cheap labour were still endlessly discussed. From the time the ships landed the Chinese on north Australian shores, survival became the priority of the 'coolies'. From the embryo port, they trudged to the goldfields they had been brought in to work, through the terrifying vastness of alien bush, so different from the lush ricefields of southern China, the fishing villages, the crowded city slums. They had to start all over again in country that seemed to stretch on and on, uncultivated, seemingly unmarked, unmapped and peopled only with 'the black people with the spears'. They had to build their own huts, plant their own food crops, work and hope to survive the flooding rains of the Wet for half of each year.

The Northern Territory Chinese were never 'just coolies'. On the goldfields until they were worked out, in the first settlements, in Darwin itself, they built towards a dream of the future. 'By dint of industry and determination, they wanted to adopt this country' says Eddie Quong. His family has all this century battled against bust and towards boom, in Queensland and the Territory. Hope kept them going, he believes, this born raconteur who before retirement sold protection against future uncertainty: insurance.

Their hope was supported by their work. As well as the goldfields settlements and vital infrastructure such as the railway line to Pine Creek, what European officials defined as Darwin was in large part a creation of Chinese labour, a symbol of their determination.

Chinese workmen built the stone courthouse on the Esplanade, the Government Residency, the old Town Hall, the first Catholic Church, the

Mining Exchange that became Brown's Mart, the houses of Myilly Point's 'silvertails', and the railway cottages that used to line the Stuart Highway at Parap. At a fraction of the wages paid to white labourers, Chinese worked on many of the roads. Most of the buildings, erected as a solid statement of the permanency of a town that was anything but, have since disappeared, in disasters natural and unnatural. Hotels, new and shiny as the tourist dollar, today rise from the swanky Esplanade.



Mining Exchange  
(Brown's Mart), 1888  
Pictorial Collection, National  
Library of Australia

The town of the early buildings was Britain's fifth attempt at northern settlement. Little of it now survives. Sue Wah Chin Ltd, Drapers and Tailors, is an exception. It is a handsome, single-storey building made of huge blocks of stone, verandah jutting over a wide pavement, with barred windows and heavy doors, looking much as it did when it was built in the 1880s by Kwong Sue Duk, he with the four wives.<sup>8</sup> So solid, so enduring is it, that it is known as the Stone House.

Other buildings are part of a shadow-town of memory, evoked only by glimpses in photographs. The substantial Man Fong Lau is remembered as an absence, as once standing at 'the place between the Civic Centre, the turn of Harry Chan Avenue and the new High Court'.<sup>9</sup>

Stretching up from the harbour in a wide, straight swathe, Cavenagh Street was Chinatown. Parallel, and a block away, was Smith Street, the centre of the 'white town'. Its emblematic centre was for years A.E. Jolly's, called 'the white store', 'not because it was painted white, but because no Chinaman, black, brown or brindle people were allowed to go past the portholes'.<sup>10</sup>

From the beginning, Chinatown met the needs of the town's inhabitants. As advertisements in the *Northern Territory Times* of the 1880s show, the Chinese were from the earliest years bakers, cooks, carpenters, tailors, bootmakers, laundrymen and women, store owners, restaurant keepers, herbalists, jewellers, contractors, stonemasons, fishermen and sawyers. In July 1882, the paper noted a seed and plant shop, the first of its kind in the Territory, selling potted plants direct from Canton. All opportunities were seized. A 1938 account notes that a Chinese businessman could be simultaneously 'tailor, trepang entrepreneur, laundry and car hire service'.<sup>11</sup>

Whenever a job needed to be done, a service performed, the Chinese were there to do it.

Many informants who are still alive can recite the names of every business up and down the Cavenagh Street of the 1920s and 1930s: the grocers and tailors, the baker and the 'squash shop', the hotel and the picture theatre. They remember Man Fong Lau's sweeping staircase. They remember the Eastern Cafe. It gave Europeans what they wanted to eat: fish and chips and steak. Albert Chan remembers the white drill suits 'our place' made for the town's 'silvertails', for one pound four shillings each.<sup>12</sup>

The redoubtable Charlie and Myrtle Houg On ran a laundry. She describes the work behind the tableau of labour witnessed by passing Europeans: the ceaseless grind of washing and ironing. The couple carried well water for two blocks, heated it on a fire of wood brought in from the bush, and boiled up the clothes in a big copper. Some mornings they were still ironing at 2 a.m.<sup>13</sup>

Chinatown's workers were part of a community whose survival into this century was in large part due to interlinked relationships of business and extended family, clan associations and domestic economies. New ventures were financed by the communal loan association, the Chengwei, rather than by European banks.



*Peel's Well market garden.*  
Fuchs Collection  
National Library of Australia

Market gardens were spread around what is now central Darwin. They gave the gardeners a kind of domestic self-sufficiency reminiscent of the village life of southern China. From the 1870s and 1880s, they also provided fruit, vegetables and eggs to the town. Lily Ah Toy, small, tough, indomitable, is the daughter of Moo Linoy, who was born in Darwin. While she was a child in the 1920s, Lily's family lived in the home it had built, raised on stones, constructed of stringy bark, bush timber and second-hand galvanised iron. In the

family garden, they laboured to grow an array of crops in a climate unsuited to some of them. They produced cabbages, lettuce, tomatoes and celery, mangoes, pineapples and bananas, sugarcane for 'cooling medicine' against the heat. In the wet season, they managed cucumbers and melons, pumpkin, beans, sweetcorn and spinach. She remembers market gardeners like her



family digging wells for water, which they carried in recycled kerosene tins, fitted with long bamboo spouts and used as watering cans. When she was nine, Lily would walk into town each day to fetch meat and groceries in a flour bag. 'Our clothes then also were the good old flour bag.'<sup>14</sup>

Her brother, Bill Wong, remembers that 'the business houses, the rich Chinese who lived in Cavenagh Street, used to refer to us as the country bumpkins'.<sup>15</sup>

Then their father died. The older boys alternated school with working as waiters at a cafe, for four pounds a month before tips. With the help of an Aboriginal man, Charlie, the 11-year-old tried to keep their father's wood-carting business going. This meant venturing out 10 miles from town to collect wood in a horse-drawn dray.

Seeing this struggle, the Chinese community suggested the family move into Cavenagh Street and sell vegetables. The children worked before and after school, trudging round delivering from baskets.



*Chinese wood-carters*  
(Greenwood-Collinson  
Collection,  
National Library of Australia)

Because of its prominent position, because of a population which in the late 1880s outnumbered the European by as many as six to one, Chinatown was often seen by visitors as the town itself. The phrase 'the heart of Darwin' recurs in European accounts, in the labelling of photographs. Knut Dahl wrote<sup>16</sup> that the town reminded him 'more of a little Asia or China than of a European colony'.

The comparative failure of white settlement in Australia's north throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries meant that Europeans felt constantly threatened: by competing imperialists, by other races, and by Aborigines. On the coast that was an Aboriginal homeland, Europeans tried to build an outpost of empire in the inhospitable tropics. Active and vocal among white businessmen was V.L. Solomon, who had arrived in the Territory a year before the first Chinese, during the goldrush of 1873. He formed companies to buy and sell mines and, until 1877 at Mt Wells, Mt Shoobridge and the Daly River, employed numerous Chinese workers.<sup>17</sup> But he was to go on to mobilise others against the Chinese, first as Territory Representative in the South Australian Assembly, later as a member of the Commonwealth Parliament.

Recall the fourth view of Chinatown, the one that dwells so indignantly on the sleeping arrangements of Chinese workers. When, in 1911, the Commonwealth took over the governing of the Northern Territory from a relieved South Australia, this view became the official one: the quotation's tone is that of the *Annual Report*. It is one of moral outrage, of resentment at the necessity of the Chinese to the Territory's precarious survival. If contemporary photographs show a Cavenagh Street of substantial buildings with wide verandahs and glazed windows, imported furniture set out on the extension of the house that was the street, pictures accompanying official reports seek disorder, so as to condemn. There are large numbers showing shanties cobbled together higgledy-piggledy out of tin, wood, galvanised iron:<sup>18</sup> temporary, insubstantial, ready to collapse in the north's storms or cyclones. Sheets of metal, the size of a large tray, perhaps from the ubiquitous kerosene tins, have been laboriously flattened and tacked together in a crazy but ingenious patchwork. Outside, in a dusty lane, may be a Coolgardie safe, a flyscreened box on legs for storing perishables. The bentwood chairs on one verandah are arranged for relaxation, to view the harbour after a hard day's labour.

Health became a pretext for disapproval. In his report for 1912,<sup>19</sup> the newly-arrived Medical Officer of Health, M.J. Holmes, conscientious, sincere, steeped in the attitudes of his time, contrasts the 'uncontrolled and unorganised building' of Chinatown, where 'some of the tenements overlap adjacent blocks, and so are built partly on one man's property, partly on another's', with the European part of town. In the latter case, he notes approvingly, all the dwellings 'have ample open space about them, and are well exposed to the influences of open air and sunlight'.

Damning pictures are labelled as 'typical old Chinatown buildings'.<sup>20</sup> Comparing them with 'Quarters of the [European] Secretary and Accountant'<sup>21</sup> or indeed 'Mr Solomon's House, the Esplanade'<sup>22</sup> shows that there were striking similarities between early Darwin buildings. Many are low, single-storied, with pitched roofs and verandahs. Some have glassed-in windows; others have push-out ones, calico in a frame. Solomon's house is surrounded by that symbol of European decorum and gentility, the fence, and has a well-pruned shrub garden worlds away from the fecund market gardens of the Chinese, flourishing out of barrenness and hostility.

The position of much of Chinatown, so well placed for breezes and views, is a further clue to the motives for official disapproval. Such salubrious sites were surely far too good for 'Chinese hovels'. One picture is captioned, 'The first impression of Darwin obtained by passengers landing from incoming

steamers...note tenement in the foreground...the occupant shares his dwelling with a large number of fowls.<sup>19</sup>

Medical Officer Holmes was appalled by the easy co-existence of so many people, fowls and recyclings such as vegetable scraps, intended to feed the pigs. When in doubt, he was inclined to recommend complete demolition. Any rebuilding was to be governed by strict regulations. Contraventions of these are linked with laboriously-described fears for contamination of the well water used by the town. Uncovered well mouths and open drains became a focus. A plate in the 1913 *Report of the Administrator* is accompanied by the comment: 'Mosquitoes breed here by the million throughout the year. A filthy unpaved drain, in which the pigs are wallowing, skirts the heap of bottles and loses itself finally in the soil.'<sup>21</sup>

'An obsession with health, sanitation and efficiency had gripped Western governors and urban planners.'<sup>21</sup> Flouting these European standards, as Chinatown was perceived to do, was 'believed to have an adverse effect on the quality of the human species'. Chinese homes could be characterised as a 'menace to health', as discoveries of single cases of leprosy or smallpox fuelled arguments that disease was rife.<sup>20</sup>

The real objections to Darwin's Chinatown were to the numbers per site, the densely-packed dwellings, and the fact that this mode of living seemed to be producing prosperity for the Chinese, enabling them to outstrip, as well as outnumber, rival Europeans. As Government Resident Price said in 1881, 'It is hopeless for [white labourers] to compete with swarms of Chinese who manage to live on one fourth of what a European requires'. It was also perceived that the Chinese 'preferred to be their own masters, and by 1880 were effectively undercutting white enterprise in mining, commerce, agriculture and contracting'.<sup>22</sup>

Lifestyle differences could be added to the bubbling pot of racism then boiling up all over Australia. Illegal gambling houses where fan-tan or mah-jong were played were deliberately coupled with opium 'dens' to provide an impression of rampant moral depravity. One European official, more honest than the rest, admitted that fan-tan was about as harmful as billiards.<sup>23</sup>

Other pretexts were sought for Chinatown's demolition or removal. Wherever they settled across the north, at Brocks Creek and Wandj, Pine Creek and Fountainhead, the Chinese built temples.<sup>24</sup> In the European sources they were referred to as joss houses. But since this 'conjures up images of Orientals, idols and pagan rites...we use the proper name'.<sup>24</sup>

European objections were raised at the siting of Darwin's Chinese temple on a prime piece of land with harbour views. Officials at the nearby courthouse complained about the ringing of the ceremonial bell, the drums and gongs and exploding firecrackers of festivals. In 1887, the temple was moved. That symbol of European tradition, order and stability, the Church of England, took its place.<sup>31</sup>

Jeremy Long sees the early Territory under South Australian rule as being caught in 'a vicious circle: capital was needed to open up the land and attract labour and a labour supply was needed to attract capital'<sup>32</sup>—all at a time when nation-wide agitation for White Australia was making the stable settlement of the best available labour, Asian labour, impossible. But by the late 1880s, Chinese Australia-wide were being portrayed as an octopus-like threat. Growing anti-Chinese feeling was fed by the Depression of the 1890s. V.L. Solomon and the Editor of the *Northern Territory Times* toured the eastern colonies co-ordinating the rabble-rousing Anti-Chinese Leagues towards restrictions on Chinese entry.<sup>33</sup> In May 1888, Solomon addressed a meeting in Melbourne which passed a resolution calling for an increase in the poll tax, and an annual residential tax on Chinese. By 1890, as a representative in the South Australian Assembly, he was introducing legislation to 'exterminate' Chinese secret societies.<sup>34</sup> By 1892, he was proposing amendments to prevent the Chinese holding agricultural land in freehold, or leases for mining areas.

The legislation tells the complex, multilayered story in brutal shorthand. In 1885, 'Asiatic aliens' were barred from new goldfields for two years, unless these had been discovered by them.<sup>35</sup> *The Northern Territory Gold Mining Amendment Act 1895* (SA) excluded them from holding goldfield leases in the Territory. An Act which became law in South Australia in December 1888 imposed a 10 pound poll tax on arriving Chinese, and allowed only one Chinese passenger to every 500 tons of ship's weight.<sup>36</sup> *The Immigration Restriction Act 1901* (Cwlth), designed to exclude non-Europeans from Australia, was passed by the new Federal Parliament as its first piece of legislation. Under it, numbers of those whose labour had built the Territory's infrastructure were repatriated to Hong Kong.

This Act also introduced the notorious Dictation Test, whereby those wishing to enter from China might well be asked to understand Polish or French. Those already settled required a Certificate of Exemption from Dictation Test in order merely to travel.<sup>37</sup> *The Naturalization Act 1903* (Cwlth) placed an almost total ban on the naturalisation of non-Europeans—a privilege which was not re-instated until 1956.<sup>38</sup>

Until the nation-wide push towards a White Australia took hold, the Chinese presence in north Australia had been grudgingly conceded as necessary. Government Resident Price, for instance, admitted that 'a limited number of Chinese are useful to the Territory'.<sup>39</sup> At the same time as Europeans were agitating for a poll tax, and for restrictions on Chinese in the goldfields, Goyder, who laid out Palmerston and pegged out the Top End's farm blocks, noted how enervating the wet season was, and warned that 'care should be taken how taxes are imposed on Asiatic labour, for by this description of labour alone will the industry of Port Darwin and lands in its vicinity ever be developed'.<sup>40</sup> 'If the Chinese are to be excluded the sooner the Northern Territory is restored to natives and alligators the less money will be lost and less valuable enterprise wasted', J.H. Angas, a member of the South Australian Legislative Council, contended, quoting a letter to the press by J.W. Bakewell.<sup>41</sup>

Debates on the Chinese Immigration Restriction Bill show that other members, including the South Australian Premier,<sup>42</sup> were aware of the motives of some of those involved with anti-Chinese activity. Bakewell observed that 'the agitation against Chinese in the Northern Territory has proceeded almost entirely from a section of the Port Darwin merchants who found that a large part of their business was being transferred to the hands of the Chinese storekeepers and also that the Chinese were not nearly such profitable customers as the Europeans and they accordingly determined if possible to get rid of them'.<sup>43</sup>

Beyond parliamentary initiatives, others organised against the Chinese. Between 1914 and 1919, unionism in the north became protection for white labourers against economic competition. Following a 1911 decision of the Commonwealth Government that Chinese should no longer be employed as wharf labourers, the Darwin Branch of the Australian Workers' Union managed to push Chinese labourers and government contract workers out of competition.

Nor was it merely labour that was a threat. As early as 1886, a public protest meeting against the opening of a Chinese evening school, complained that 'the Chinese already know too much for the good of the whites in the Territory and if they were educated they would supplant all clerks and professional men'.<sup>44</sup> Solomon, as a member of the Commonwealth Parliament discussing draft legislation on restricting immigration, claimed special knowledge of the 'Asiatic races' he had employed during his 15 years in the tropics, and said that it was not Chinese 'vices or the uncleanness' that were to be feared, 'but rather their

virtues...their industry, their indomitable perseverance, their frugality, and their ability to compete against European labour<sup>45</sup>.

In August 1905, the *Northern Territory Times* quoted the views of S.J. Mitchell, who had made two short visits to the Territory and, as a result, felt able to comment on the role of the Chinese in the mining industry. He accused them of profiting while failing to contribute to its development, spending little, and putting nothing back. Throughout campaigns like this, the Chinese themselves did not remain silent. A letter answering Mitchell, signed by 13 Chinese merchants, read in part:<sup>46</sup>

Mr Mitchell condemns us for living on almost nothing, and spending little. Let Mr Mitchell call for a return of the customs duties paid by us since we have been in the Territory, for our contribution to the railway revenue, to the earnings of steamship companies, European storekeepers, and local banks, and he will find an abundant refutation of his statement. It is said of us that we seek to make money and get out of the Territory to spend it. That may be so, but where is the white man who has come to the Territory intending to make it his permanent home? As a matter of fact, we have resided here and made this our home equally with European residents. Our people live simply, it is true; it is true, also, that with larger means the wants of our people increase like those of other nationalities. In these days of competition, Mr Mitchell should not find fault with simple living; he should rather seek that his people should live simply.

They conclude:

...Mr Mitchell fails to see that in the truest sense we are more Territorian than he, despite our nationality. We have lived here, most of us, for over 20 years, our interests are all here; and it is a much more vital matter to us that the Territory prospers than it is to Mr Mitchell...

The stigmatising of Darwin's Chinatown as a 'conglomeration of hovels' appears today as part of a campaign, sometimes overt, at others unacknowledged, to move the over-successful Chinese into less advantageous positions. In 1912, M.J. Holmes announced: 'It will be necessary to pull down many of the at present hopelessly insanitary and unsafe buildings'.<sup>47</sup> In 1913, 15 dwellings were demolished, and 'a new Chinese settlement' suggested, two miles from what was then the centre of town.<sup>48</sup> In 1914, Chinese reluctance

the Chinese. They did not wish to be repatriated to some non-existent 'home'. 'These old men did not want to go home because they had no homes to go to' he said. After having laboured to build and sustain the settlements of Australia, 'after having been here 50 or 60 years, they claimed this as their home'.<sup>34</sup>

Beyond the European observers, there have always been stories handed down within Chinese clans and families, stories that have until recently remained untold to the wider community. These oral histories select what matters to the teller, the trickle of personal truth from the torrent of memory. The more unstructured the enquiring interview, the stronger the emergence of what is important to the speaker. These histories emphasise the informants' views of history's process, against official representations, earlier chroniclers. They may contradict what has been glossed over or de-emphasised. Theirs are voices which have been shouted down in the great political and economic debates. Oral history extends what we know about the past beyond what the officially validated, the literate and articulate, have to contribute.

Now that an official policy of multiculturalism has made it acceptable for Australians to have multiple identities, the sons, daughters, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of many of those who sought only to forget the rough and violent times of poverty and segregation, are speaking out. They are themselves questioning, researching and preserving, convinced of the value of their own particular part in the drama of building modern Australia. These Chinese Australian voices reinterpret history for our times: the context in which they are presented is the run-up to the Asia-Pacific century. Now that the public image of Chinese Australians has changed, such stories are welcomed.

As the isolationist policies of White Australia gave way to assimilation, then multiculturalism; as the communist fanatics of Cold War China dwindled into something more human, less threatening and frightening; as it became possible to trade with and visit China, and meet real Chinese on their home ground, the popular image of the Chinese has changed in Australia. Once devils and aliens, they are now friends and neighbours. Once 'despoilers of the goldfields', they are now heroes and heroines of our pioneering past. Once linked together in impenetrable secret societies, they are now desired business associates and trading partners. Their strange, noisy and ungodly rituals have become part of popular cultural events. Australians from a variety of backgrounds are seeing the Chinese, those who live here and those who live elsewhere, as heirs to a rich and boundlessly fascinating cultural tradition.

The new stories add human details. Previously we knew only that boatloads of women and children were evacuated from Darwin to Queensland just before the bombings of World War 2, but from Essie Yuen, in her late 80s, we learn how valuables were hurriedly abandoned. 'They all thought in their ignorance that they were coming back' her daughter, Pam Con Foo, says. 'They were told to pack a suitcase and go as quickly as possible. So all the good things were left under the bed, and all the old raggedy things were taken.'<sup>55</sup>

We can learn from stories such as Essie Yuen's of passengers crowded together on the deck of the *Zealandia*, bound for the safe south; of pregnant women with toddlers clinging to their knees lining up for meals of hard biscuit. We can learn about the ban on lights that extended even to cigarettes. Of her mother's pregnancy, Pam Con Foo says, 'Number eight was born in Cairns on January 11—that's how advanced it was'. 'When we get into Longreach, it's February 19th' remembered Essie



Yuen. 'We get off the train; they say: "Darwin bombed this morning." Ah, we nearly fainted...I say, "Goodness me, my husband's there!"... really frightened. Really upset.' She confessed this on tape to her grandchildren.<sup>56</sup>

Wartime evacuees from Darwin at Eden Hills, South Australia. The Que Noy, Ah Toy, Cheong and Hec families are represented.  
Pictorial Collection, National Library of Australia

These stories reflect the characters of the tellers. One informant may see another as exaggerating, over-colouring, sensationalising, their stories as scurrilous and subversive. Those who wish to talk of scandal or failure may be tactfully silenced, or discredited as rumour-mongers ('Nothing like that in *our* family'). The community's licensed storytellers may close ranks against someone with another story to tell, a discordant one. One clan or family may loom large in the storytelling of a member, but seem less like heroes or heroines to others.

Memory is notoriously unreliable, argue some who have themselves produced distinguished oral history projects. Such history is fluid and negotiable. Often, its stories are unverifiable. It sets tone, feelings, nostalgia, against elegant theory, or a long, slow trudge through cumulative empiricism. Some interviewees may have their stories well prepared, in good order. They may be wise to the needs and prejudices of the researcher, the historian, the journalist. They may set their own agendas. Having offered a questioning



to move from their homes meant that 'the authorities pulled down 190 hovels over their heads'.<sup>31</sup>

Big, sprawling, crowded, noisy, smelly Chinatown became, then, not so much a place as a metaphor. The higgledy-piggledy add-ons behind Cavenagh Street's respectable facades, homes to unknown numbers of 'aliens', could be linked to notions of 'invasion', to being 'swamped' by 'swarms' or 'hordes' from the 'teeming' cities of Asia, to being outnumbered by 'Orientals', 'Celestials' and 'Chinamen'—all common terms of reference to the Chinese through the long years when the Great Walls of White Australia were being raised higher and higher. In fact, numbers were falling. Chinese still comprised 20 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population in 1933,<sup>32</sup> but just before wartime evacuation in 1941 and 1942, they accounted for only 10 per cent of the community.<sup>33</sup> By 1967, three per cent of the Darwin population was Chinese.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout the years when White Australia was being constructed, 'real' homes for the Chinese were increasingly seen as somewhere else. 'Birds of plunder who dug their gold and flew away to their homes and ended their days amidst the fumes of opium' is how, from South Australia, one minister described the Northern Territory Chinese.<sup>35</sup> He, like so many others, neglected to mention the obstacles placed in the way of their building lives as Australian citizens.

While denying them basic rights, it was easy for Europeans to stigmatise the Chinese as 'them', as different from 'us'. But after World War 2, some of the displaced inhabitants of Chinatown would insist on returning. They participated in rebuilding not so much a place, as a transmuted state of mind.

## Listening

Who do we think we are? That's a question all of us strive to answer.

The false representation of history is not something that can be forced on a free people without an organised, Stalinist-style campaign. But a national history that denies all its people voices can be totalitarian by default. Consider what the Chinese voices, past and present, add to the previous section. Beyond the official records of the Northern Territory, they are its historians. 'They claimed this as their home' said Jimmy Ah Toy, against officials and others who insisted on classifying the Chinese as sojourners. His family remembers the hardship the campaign against Chinatown created for

photographer a cold drink, one feisty 89-year-old's welcome became chillier. 'Don't you tape me!' she instructed. 'Don't you dare take my photograph! Don't put me in the newspaper!' The photographer went on snapping. Later, he sent her pictures which, her daughter says, she was glad to have.

When one researcher started on her thesis in the mid-1980s, she found little written material by the Chinese, and that the government documents and private reminiscences were by Europeans, for Europeans.<sup>10</sup> It was only when I began to listen to the voices of Chinese Australians retelling the stories of their history—those that have been written down in someone else's version, those mistranscribed, those never before told—that I felt I was approaching something authentic about those times, something true to the lived experience of all our forebears, something that stretched back through family memories to the time when the first man stepped off the first boat in Port Darwin in 1874. I listened to these voices as they worked with and against those of others writing of our pasts and present. Lily Ah Toy remembers as if it were yesterday a Darwin inhabited by the people of the 1920s and 1930s: 'See, all these connections!'<sup>11</sup>

### *Essie Yuen and Kathleen and Charles Chong-Fong*



*Charles and Kathleen Chong-Fong with their parents, Allen and Dawn. Photo courtesy of Pam Con Foo and the Chong-Fongs.*

Take the history of the Con Foo and Yuen clans. Clues are contained in two small cassettes, one in the Northern Territory Archives,<sup>12</sup> the other recorded by Essie Yuen's grandchildren, Pam Con Foo's niece and nephew, Kathleen and Charles Chong-Fong. Both were recorded with Mrs Yuen, in her sharp and sturdy 80s, among other family members. They join in, prompt, remind, amend. But the strongest voice is the tough, dry one of Essie Yuen.

Kathleen and Charles made their tape as part of a school assignment, the sort that started being set in the 1960s, but did not come fully into its own until the growth of multiculturalism and feminism led to the publication of books such as Barbara James' *No Man's Land* (1989). Kathleen quotes James' contention that pioneer women were often 'the real managers of the Territory, the stabilising influence, the builders of social structure',<sup>13</sup> an assertion which earlier would have been dismissed as absurd. Bush Chinese women, with no choice, no say, real managers and builders? Kathleen, smart and articulate, a

young woman going places, was asked to write on the theme that 'the contributions of the early Chinese pioneer women to the development of the Northern Territory, despite ongoing hardships and crises, were among the most lasting'.

She chose her grandmother as her subject, as 'embodying the essence of the pioneer'. She outlined the events of Essie Yuen's life: childhood poverty in the mining town of Brocks Creek; the family's move up to Darwin in search of work; marriage to a husband who worked at several jobs to make ends meet; wartime evacuation, heavily pregnant; widowed in Sydney, with nine children ranging in age from two to 21; working long hours in a fish-and-chips shop; postwar return and another start in the new Darwin of the early 1950s, in a house built by her son; survival of the 1974 destruction of Cyclone Tracy. This is the outline of a life that could accommodate the experiences of many other Chinese families. In her struggle against 'isolation, environmental conditions, [the] high cost of living...and inadequate and often backward technology', 'the history of the Northern Territory was also the history of *her* life' writes Kathleen.

Qualities such as endurance and resilience are revalued by such work. Lily Ah Toy, bumping down to Adelaide in the back of an Army truck, covered in red dust and in charge of nine small children, four of them her own, becomes in her own accounts another of these wartime heroines. The intention of the Chinese to stay on in the Territory, generation after generation, down to the fifth, while other less stable populations came and went, is validated by such stories. In many ways these women are shown as the true Territorians.

'I like Darwin' Essie Yuen, veteran of the bush, the War, north Queensland and New South Wales, told her grandchildren. 'It's my home town and my favourite place.'

Their descendants recognise that the pioneers made further progress possible. In the Archives tape, Yuen remarks to the interviewer: 'I said to my granddaughter, "You can do better than I did"'. Kathleen, studying at the Northern Territory University to become a lawyer, will join those other children of the third, fourth and fifth generations, the doctors, engineers and accountants who are 'a far cry from the belittled Chinaman of the Territory's early pioneering days'.<sup>11</sup>

In his Year 12 English Major Project of September 1989, Kathleen's brother, Charles, identified the difference between the lives of his generation and his

forebears as the present 'great opportunities' now available for extended education and, by implication, for life opportunities beyond.

But he discovered, too, that he could empathise with the poverty in which his grandmother survived 'a tin shed where it was always cold' when evacuated to Longreach, and the building crowded with other families in which she lived as a widow in Sydney. In describing the events of her life, Charles also measured social change: 'When my mother was a youngster the racial tension had died down a lot...because of the War and Depression, the Europeans began to respect the Chinese for the way they handled the hard times'.

For his project, Charles was able to interview the Territory's most distinguished European historian, who is gradually building up its story.<sup>62</sup> In their interview, Professor Alan Powell told him that during the depressed 1920s and 1930s, Chinese storekeepers gained respect because they 'seemed to be those who gave most support to those in need'.

Powell opened Charles' eyes to the character of the town. The prewar miniboom, as new housing and services were added in the build-up of Australia's northern defence, revived it. Then came the bombings, the lootings, the burnings. Darwin was 'virtually a burnt-out shell occupied by the military. I think it's the only major Australian town that has ever been completely evacuated for a long period.'

### ***Shui Kwong Lo***

Kathleen, Charles and Professor Powell all work in the context of self-told histories of the Northern Territory. But if in the beginning was the Word, it must be written, the Chinese believe. Mere orature is not enough.<sup>63</sup> The Reverend Shui Kwong Lo, teacher, scholar and venerable sage, who came to Darwin in 1941 from outside the existing Chinese community, began in 'The forerunners (family stories 1878-1980)',<sup>64</sup> the mapping of genealogies, the reconstruction of the family links which played such an important part in sustaining people through the long, hard years of White Australia. In his family lists, the striking interrelationships, by birth, marriage and association, are highlighted. They preserve in written form, in the Reverend Lo's own calligraphy, what were previously oral records.

Shui Kwong Lo's document in the Northern Territory Archives, titled modestly 'From my Darwin notebook', also contains a brief account of his own life. Born in Pok Lo, Guangdong, in 1900, that year when many of the first ABCs, Australian-born Chinese, were also babies, he came to Darwin as a Chinese teacher with the Methodist Overseas Mission.

A folder of supplementary material is introduced by a page of calligraphy. It includes a portrait, a 1988 photograph of Shui Kwong Lo, a slight man with white hair, a goatee beard and a gentle smile. Other pictures show him with the prominent businessman and patriarch of the powerful Chins, Chin Gong; the Chinese school at which the Reverend Lo taught; and a 1914 procession in celebration of a goddess' birthday. Man Fong Lau's sign obscured by billowing flags, including the flag of imperial China.

As the Reverend Lo describes his first encounters with his Darwin community, he maps the Chinese town. First he called at Man Fong Lau, local headquarters of the Guomindang. He talked in the Hakka dialect when he dropped in on Mrs Moo, neighbour of Bill Wong and Lily Ah Toy. He met 'senior student friends' like Harry Chan and Jimmy Yuen, who had been sent away to Chinese school in Canton: 'We had our mutual understanding'.

His account is punctuated by news as it came through of the advancing Japanese forces. When Hong Kong was invaded, it was shocking news to Chinese Darwinians; when it fell, they were devastated.

He is constantly concerned with placing the present in the context of the past. Stories of the 'old friends', the earliest unsung 'coolies', are told by the elders of the Darwin temple, he writes. And 'when I wanted to know more, I asked the Historical Society, Darwin, for help'. From its files, he gives the following poignant information:

- Most of the dead were labourers, miners, carpenters, cooks, gardeners, fencing workers, ironmongers, ironsmiths, horse riders, fishermen, cart drivers, cowboys, settlement watchers, station keepers, labour boss, public house keepers, bagmakers, leather makers, frame and box makers, ferrymen, handicraftsmen, storekeepers, trackers, herbalists
- Causes of death...by dysentery, consumption, dropsy, photosis, pneumatic fever, apoplexy, and diarrhoea. Some of them died of murder, some by fights, very few committed suicide, others drowned, crushed to death by falling trees or rocks, run over by trains or carts, thirst, sunburn, boils, cancer, heart diseases, hookworm, malnutrition, weakness
- Most died at the age of 20 to 40
- Nearly all of the dead were buried by the Chief of Police or policemen

- Time of burial: 1880–1900.

To this stark list of facts, Shui Kwong Lo adds feeling. He pays tribute not just to the living, but to the living dead. In his very personal account, written in 1989 during his retirement at his son's house in Darwin, he recalls visits over the years to the old friends' graves in the Stuart Park Chinese Cemetery.

Before the graves, candles and incense were lit, and paper money burnt. Fresh white ashes 'were flying up in the air, like the old friends' spirits hover over the alive friends' heads...The ceremony leaders called the spirits of the dead to come and enjoy these things, especially calling the poor, lonely, hungry, widows, widowers, orphans, forlorn ones to come down to the assembly'.

'Through years of wind and rain, your names on the tablets and stones were blurred...not a voice heard, all things but vanished into the void.

'Up and down I sadly look around. Physically, I couldn't see any old friend, but surely amongst the thickly clasping clover, and the wild flowers, they were there. Their horny hands are waving at me, their skin-hardened legs are moving towards me. Their hands and legs took part in the work of this country's opening-up.'

'Death does not mean finished or gone in Chinese culture' he comments. 'It means no longer of this body, but still part of this world, and therefore still of the family on earth.' The pursuit of worldly success also involves appeasement of, and ritualistic respect towards, the spirits of the dead, for by keeping them 'quiet and satisfied' harmony can be achieved in everyday life. The visits of living community members to the graves is also filial.

Shui Kwong Lo's accounts of the day-to-day existence of the living in this 'yet-to-be-developed Eden', are no less vivid. If Confucius advised 'Do not enter the dangerous country nor live in it', the Chinese who struck out for north Australia were deaf to such strictures, he observes. He records his relationships with the stalwarts of the Darwin community: with 'Great Mum—Mrs Chin Tsu-Hua', matriarch of the Quongs; with Granny Lum Loy, who exported to Western Australia the mangoes from the grove of trees she planted and tended; with Wilson Lee, founder of the transport company, 'a strong man, always on the move'.

### *Charles See-Kee*

Where Lo's stories tend towards the personal and the spiritual, Charles See-Kee's approach is pragmatic and ironic. He also arrived in Darwin in 1941,

from Shanghai. In an already war-affected city, he had barely escaped being shot by the occupying Japanese. His parents escaped at the same time to Hong Kong, then disappeared forever. Cut off from his own family, his own territory, his own history, he went on to recreate himself—and Darwin—in a new image.

Sitting in his Ethnic Communities' Council office in Harry Chan Arcade, See-Kee is still dapper. The sophisticate from cosmopolitan Shanghai found the little bush town 'backward', its people ignorant. "As a young man, a dandy, seeking refuge in Darwin with his black sheep brother, he remembers how appalled he was at the drab conformity of European Australia. Nor was he impressed by the Chinese community, by their apparently docile acceptance of second-class citizenship; 'you couldn't upset them'; by their constant reference to the manners and mores of another time, another place, to the China of their parents and grandparents. 'It's nothing at all like that in China', he informed them, dismissive of short visits to rural villages for Chinese schooling or to find a wife. 'They didn't realise the world had changed' he told me.



Charley See-Kee at 8 TOP FM. Reproduced with the permission of the Northern Territory Archives.

See-Kee was always proud of being Chinese. He tells how, when his father, Tsang See-Kee, had earlier visited Australia, immigration officials had recorded his surname as See-Kee, not knowing the correct Chinese name order. When he himself arrived, Charles See-Kee 'was determined to retain my proper surname, Tsang'. But this proved too difficult for Australian officials.

He was to go on to join the Territory Chinese community, marrying Lily Ah Toy's sister, Noreen. It was See-Kee who began to publish the inside history of the Northern Territory Chinese; he who insisted that there wouldn't be a Darwin without their labour; he who began the work of validating them as pioneers. He was the one who chronicled the buildings of the little town; he pointed out who laboured to put them up.

In a 1987 lecture later published as a paper, *The Chinese Contribution to Early Darwin*, See-Kee acknowledges early hardships. But there is none of the

indignation and prurience of contemporary European chroniclers, like Holmes. 'There were no motor vehicles, electricity or water reticulation' he notes matter-of-factly. 'Buffalo carts were used before the horse carts as the chief mode of transport...Rain water tanks and sunken wells provided the only water supply for the whole town.'

Not only did families like his wife's supply the town with vegetables and fruit. In a magazine article, 'The ethnic Chinese—an integral part of Darwin',<sup>88</sup> he writes: 'They established piggeries and were engaged in the fishing industry and fished for trepang, *bêche-de-mer*, as well as fish which was salted and dried for export to Hong Kong. The Chinese grew rice successfully without tractors and mechanised equipment.'

He goes on to place such work in the wider context of Territory and Australian history. 'Already the Territory was burdened with debt and getting worse each year. Mining, pastoral and agricultural activities could be the solution, but these all required cheap labour working under the most trying conditions. When gold fields were discovered, the Chinese were the answer...Then a railway was needed to serve all the mining country and help the navigable rivers to take down the pastoral and agricultural products to the seaboard. Again the Chinese provided the main workforce, and later the legitimate business of the country.' Pithily, he sums up: 'Where others failed, the Chinese succeeded.'<sup>89</sup>

It was not easy for See-Kee to settle in his new community. 'When my parents died, I lost all interest in China. I didn't want to go back' he said. During wartime evacuation his brother married in Sydney, but 'I was completely lonely. I didn't know what to do.'

Yet not only through his work, but in his life, he was to provide inspiration for the Darwin Chinese. When he arrived, he found Chinese Australians working for the government, but as 'cooks or message boys, gardeners or maids'. With his degree, and his experience working for an international company in Shanghai, he thought he could do better. 'I never regarded myself as inferior, as worse off than a white man.' He applied for a white collar job with the Northern Territory Administration, competed for it against Europeans—and won.

All the Darwin Chinese know and tell his story. They had heard it many times before he told it to me. They particularly like one episode. The public servants of the town 'were above the ordinary citizens—at least they thought they were, and that's the way they behaved'. When See-Kee applied to join the



Single Officers' Mess, his application was refused—three times. Meanwhile, Europeans were admitted. 'Saturday nights they used to dress up in their little monkey jackets, go to the Mess all dressed up, full of protocol.'

The War intervened in See-Kee's appeal for admission, the Administration transferring itself to Alice Springs. 'I became the Secretary of the Public Service Mess in Alice Springs' he said. Before the transfer south, the Secretary of the Darwin Mess had gone to Canberra. 'He later came to Alice Springs and he had to apply to me for admission to the Alice Springs Hostel. I thought this was a great opportunity to get my own back and not accept his application—but I didn't.'<sup>70</sup>

In this version, the much-repeated story was at last written down, in 1987, as part of the Northern Territory Library Service series of *Occasional Papers*.

### ***William and Darwina Fong***

It was not until he was 12 that William Fong came up to Darwin to get some education, brought by his widowed mother<sup>71</sup> who had come to Australia as a 17-year-old bride. William spent his childhood in the little bush towns of Pine Creek, Katherine and Mataranka, where his family fossicked for gold, had market gardens and

general stores. William spoke his own dialect and could understand Cantonese. But lacking the dominant language, English, he was relegated at school in Darwin to the kindergarten class, with much younger children. He struggled to progress. A friend came in every night to tutor him. He caught on fast, and was promoted quickly up the grades, skipping some.

At 17, he left school to earn some necessary money. One of the few jobs available to a Chinese boy was as a messenger, delivering telegrams by bicycle. Of other possibilities, he says: 'The only job you can get is sort of a mess boy, to clean the bed and sweep the floor and so on...You couldn't join the workers' union at the time. They just don't accept you.'

He went on to work in family enterprises, including cafes and Darwin Aerated



*William and Darwina Fong at their son Des' wedding, with Darwina's mother, Mrs Sue Wah Chin (centre). Photo courtesy of Darwina Fong.*

Waters, the local soft drink business. Meanwhile in Adelaide, where she had been evacuated with her family, his future wife Darwina helped out at their Rundle Street cafe, in the city's market area.<sup>72</sup>

Darwina had returned to Darwin with her mother, just before the outbreak of war. Though married to an Australian-born Chinese, her mother had been forced to return to China because her three-year permit had run out. 'If it wasn't for the War, we probably would have been kicked out again' says Darwina.

At the age of eight, the little girl couldn't speak English. At school, 'I remember this teacher who whacked me with a ruler because I couldn't comprehend what she was telling me'.

The Adelaide cafe was a seven-days-a-week job. 'Mum and Dad, they would get up about four o'clock to cook the porridge.' At five, her father would open the cafe to feed the market people eggs on toast, bacon and eggs, sausages and eggs, steak and eggs: 'what Aussie people like to eat'. Darwina helped in the cafe until eight o'clock, when she would get ready for school, and catch the tram out to suburban Magill Primary School. The daughter of the tobacconist next door worked in the Adelaide Circulating Library, and Darwina began to use its books. 'I started to read a lot, and listen to older people and pick up things.' When she returned at the end of the school day, she began work again, serving meals, collecting the money and washing up.

The family lived above the cafe. Her mother had three of her 11 children while in Adelaide. She gave birth in the upper rooms. 'The doctor came and the nursing sister came and delivered the baby upstairs. Mum worked right up to the time she had the baby. Next thing, she'd be downstairs cooking again, baby on her back.'

Over the seven years the family was in Adelaide, they built up, and got to know a regular clientele. 'We had people who came in once a week on Saturday, came for a cheap meal and then went to the pictures or the theatre.' These people mostly lived in nearby boarding houses.

On top of her other work, Darwina's grandmother would make toffees and chocolate crackles for her to sell for the School Patriotic Fund. A badge was awarded for each two pounds raised, with a bar for every additional 10 shillings. 'They used me as an example. "See Darwina: she understands what war is about."' "

The family returned to Darwin in 1949. Darwin's uncle, the family patriarch Chin Gong, had arrived in 1946, 'and asked if we would come, but there was nothing here. Everything was damaged.' Her eldest brother also returned in 1946, and the second eldest, who had been in the Air Force in Melbourne, came over with his wife to run the Adelaide cafe.

William and his family had returned in 1946. When Darwina and her family visited the soft drink factory in the pre-Christmas rush, he was among those doing overtime, stockpiling drinks for the festive season. They took to one another immediately. 'A week later he started to take me out.' A year later, they were married, setting the foundation for an obviously strong, successful and enduring partnership. But first William had to finish building what became their family home, brick by hand-made brick, some 10 000 of them.

### *Pam Con Foo and the Yuens*

Charles See-Kee's work gave others confidence to make public their own stories. Many of the sources of the entries in the *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography*, published in 1990 by the Northern Territory University Press, are given as 'family information'.

Pam Con Foo, a shrewd and energetic businesswoman, active in retailing, the travel industry in Darwin and Hong Kong, and Darwin community organisations, is a member of clans that stretch across north Australia and into southern China. Her project with the Yuens and the Con Foes is that of thousands of Australians, seeking from shipping lists and gravestones clues to their family story: naming, reclaiming, restoring to history those who, like the Reverend Lo's 'forerunners', have been allowed to slip from it.

She is trying to reconstruct the life of that largely silent first generation of Chinese.<sup>70</sup> Her grandfather, Yuen Yet Hing, left the southern Chinese village of Gung Kok in 1876. Chinese were not named on the shipping lists of the time, 'just grouped: "eight Chinese"'. There are no letters from or to him, although he returned to his village to marry, his third wife becoming Con



*Essie Yuen, and Pam Con Foo with Harry and Eddie Con Foo in the People's Republic of China. Photo courtesy of Pam Con Foo.*

Foo's 'grandmother with the bound feet'. 'We haven't got *any* communication with what our grandfather did' she says. In Australia, the family knows he opened the Yuen Yet Loong store in Darwin. He had mining interests at the vanished town of Fountainhead, becoming so successful he was able to buy a Model T Ford. He is mentioned in mining records: 'how much gold was weighed in...in a few instances, my grandfather's name is there'. From 'hearsay, stories that have been passed down', she knows of the 'mysterious fire' in which six of his shops were burnt down.

Otherwise, apart from his 1916 death certificate, 'all I've really got are photographs of him'. They include the 1905 gathering at the Government Residency in Darwin. The Governor of South Australia and white officials stand on its steps above a row of Chinese merchants. Yuen Yet Hing in his black embroidered Mandarin gown is one of those whose names are still known; other identities have gone forever. Staff at modern Government House confirm that Chinese would not have been listed in the visitors' book: 'They were seen as coolies'.

At 69 Yuen suffered a heart attack. His last surviving son 'doesn't remember anything of his father, because he was six months old when he died'. 'My next visit to China is to find my grandfather's grave' says Con Foo. A family photograph shows 'my uncle with my grandfather's skeleton laid out. As children, we wouldn't look at that picture, but we were curious.'

The custom was to send the bones back to China for burial. 'Maybe in their heart they just wanted to go home.' It's a powerful image: Australian soil, tilled and worked by Chinese miners and gardeners, yet denied to them as owners by the authorities' refusal of citizenship; Australian soil, rejected until just before World War 2 as a burial place for Australian-born Chinese. Instead, the bones were stored in urns or boxes in a little chapel next to the temple, awaiting shipment to Hong Kong, and then carriage on to the ancestral village for 'the final place of rest'.

In China in the 1890s, Yuen built a 'very, very big house' which stood in the village until 1959, a time when 'there were a lot of hungry people'. It was pulled down and replaced by six smaller ones. In one now stands Pamela Con Foo's grandfather's marital bed of heavy antique rosewood. It has the status of revered antique, rather than something for use. 'You couldn't sleep on it. You couldn't sit on the chairs.'

She has a photograph of the watercress field which has been offered to the Yuens to compensate for the vanished house. In the late 1980s, she was

among representatives of the Yuen clan who travelled to their ancestral village for the laying of the foundation stone of a school built with money from members in Darwin, Cairns, Townsville, Sydney and Hong Kong. To build the substantial three-storey structure in Gung Kok, part of a property in Dixon St, in Sydney's Chinatown, was sold for \$45 000. The villagers provided the labour.

One of the first things many young Australians launching themselves into adulthood do is set off overseas. The 'homeland' is likely to be a stopping place in our itineraries; we are alert to traces of our ancestors. For Chinese Australians, this has always been more formalised. Many Territory families have sons and brothers and husbands who went to China, like Jimmy Yuen, for a few years of Chinese school. There was no secondary education in Darwin in the early years and single men vastly outnumbered eligible women. Later on, with dwindling numbers of Chinese Australians and intransigent immigration laws, there were still not enough women among their own community for the young men to marry. By 1921, there were three Chinese men for every woman, and by 1933, the ratio was 1:6.<sup>71</sup>

Nine times 'since we found out where we came from' in 1972, that optimistic, outward-looking time for Australia, Con Foo has been back to the village where her grandfather married, two-and-a-half hours by bus from Macau. 'The first time we went back, we felt like royalty. So many hundreds of little beautiful children waving coloured flowers and flags and chanting "Welcome! Welcome!"'

The school is named for Yuen Yet Hing. Its library is named for Pam Con Foo. The village was a lot smaller than she expected. 'Your imagination gets grander...the more you hear, the more you imagine.' As for the villagers on that first visit, 'they thought we were freaks. Because we looked like Chinese, but we didn't dress like Chinese, and we didn't sound like Chinese.' In fact, they were amazed they could still speak the language, since they were ABCs.

*A welcome with flowers for Essie Yuen and the Con Foes at the Yuen Yet Loong School, Gung Kok, Zhongshan Province, People's Republic of China. Photo courtesy of Pam Con Foo.*



*Ernest Yuen, aged five, with Yuen Yet Hing 1910. Photo courtesy of Pam Con Foo.*

Clan subcommittees in Australia and Hong Kong send representatives to school meetings two or three times a year. 'We really have taken it on. Whatever is needed—like if they need a photocopying machine—one of us would donate it.'

When they returned to the Con Foo ancestral village, her family took watches and three bicycles. 'That was like giving someone a car. The bicycle was their means of transport. They could do business; they could go from here to there.' Each bike was often used by more than one rider, 'one on the back, one on the bar, one sitting, and one in the front'.

Con Foo took her children to China for the first time when her eldest son was 13, the next 11, and the youngest eight. Their responses were unenthusiastic.

'If ever I'm to come back inside China, I'm going to donate a camp toilet to them' announced the 11-year-old. The youngest, gazing unimpressed at the wooden blocks provided for pillows said: 'We're going to bring our own pillows next time'.

This they did, with eiderdowns and big, thick bath towels. On that first visit, her sons couldn't understand why everyone in the village brought the Australian visitors a chicken as a present.

'We're sick of eating chicken' chorused the Australian sons. 'And I had to explain to them that they had nothing else to give. The chicken was their prize possession...because that chook could lay an egg every day for them, and that would give them an omelette at least, something that was ongoing.'

'A chook?' exclaimed the Australian sophisticates, incredulous.

## The Fong Lims

*Alice Fong Lim,  
Reproduced with the  
permission of the  
Northern Territory News*



They were perhaps too young. Charles Chong-Fong, searching for his history in his late teens, identifies 'the real symbolic act of...complete acceptance' of the Chinese in Darwin as being when Harry Chan was elected mayor of the city in 1966, by a largely non-Chinese constituency, and also became President of the Legislative Council. Charles sees the early and inter-war periods of

'antagonism and conflict' as leading to one of 'complete acceptance, until [the Chinese] are now respected members of the Territory community'.

Alec Fong Lim was elected Lord Mayor of Darwin in 1984. The Lims are a high-profile, high-energy, non-traditional Darwin family. Tanya Fong Lim, one of the flamboyant Alec's six professional daughters, is poised and confident. She speaks of her father, who died prematurely, with real affection. He 'absolutely loved the job' she says. 'Loved it. It wasn't uncommon for him to be going to five functions a day.'

From a transcribed talk, 'Memories of Pre-War Northern Territory Towns',<sup>10</sup> his exuberance, his common touch, his 'man of the people' persona, erupt enthusiastically. What Alec Fong Lim has to say reveals the history of those who, like the Ah Toys, sought to become assimilated into the wider community, who were determined to make it, Fong Lim makes a good story of a family determined to be positive.

He was brought up in the little Top End town of Katherine among the Scots, from whom he got his name Alexander, and among White Russian peanut farmers like Long John Ivanetz. His father, George Lim, a tailor, ran a general store. In the town, 'there was no electricity, no refrigeration and no entertainment'. Life was hard; 'one year a drought, the next a flood'.<sup>11</sup> But there was little time for complaint: 'We lived okay without any luxuries because we did not know of anything else'.

In 1938, at the end of the Depression, 'Dad thought our family should try the big smoke'. The concept was purely relative. Remembering the 1990s, Essie Yuen describes the town her family moved to in the 1920s as 'small town...very quiet time'. You could 'open the doors and windows without anyone troubling you. It was very quiet and peaceful...now there are too many people!'

George Lim and his family loaded their possessions on to two vehicles and drove for 12 hours over rough bush tracks to Darwin.<sup>12</sup> They made an immediate impression, on Chinese and Europeans alike. There was a bold strike into the heart of the white town.

'Imagine the consternation amongst the Chinese community, whose businesses were exclusively in Cavenagh Street, when this country humpkin bought a business in Smith Street—the white man's domain!'

'You will never succeed' Lim was told, 'The whites will not trade with you. You must operate in Cavenagh Street.' In 1990, giving his talk, Fong Lim was

still gleeful: 'Of course, saying you cannot do something to Dad was like waving a red flag at a bull'.

He remembers the Darwin of the late 1930s as very run down. Chinatown was 'a series of ramshackle corrugated iron buildings'. It was small enough to map out from his memory: Jolly's and the Japanese lemon squash shop where 'a great drink' was made with fresh lemon, syrup and shaved ice, and from where Lily Ah Toy remembers you could also get a cigarette tin full of deep-sea pearls for five pounds.<sup>71</sup> He focuses on the hotels the Lims would later own: the Victoria Hotel run by Mrs Gordon and her son Cookie, and the Hotel Darwin, run by the Greek Australian who would become a millionaire, Mick Paspalis.

The Lims lived above the shop, and everyone worked. Fong Lim helped with after-school deliveries, was in charge of the tobacco counter, and sold 'Mum's special salted roasted peanuts' during the interval at the Star Picture Theatre. Wartime evacuation to Alice Springs is mainly remembered for the cold. Water froze in the pipes as food for the family's cafe cooked in a container of fat over an open fire in the backyard. From primary school, Fong Lim won a scholarship to high school in Adelaide, not returning to the Territory until 1946. By then, Darwin was rebuilding itself from the ruins of war. 'It was a man's town', he remembered, '...very few women; beer hard to get; cigarettes and tobacco rationed; no fresh fruit or vegetables...meat tough as shoe leather and bring-your-own wrapping paper; buildings very shoddy; shocking roads'.

In one ebullient paragraph, he manages to characterise the entire postwar town: bombed wrecks in the harbour; the sea 'teeming with fish...bream in the water caught by the hundreds from the wharf'. The buildings petered out around Parap, with only army huts beyond. Today's prosperous waterside suburb, Fannie Bay, was 'just the old airstrip'. 'A series of one-man huts' was opposite the Catholic Cathedral and 'the girls' dormitory was where the Travelodge now stands. There were 'illegal betting shops and gambling houses...bush race meetings on a track graded out of the bush past Knuckey's Lagoon'. 'Everyone knew everyone' he concludes. 'Conditions were hard but life was lived to the full...soccer and Aussie Rules were strong...but basketball was king in the 1950s.'

When George Lim bought the Victoria Hotel, he became the first Chinese in the Northern Territory to own a licensed business.<sup>80</sup> The 15-year-old Alec, just back from 'the cloistered confines of a boarding college' was put to work. The Vic was 'a man's pub in a frontier town'. It was the 'social watering hole and office' for everyone from buffalo hunters, crocodile shooters and prospectors



to bank staff and journalists. Fong Lim's work was 'great grounding' for the Lord Mayor's job. 'I closely associated with people, listening to their troubles and complaints. It also prepared me for recalcitrant aldermen.'

Charles See-Kee's memories of the town of the 1940s and early 1950s, are that it was a place 'where men are men and women ain't ladies'. Shui Kwong Lo includes a local newspaper account of the celebrations that were the culmination of Alec Fong Lim's 'battle from bottom to top' in his memoirs.<sup>81</sup> In 1965, Alec's mother, the famous Lorna Lim, held a 61st birthday party at the Town Hall:

Lorna and George, with their four sons, five daughters, and 20 grandchildren, were congratulated by over 800 guests, dined on an astonishing variety and quantity of European and Chinese foods, laid on dozens of groaning boards, and were provided with almost non-stop music and refreshments in the Territory's biggest-ever birthday party.

Like Harry Chan before him, Fong Lim was a generous, outgoing, highly visible role model for those who took on an entire society, and won. Tanya Fong Lim and her sisters are carrying on the tradition. Camille has her own computer software support business. Dallas works for Qantas. Katrina is the Executive Director of the YWCA in the Territory. Lorelei, a journalist, is currently Press Secretary to a Northern Territory Government minister. Tanya herself is a lawyer, specialising in commercial litigation.

When we talked,<sup>82</sup> she seemed thoroughly familiar with the dates and personnel of her family history. 'With my father being fairly sick for a long time, I thought perhaps we should find out those things' she said.

In contrast with Charles See-Kee, she sees assertiveness as one of the secrets of the Chinese community's success. 'The Fong Lim family is fairly high-profile...and Dad seemed to flourish on his own. It was just his personality.' She agrees with See-Kee and others about the major reason for long-term success. 'I think the thing about the Chinese here is that they're not afraid of hard work, and they're willing to work for their goals.'

In her family, the preservation of culture, of custom and feast days, died with her grandparents, she says. Her English husband is interested in conserving some of her Chinese heritage for their new son. 'My father had a Chinese funeral', she says, 'but we had to go to older Chinese women to find out what we had to do, because my mother didn't know'.

When Fong Lim went to university in Adelaide, “people kept on asking me where I came from. And when I said, “Darwin”, they’d say, “Yes, but where did you come from originally?”” And she laughed. “It came as quite a shock to them that I was actually born in Darwin, and so were my parents and so were my grandparents.”

Her son, largely at her husband’s insistence, was given two names, the Australian Robert, and the Chinese Fong Gim Sung. “It was explained to me by the old Chinese woman who suggested it that it means “large tree with a golden haze, and a path leading up to goodness.””

### *Eddie Quong*



*Eddie Quong*  
Reproduced with the  
permission of the  
*Northern Territory News*

Behind success like the Fong Lims’ lies the drudgery of the hardest of hard times. Eddie Quong says of his family: “We were the people who decided to stay and battle it out”.<sup>81</sup> Like See-Kee’s, their very name was denied them by their adopted country. Quong’s father Chin Shue Hong changed his name to Henry Quong “as a result of his experience working with white Australians in the Army” during World War 2.<sup>82</sup> The country that gave families like this a living, then relied on them for its own survival, has only now allowed them real lives.

Until recently, it has been necessary to imagine what it must be like to live in a society whose very laws were worded to exclude you from participation. Eddie Quong is one of those who are now prepared to speak out, to put current Chinese Australian success in the context of the rough and violent past. Living memory, family stories, reach back to a time when the gold mines were effectively worked out, when many were going back to China, never to return, when those who were left were being forced to seek out different sorts of lives, “the die-hards, like ourselves, who have lived here all our lives, who were born and bred here”.

“I got most of my stories from my grandmother, who died in my arms at the age of 94” says Quong. The family lived in Pine Creek’s Chinatown, “a shanty town separate from the “other” Pine Creek”. There were two temples, stores and gardens. Babies were born at home. “Every one of my siblings was born with the care of my grandmother in the bush. Every one was born healthy” says Quong. His mother went into hospital for the first time for the birth of her 13th child. The baby “died with a cracked skull. The child had been dropped—accidentally or otherwise, I’m not going to

ask. This was why, when they started the Darwin Hospital Advisory Board in 1960, I became one of its first members. There was only one way: to control and help.<sup>7</sup>

Quong was on the Board for 23 years, and its Chair for some 18 of them. Before this time, 'irrespective of what qualifications people of Chinese descent had, they were always overlooked'. Meanwhile, public servants, straight from the south, 'threw their weight around, were given all the rights. They were given everything; they demanded everything. There was a fair bit of animosity.'

The way to power, the Chinese discovered, was to empower themselves.

## Territorians

Apart from subsistence life, disaster is the great leveller of the Territory. Its history is a cycle of destruction, endurance, persistence, rebuilding, success; of cyclone, flood, drought or war. Disaster is a ravager of evidence. If Lily Ah Toy's family photographs survived Cyclone Tracy in a biscuit tin, think how many others have been lost.

When he returned to Darwin after the War, Bill Wong found 'There was no Chinatown'.<sup>8</sup> It had been razed: burnt, reduced to ground-level rubble and overgrown with grass, as completely as if the country had been invaded and the enemy had wanted to obliterate all evidence of the Territory Chinese.

But the only occupation had been by other Australians. Chinatown had been 'swept away by the looting, burning and bulldozing of the locally-based provost troops after the bombing'.<sup>9</sup>

Wong remembers going back to the family home and farm, the happy scene of his childhood, as heartbreaking. 'I went back to where I used to live. And there was no home there. I looked down the gully for my cousin's house—all gone. All the market gardens were gone.'

'The Army helped themselves' says Lily Ah Toy.<sup>10</sup> When civilians returned to the Top End, 'the houses were bombed, were looted; there was nothing'.

The memories are still vivid. Substantial stores had been burnt to the ground. Roofs had fallen in; white ants had attacked; rubbish was piled high in rooms emptied of furniture. The wells had been filled with rubbish. Nature, too, had



## Chinatown, Darwin.

*Darwin's Chinatown  
before World War 2.*  
Pictorial Collection,  
National Library of Australia.

invaded: the tough, spiky grass that in the Wet grew as high as a man's shoulder, the creeping vines.

'I remember a couple of elderly ladies coming back to their shop from Melbourne' says Eddie Quong. 'When they saw it bulldozed, they just sat down and cried. They had buried their valuables in the backyard. Their fortunes were gone.'

'Everybody had nothing' remembers Charles See-Kee. 'Government had taken over everything', all land and housing, under the *Darwin Lands Acquisition Act 1945* (Cwlth). Of 500 acres in the town area, 53 had been registered in the name of 80 Chinese residents.<sup>304</sup> Postwar, he remembers: 'People were only given a fortnightly tenancy, and one of my jobs was to enforce this. They used to come into the office and complain to me.'

A grandiose plan had been conceived for an entirely new town. It was intended to present Australia's northern gateway as an entrance worthy of a rising European power. What was left of the old town was ignored. Darwin was seen 'as a vacant piece of land—not worrying about the roads or the houses here', as See-Kee told me. 'Cavenagh Street was supposed to sort of disappear.'



The kind of thinking underlying postwar reconstruction can be seen in a 1943 letter from the Administrator, C.L.A. Abbott, to J.A. Carrodus. Abbott thought perpetual leases, combined with good town planning, would result in 'the elimination of undesirable elements which Darwin has suffered from far too much in the past'.<sup>90</sup> 'The acquisition of this area by the Government will give control over all people returning and will entirely prevent the Chinese quarter forming again' he continued. 'If land is acquired from the former Chinese residents there is really no need for them to return as they have no other assets.'

*Darwin's Chinatown after World War 2*  
 Pictorial Collection,  
 National Library of Australia

In Canberra in June 1946, the Northern Territory Chief Surveyor, A.R. Miller, endorsing the policy of assimilation, said 'it is undesirable that persons of the one nationality (non-European) should be permitted to congregate in a particular area'.<sup>91</sup>

Leases guaranteeing security of tenure were not agreed upon until the early 1950s. One can imagine the frustrations for returning Territory residents, the battles with those who often seemed determined to deny them access to their own land and property. They faced Kafkaesque situations, like the dispute between the Department of the Interior and that of Post-War Reconstruction. It was referred to Cabinet, which suggested an interdepartmental committee. This in turn set up a subcommittee including yet another interested party, the Department of Works.

Why did the Chinese come back at all? Many, resettled in the south, did not. Of those who fought to return, some until well into the 1950s, Lily Ah Toy says: 'We had land here, and our roots were here'. They had also shared an experience that few Australians have, of evacuation and internal exile. A common experience of privation and dispossession 'bound the people together' says Charles See-Kee.<sup>92</sup>

After the War, the Reverend Shui Kwong Lo returned to a former troops' 'rest house' in Schultze Street, Myilly Point, to set up school again. The Chinese community rallied round to help repair the roof and walls. The well had no water, so George Lim engaged a plumber to lay pipes, and donated a fridge. Charlie Fong gave arcmesh for fencing, and parties of young men, including Bill Wong, helped clear the gardens. 'Kwan-Chong gave us his best banana buds and paw-paw plants...When more greens grew up, I named the place "The Garden of Hope".'<sup>43</sup>

The Territory rewards the stoicism and persistence necessary to get through such experiences, qualities the Chinese had in abundance. It rewards the virtues of the immigrant, who knows all about starting anew—maybe several times. 'Everyone was glad to escape with their lives' says Lily Ah Toy, of the cyclone. 'The material stuff was nothing. You can start again and work it up, like we did.'

Starting from nothing postwar gave the authorities a chance to build afresh, according to prevailing ideologies. By 1956, the thesis by Cross<sup>44</sup> could approvingly quote an Immigration Officer who observed that Darwin provided better opportunities for assimilation than other Australian towns because of 'the fact that new Australians were scattered and outnumbered in most avenues of employment'. Dispersion of the Chinese from a single site to many, scattered around the town, was seen as the answer to the creation of physically and visually distinct Chinatowns.<sup>45</sup>

The frustrations of the postwar period may be compared with the years after Cyclone Tracy. 'The most horrible period of my life was the 12 months after the cyclone', says developer Ernie Chin,<sup>46</sup> long a believer in the potential for northern development. 'I had a belief in Darwin and I had a dream of what Darwin should be, and how it should develop itself.' A pioneer of rural subdivisions since the 1960s, Chin is scathing about the years of Canberra control over the Territory. 'They didn't want anyone to do any development—unless it was them. They were very much against private development in the Territory. If we were to develop blocks of land without their control, that would create pressure for infrastructure.' And that meant spending money.

After the cyclone, 'the frustrations that were created by bureaucracy were breaking people's hearts. You couldn't do anything. Nobody would give you a straight answer, or make a decision.'

# Making histories

Such equivocation had the desired effect, however. Postwar, the Chinese were discouraged and dispersed. By the time Inglis was doing fieldwork for her 1967 thesis, the Chinese were less high-profile as a group. And it was apparent, she writes, 'just how little the non-Chinese knew about the Chinese population'.<sup>94</sup>

Hers was the first thesis to use the perceptions of the Northern Territory Chinese as an integral part of the work. It took account of growing interest in the wider community in oral history, in local history, in 'ordinary' voices. But Inglis sees her interviews as supplementary, as conducted largely 'to compensate for deficiencies in the written records', for the absence, for instance, of any Chinese newspaper in Darwin. She circulated a draft history among her informants and included their corrections and additions in her work.

In the spirit of the times, she chooses to see the Northern Territory Chinese as an example of successful assimilation. Assimilation she defines as 'the process by which a subordinate ethnic group becomes indistinguishable from the dominant group in the community'.<sup>95</sup> Leaving aside how 'subordinate' the Chinese were in Darwin, it's interesting that she sees economic assimilation as progressing more rapidly than 'cultural or structural assimilation'. Given the evidence of earlier Chinese economic success, one might ask who was assimilating to whom.

Cross' 1956 thesis on Darwin as a provincial society is also occupied with the movement towards assimilation. In the years before 1930 the sending of young men to China for a few years of Chinese school, the marrying of Chinese brides, and the maintenance of a Chinese language school in Darwin, is seen as 'stubborn resistance' to Chinese absorption into the wider society.<sup>96</sup> However, Cross claims, 'evidence from newspapers shows that by the late

*Darwin Chinese Recreation Club Soccer Team, 1925. Back row, from left: Low Wah, C. Ng, Sing Lip, Chin San, A. Jan, Chin Pui. Front row: C.M. Song, G. Lee, B. Moy, A. Fung, T. Lee. Photo courtesy of Ernest Chin*



1930s, the younger generation...despised opium smoking, and preferred films to joss houses'. The formation of the Darwin Chinese Recreation Club for younger Chinese is not attributed to their banning from white sporting clubs<sup>100</sup> but was interpreted as 'breaking down Chinese exclusivism and encouraging social and sporting contact with the rest of the population'.

Cross goes on approvingly to quote an anonymous 'postwar leader' of the Chinese community as identifying the difference between the pre and postwar 'educated' being 'that they are changed from half-hearted Australian to whole-hearted Australian, from a good knowledge of China to little knowledge of China, from old style custom, habit and manners to new'.<sup>101</sup>

The writers of later theses would not dream of offering such analysis. Hutchings (1983) for instance, criticises the assimilationist approach as cultural encroachment, later to be replaced by a social ethos of multiculturalism, itself now under attack as a conceptual tool, from both Right and Left.

Hannan (1985) is concerned with placing herself explicitly in relation to the history of the Top End Chinese—in standing, as it were, by their side. She writes: 'I was fortunate in being a "Darwinite" who had attended school with the children of Mr Raymond Chin and Mr Charles See-Kee and others with whom I spoke. Family acquaintances like Mrs Shu Ack Fong and Mr Ronald Chin smoothed my path, as did the Lord Mayor of Darwin, Mr A. Fong Lim. Each person interviewed contributed something special and I cannot thank them enough.'

She provides a detailed and well-researched account of the changing shape of what had been Chinatown. Before the War, she notes, the south-eastern end of Cavenagh Street had 60 shops on 16 blocks, held by some 11 families. By 1954, the business district of Darwin had 16 shops, one to a block, with 10 of the properties held by three families.<sup>102</sup>

Land acquisition and new leasehold regulations 'effectively destroyed the old landownership system of the prewar Darwin Chinese where, as often as not, a block of land was held in parts by several members of the one family'. The family's role in the administration of business and property was eroded, both by a reduction in the numbers of family firms, and increased opportunities for work in outside jobs. Postwar, those Chinese who returned were 'forced to separate their residential and business lives and to integrate themselves into the general community'. The number of Chinese landowners fell by 50 per cent



With all the thesis writers, there is a sense of a story worth telling, from whatever perspective, but it is one that is too large to be contained in a single piece of work. Each contains a bibliography that could breed a dozen more. So far, there has been no doctoral thesis written on the Northern Territory Chinese.

The most prevalent non-academic approach of recent work is to be found in stories of Chinese persistence and success. These gloss over tragedies such as the lonely deaths of Shui Kwong Lo's 'old friends'; they can ignore past misdeeds which probably make us feel less good about ourselves as an Australian community. Then again, some hidden histories, like blatant examples of racist violence, can be brought forward to exorcise them. Eddie Quong speaks of Chinese miners who, when they discovered enough gold to get rich, were killed for it. These stories had previously been told only within his family.

Others stories are more complex, harder to deal with. Some of them, you feel, cannot be told by white Territorians. Others can only be told by us, as part of our own stories.

Tim Jones, an ex-Public Service Inspector for the Northern Territory, wrote the history of its mining industry. Fascinated by the part Chinese people played in it, he went on to chronicle *The Chinese in the Northern Territory* (1990). In the tradition of the self-told success stories of the See-Kees, the Fong Lims, the Ah Toys, validated by community acceptance, he offers an example of his own, Ping Que, a man of power, influence and wealth.

Ping Que was the first Chinese merchant to be mentioned in the local European newspaper. Jones shows how he won almost universal approval from the Europeans of his day. In *The Northern Territory As It Is*, the journalist W.J. Sowden describes him as 'the famous Ping Que...a sleek, well-fleshed, intelligent Chinaman'.<sup>101</sup> As well as extensive mining operations (one, at Union Reefs, covered 20 acres and employed 60 men), he had stores and butcher shops on the goldfields, ran abattoirs, employed Chinese teamsters and other labourers, some of whom were brought in from New South Wales, and traded in opium. The *Northern Territory Times* correspondent on the goldfields wrote, 'I believe that if Ping Que could get any run of stone to turn out even a steady ounce, he would employ all the coolies in the Territory'.<sup>104</sup> In 1873, he was appointed a member of the Mining Board. In 1885, his application for Australian naturalisation was approved, and only his premature death prevented the certificate being issued.

Ping Que's obituary in the *Northern Territory Times* of 15 May 1886 shows that from the earliest days there are precedents for the 'good bloke' kind of historical record, even in an often racist press:

Many years of hard work and sterling pluck and enterprise earned for Ping Que the respect and goodwill of every Englishman with whom he was brought into contact. He was far and away the smartest mining man we have yet met in the Territory.

His success prefigures many of the later stories. The manner of their telling shows that these men (for they were until recently, exclusively male) were able to present themselves in ways the European community could relate to: material success, affability, fluent English. Like Harry Chan, Ping Que has become almost emblematic: 'a Napoleon among his countrymen'.<sup>100</sup>

This is the kind of story most likely to be read by the Chinese community itself. Even those who have acted as informants for them have rarely read the theses. Perhaps this is connected not only to density and length, but also to the distancing effect of academic expression. Voices of interviewees, listed anonymously as numbers 1–38,<sup>101</sup> may deter involvement rather than invite it. Most people I spoke to had, however, read transcripts of interviews held in the Northern Territory Archives, of people who were named and provided with background biographical information.<sup>102</sup>

## Chinatown transformed

Darwin's *Chung Wah Society Newsletter* of November 1987 told its readers it proposed to adopt a new logo, incorporating a dragon, 'a symbol of strength, confidence, reverence and achievements. We believe this exemplifies the Chinese community.'

The main feature of the *Society's Newsletter*, the only Chinese publication in a town which never had a Chinese-language newspaper, is celebrations of success. Issues are full of news of banquets and festivals, of balls, weddings, dance recitals, children's Christmas parties. There are accounts of scholastic achievements and sporting events, of the opening of the \$1.5 million Jape Shopping Centre in the middle of Cavenagh Street by an ex-Timor family.

Chinese commerce thrives, but not on the old sites. A Big W sprawls where once stood Harry Chan's store, and a neighbouring building has its Harry

Chan Arcade. In 1947, when Chin Gong built W.G. Chin and Sons in Smith Street, it was recognised as a worthy successor to that of his father's Fang Cheong Loong. He followed it with the Chin Building (1956), Chin's Arcade (1959) and Chin House (1963). They help define the new city; they stand in for all those business families, such as the Pak Poy's, who found it, postwar, too difficult to return, and made their successes elsewhere.

The drive to build, consolidate, achieve, has given way, in the security and leisure of success, to the need to understand, to know. 'Chinatown' has been reconstituted not as a physical entity, but as an awareness of, a pride in, identity. At the end of the century, despite the long dim years of White Australia, Darwin is again in many senses an Asian place.

Rebirth is a concept well understood in a city that reinvented itself, discovered a new identity, not just once, postwar, but again after Cyclone Tracy. What the Chinese and the other Territorians worked towards was a place in which everyone could feel at home, a place where, as See Kee says, 'they judge you on what you are, not what you say you are'.

It is a place which struggled to move beyond its lowly status as the colony of a colony. Since 1978, with a measure of self-government, it has found its own special identity. It is a place where, behind the official dogma and beyond racial restrictions, people have always got on with their lives. 'For years we've had the Chinese influence, the Macassan influence, the coloured influence, the Japanese influence' says Eddie Quong. 'There is no such thing—shouldn't be such a thing—as a pure-blood. Hitler tried to do that.' 'Darwin is home to us' says Pam Con Foo. 'We've dug our roots a little bit deep.' In streets which could be those of a south-east Asian city, it is impossible today to tell which Chinese Australians are fifth generation, which the children of newer arrivals.

The self-told stories of Chinese success place them within a wider Australian history. From being perceived as sojourners whose allegiance was to other people, to families in another country, their stories have helped to preserve a picture of good Australian citizens who built up this country. Newer generations of migrants can take heart from their success and their methods.

Newly-arrived Chinese, looking out at the exuberant mix of Australia's 'barbarian' tribes, can see the usefulness of interlinking family and language groups. As in the past, there is usually someone who understands to call on in the hard times. 'Chinese are really quite close. We've always gone around helping each other' Pam Con Foo says.

'I don't know what the Chinese community was like when my father was young, but I'd imagine they were as closely knit as the Timorese Chinese seem to be now' comments Tanya Fong Lim.

## Making stories

In 1991, I wrote 'The ancestral village: The Top End Chinese, ourselves and others', for the National Library of Australia's journal, *Voices*.<sup>100</sup> The issue dealt with sources of Chinese Australian history across Australia. My article was intended to highlight the written and pictorial sources on the Northern Territory Chinese, and to set some contemporary voices against the interpretations offered in them. Interview material was simultaneously used in the magazine *Migration*.<sup>101</sup> It was important to me that these pieces be accessible, that they be read by the people they are about.

After their publication, on my next visit to Darwin in late 1991, I sought follow-up interviews with most of those to whom I had spoken. They agreed to talk to me.

I asked them about my interpretation of their lives and the lives of their forebears. 'I think that all younger generation Chinese people should read the [*Voices*] article to make them proud of their ancestry' Joyce Cheong Chin told me. She also said: 'In some instances, you've probably made us a little more heroic than we are'.

This could be labelled the 'Ping Que effect'. A useful antidote to it might be Hutchings' view of tensions between the self-perceptions of the older, dominant community, and newer Chinese arrivals, from Timor or Vietnam. In their struggle to establish themselves, the older may see the newer as inclined to a 'get-rich-quick' attitude, Joyce Cheong Chin observes, while the newer regard the older's comparative loss of language as nothing less than loss of culture.<sup>102</sup>

Such differences point to the dynamism of historical relationships. I also discussed with my informants other ways of presenting their stories. Eric Rolls has published his long-awaited *Sojourners*, billed as 'the epic story of China's centuries-old relationship with Australia'. As in his earlier books, Rolls takes an expansive storyteller's approach to history. A second volume, bringing the story up to date, is due shortly.

Still more chroniclers are seeking the help of the historical actors themselves. Film Australia has made two television programs based on Rolls' research.

They give some of his interviewees—and others—the chance to speak straight to the camera. The techniques of documentary film are used; or a *Bulletin* cartoon, to epitomise the fears that led to White Australia.

The ABC is developing a six-hour miniseries, 'not a saga, but a series of slices of life', says Nicholas Jose, one of its writers. Beginning in 1910, within living memory, it will follow the fortunes of individuals from an extended family through to the present. One episode will concentrate on the relationship between an 18-year-old boy and a 90-year-old woman.

How would my informants choose to have such stories told? 'I'm not one to forget [the difficulties]' Pam Con Foo told me. She emphasises the drudgery of tending the market gardens supplying the food for the embryo settlements, 'doing the hard manual work'. 'We need to remember their hardship and we need to appreciate all that they had gone through to make it so much easier in our time...They proved their ability to withstand all the hardships that were put in front of them...They achieved their goal of wanting to stay in Australia.'

She would like the view put that, despite continuing contacts with an often unstable China, her forebears were not mere sojourners, were not the 'temporary residents' seen by Europeans well into the third generation of Chinese Australians. Rather, they wanted to stay. 'They just didn't want to give up and go back. Because going back, they really had nothing.'

Now that there is a reconstitution of traditions, in the re-learning of language, the re-enactment of burial and other religious traditions, it is clear that they merely went underground during the assimilation period. 'I think they just thrived on their own community effort...building their community' says Con Foo. 'And after that, the more adventurous ones got a little bit gamier and maybe proved their ability and were then allowed into the other part of the community.'

Between 1903 and 1956, the Commonwealth did not naturalise Chinese. No wonder Joyce Cheong Chin sees her family as developing a steely determination 'to show the white people we could be as good as they are'. Her success was made possible by the struggle of her family, by Lily Ah Toy's insistence that her daughter would be educated, and by Joyce's own determination to go away for the further education not available in Darwin in the 1950s and 1960s. She returned to become a pioneer of adult education, and is now head of the Fashion and Fashion Design Department at the Northern Territory University. Presiding over it, she demonstrates all her mother's force, eloquence and charm.

Public recognition of success, as in the Ping Que and later accounts, was important. Of her ideal story of the Northern Territory Chinese, Chin says: 'It would have to go right back to the first shipload of people who came out and why they were brought out'—in other words, some of the background of poverty, famine and chaos in China itself: the shortages of land and food, corrupt administration, high taxes and voracious money-lenders, plus continuing internecine warfare. 'It would have to show some of the conditions', she continues, 'and contrast that gradually with the current total acceptance and success of individuals...It must show the extremes'.

Chin is well aware of the traps of 'good bloke' and success story approaches. 'There are probably a lot of others who have just been quiet achievers. And I think they should be recognised.' William and Darwina Fong are perfect examples.

Of the taking over of her heritage for the blown-up images of the big screen, the dramatic effects, the addition of the colour and movement which make it suitable for prime-time TV, she is realistic. 'It has to be sold, and it has to attract and capture the imagination of the viewers' she said. 'Stories will be exaggerated...the killings, the lack of opportunities, what was taken from the people...The Chinese were given so little when they got here...lack of facilities, accommodation—and so much expected of them.'

In the wake of other popular re-interpretations of Territory life, such as the films of *We of the Never-Never* and *Crocodile Dundee*, Eddie Quong expects from the media presentations 'a certain amount of literature, a certain amount of romance'.

Con Foo feels there is the potential for 'a fantasised story: what people think should have happened or didn't happen, or they'd want to happen...I'd like to see them do it with the sufferings as well as the achievements. A true text. The real story.'

All of them recognise that a book like *Rolls*, or an hour of well-conceived television, can have more impact on audiences than the most admirable paper hidden away in a specialist journal. This is what I discovered when ABC Radio National's Social History Unit produced two programs based on my oral history recordings. Offered largely in the distinctive voices of my informants, the programs and their spin-off cassettes have attracted interest from Melbourne to Cairns.<sup>111</sup>

Simon Schama, Professor of History at Harvard, is an advocate of history capable of stirring the imagination. The ground of history is, he says, a

'debatable land', 'sometimes fiction, sometimes theory'. He deplores the kind that came into fashion at the end of last century, 'empirical, verifiable, objectively grounded': history which still so often pretends to truth, to scientific accuracy—until, that is, another historian working from exactly the same sources comes to exactly the opposite conclusions.

Schama sees history as thrilling narrative. It should not discard argument and analysis, but lend it proper dramatic and poetic power.

He would probably approve of the television ventures.

## Looking out

Multiculturalism has facilitated the move beyond assimilation to retain the cultural markers that define the Chinese as ethnically distinct. Lynn Pan, who has written so illuminatingly of the overseas Chinese,<sup>111</sup> notes that categories and tests of national identity are race, language and religion. Eddie Quong and Joyce Cheong Chin are two of those who admit to being 'caught between', to losing language at the insistence of White Australia. During her 1940s childhood, Chin remembers how, in the family store, her parents 'had to be careful, for the goodwill of the business, that they couldn't be accused of talking about customers behind their backs, or in front of them in a foreign language'.

When Chin was sent up to high school in Darwin in the 1950s, she lived with her grandmother. 'Here was I who couldn't speak very much Chinese, living with somebody who couldn't speak very much English.' Her grandmother, Moo Linoy, Mrs Wong, used to call her and her two brothers, also in Darwin for school, 'the Aboriginal Chinese grandchildren'.

Cantonese was the most commonly used Chinese language in the Territory, with Hakka, Sze Yap and Heung-san as dialect groups. Since 1980, Mandarin, the official language of the People's Republic, has been taught at Darwin High School. For the native speakers among the latest arrivals, it's being offered as a 'mother-tongue maintenance program' by the Secondary Intensive English Units at Casuarina and Dripstone High Schools.

What about religion? Cross notes that, in 1911, 'almost the entire population gave their religion as "Chinese" or Confucianism...but in 1933 only 4%'.<sup>112</sup> Inglis describes how traditional festivals such as Qingming and Winter Solstice were celebrated throughout the early years of settlement, and noted that most homes in the 1960s contained ancestral altars, or those for the

worship of favourite deities.<sup>111</sup> In 1990, as we left her travel agency after our interview, Pam Con Foo lit a stick of incense on its altar.

But in the 1940s and 1950s, Lily Ah Toy had Christian services conducted in her home, and sent her children to Sunday School, as part of the family's movement into the economic and social mainstream.

"After my mother-in-law died...my father-in-law said: "We've got all these religious ceremonies...They wouldn't know it's only just carrying on the tradition, so it doesn't really matter." He really said that to us."<sup>112</sup>

Ah Toy shows, too, that spiritual attitudes are by no means static; nor is there a unilinear movement from 'Chinese' to 'Christian'. 'Even though I go to church, and I believe in God, I have never been baptised, which means that I can still go to the temple.' Muslims, Buddhists, 'all worship God in different ways', she believes. She well understands the dangers of cultural transitions: when her little grandson asked her 'You can't see God. Who is God? Where is God?'...It became too difficult, and so he and his friends, they don't believe in anything.'

Ah Toy's brother, Bill Wong, now an elder of the temple, would accompany the family to the United Church to worship.

And then there is race. In 1988, eight Darwin professional people, Chinese Australians, went on a 10-day trip back to China. 'The main idea was to show us the country of our forebears, to show the outside world the changes taking place in the world's largest populated country as it was preparing to enter the world market' says Eddie Quong.<sup>116</sup> 'They wanted to put China on a window display and say: "This is China: be proud of it".' Liz Chin-Seet was at the time

Vice-President of the Chung Wah Society, and was asked by the Chinese Government to get together a group from Darwin. 'The criterion was that the people had to be from Guangdong Province or Canton, since it was the Guangdong Government that sponsored the trip. The people involved also had to have a science or engineering or tertiary qualification' says Chin-Seet.<sup>117</sup> Tanya Fong Lim, with her law and economics degrees, fitted the bill perfectly. There was also a dentist, a pharmacist, an

*The Darwin group which visited the People's Republic of China. From left: Eleanor Wong-Chin, Tanya Fong Lim, Daryl Chin, Liz Chin-Seet, Eddie Quong, Roland Chin, Randall Chin and Cedric Chin. Photo courtesy of Liz Chin-Seet.*





accountant and an engineer. Both Chin-Seet and her father went. 'It was an achievement for the Chinese community in Darwin to be invited by the Chinese Government to go over to their wealthiest province' she says, 'Normally, on other trips, people are picked from all around Australia.'

The group travelled south-west of Canton in country that is the ancestral home of the Chin clan, forebears of both Quong and Chin-Seet. 'Everybody, irrespective of who, when, why, has a hankering to find out where they came from. This gave me the opportunity' says Quong. 'It took me three or four weeks to understand my mother tongue. I met 30 people considered to be related to me, I was offered a house left to the last of my line in China, my grandfather. They said it was still my house: I'm the surviving clan. I called one of them, the head man, over and I said: "As far as I'm concerned, I bequeath it to all the village, and that man there will distribute it". And then I went like a Bondi tram.'

Quong was, however, more than impressed by the development he saw in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone just over the Hong Kong border. 'When I first saw Shenzhen 30 years ago, it was a dirty little fishing village. Now, they make watches, glasses, clothes, food products.' He was also impressed by China's great historical tradition: 'the age. The continuity. The massive grandness. The superb civilisation that existed years ago. It gives you a sense of smallness.'

In Liz Chin-Seet's ancestral village, the group was taken to a house that was supposed to have belonged to relatives. 'We saw this old woman come out, hunched over...I was told what she said: "You look just like your father"—which is my grandfather.' They wondered how she would know, 'and then she started rattling off all the names of my uncles', Chin-Seet, in her early 30s, a highly personable marketing manager, while impressed by the progress China had made, felt her experience there reinforced how grateful she was to be born Australian. 'I'm so glad my great-grandfather left China and came out...because obviously we have a much better standard of living.' 'Don't tell them your family's got two or three cars. Don't tell them you've got an acre of land', Quong counselled the younger members of the party. 'We didn't want them to feel inferior, or ask for material things' says Chin-Seet.

In 1985, Charles See-Kee wrote of a sense of 'rebirth' within the Darwin Chinese community,<sup>118</sup> drawing attention to the free 'Chinese language and cultural classes' attracting 'young students of both Chinese and non-Chinese background'. He sees this as a sharing of culture, which could be extended

into evening classes for 'mainstream community' adults. Bill Wong also speaks about the children of the families who have been in the Territory for three or four generations 'starting to come back' to language, to the temple.

Those like Wong, from the 'old families', remember welcoming in the new. He recalls the arrivals after the upheavals in Timor in 1975. 'They spoke a mixture of Indonesian, Portuguese and Chinese—a Hakka dialect' and 'were very fluent in Mandarin' he says. 'We tried to speak to them in English, but the children weren't yet going to school.'

After the cyclone, with the temple building damaged, 'the Chung Wah Hall was a temporary place of worship, and we asked them to meet us here to form a sort of contact'.

'Never before has there been such a big influx of newcomers, most of whom were refugees and evacuees', appeared in the Darwin Newsletter of the Chung Wah Society in October 1979. 'It certainly will call for a greater effort to try and understand the complexity of the many problems of these people who not only have been uprooted from their homes but who also have had to start their lives all over again in a completely different environment.'

*Cyclone Tracy left its mark on 114 East Point Road, Fannie Bay, the home of William and Darwina Fong. Darwina and William Fong Collection, Northern Territory Library and National Library of Australia*



Such understanding reaches back to their own parents' and grandparents' experiences.

Those who have made it still remember the drudgery of the early years and empathise with what the newcomers are going through. Says Pam Con Foo, veteran of war and cyclone: 'A lot of them have had sadder and more tragic lives than we that were born here could even contemplate, or even imagine.' 'We who have so much and still complain that we have not enough should pause and think of those in nearby East Timor, Vietnam and Kampuchea who have nothing but misery and a life of uncertainty', appeared in the editorial of the October 1979 *Newsletter*.

It provides the sobering stories of escape whose details only rarely reached the mainstream media. The story is told of '85 men and 65 women, including one pregnant mother and 19 children under five' who were at sea *en route* to Australia for 22 days. 'They were attacked and robbed by pirates and left in a sinking ship without anything to eat.' The captain of a British oil tanker answered their distress call. In an echo of the actions of earlier unions and of the Anti-Chinese League, local waterside workers declared their intention of preventing the departure of the British tanker unless the rescued 'Vietnamese' were taken away and resettled elsewhere. Granted temporary visas, the sick were taken to Darwin Hospital where they were fed with food sent in by local Chinese restaurants and cafes.

## Australians

Who are we? Who do we want to be?

When the Chinese temple was burnt during the War, only the wooden plaque bearing its name, Let Sing Gung (All the Sacred Deities) was untouched.

To Bill Wong, this symbolises the survival of community and religion. Today's temple is splendid. The images of the gods have been imported from Hong Kong. They preside over altars in an interior gorgeously hung in red and gold. Beneath the lanterns, incense sticks wrapped in prayer sheets can be bought and burnt, in memory.

Outside, tradition is further maintained. The *feng shui* of the site is identical to that of the original temple. Two large granite lions, transported from the vanished temple at Brocks Creek, stand guard on either side of the door. Inside is a golden dragon brought from Hong Kong for this newest temple, opened in September 1978.



Bill Wong in front of the Darwin Chinese Temple, with a granite lion, half of a pair from the vanished temple at Brocks Creek. (Photo courtesy of Bill Wong)

It stands for other vanished temples, for the one replaced in 1887 by the Church of England, for the bush timber and galvanised iron ones damaged in the cyclones of 1897 and 1937. It is a reminder of the flames which destroyed the wartime temple.

In 1974, after the devastation of Cyclone Tracy, 'when I first crawled out of the wreckage, my first thoughts were for my photographs and historical stuff' says Ernie Chin. His second thoughts were for survival: 'I had a generator by 10 o'clock the next morning'. His third surprised him. His car was undamaged so he was able to pick up his brother and drive to a friend's place to see if he, too, was all right. As they crawled through the devastated city, he noticed that 'the temple was all smashed, but all the idols were sitting perfectly safe, almost undamaged. I'm not a religious man; I don't know anything about the Chinese religion.' But he stopped and, with his brother and his children, carried the gods back under the verandah, and covered them over. 'I said: "I've got to do it." I felt I had to say "thank you" to somebody.'

Recession and rapid change are forcing questions of identity, including spiritual identity, on to even the most somnolent of Australians. There's something of a crisis of national consciousness.

The reworking of the stories of Chinese Australians is part of a redefinition of what it is to be Australian. The way the communities interact, and their past relations, is the big, continuing story of our history. The Roman poet Horace observed that people without history are like infants, knowing neither from where they have come, or where they will go. With the push into Asia, we're asking: Who are 'we'? Who are 'they'? Who were they and what are they becoming? If Asia is the area increasingly acknowledged as 'where our future lies', there are those who don't necessarily welcome this: those who feel threatened by what Alison Broinowski, in her book, *The Yellow Lady* (1992) calls 'the tyranny of proximity'.

In chronicling the first and second generations of Chinese Australians, local and community history opens up areas that have been of little interest to the great national histories. It gives faces and voices, significance and validity to those long, silent years when the Chinese, admitted so grudgingly, given so

little, exploited as cheap labour, denied by increasingly racist laws the means of earning a living, nevertheless wanted to adopt this country. Through the recollections of Essie Yuen, it shows what life was like in now-abandoned mining settlements. Through the memories of Lily Ah Toy, it can describe the marriage rituals of village China re-enacted in the desolate north. Such history can show how small towns evolved into cities; it can recapture the texture of working lives in superseded factories; it can describe how the vilified and despised became respected citizens.

How do my informants tell it? The Reverend Shui Kwong Lo, returning to live in Darwin in his retirement, admits how lonely he feels now that 'the little Chinatown and most of my old friends are gone'. He is comforted, however, 'when I reach the gate of the Chung Wah Society, and enter the door of its temple', reminded that 'our contemporaries are there. We can talk, walk and work together, just the same as yesterday.'<sup>119</sup>

Many, like Charles See-Ke, regard the return to Darwin after wartime evacuation as the crucial period in the assertion of Chinese community, and the beginning of the real move into wider society. He says: 'Then we all became Territorians'.

Through the Chung Wah Society, 'a general meeting of the Chinese community was convened; as a result, it was unanimously agreed to disband all the old organisations and to form a parent body to look after all members of the Chinese community, irrespective of clan or dialect'.<sup>120</sup>

Pam Con Foo has a shrine not only in her travel agency, but in her Darwin home. There is another for her ancestors in her ancestral village. Yet she says: 'Let's face it: we're lucky'. On her next visit back to China, she plans to take a tape recorder. What will she record? There is her grandfather's adopted son 'who went blind through starvation'. There is the big ancestral home that was pulled down in 1959, 'when things were really hard', and replaced by the six tiny houses. 'I don't like going round asking questions...We just listen to what people tell us.'

'Every time I go back to the village, I say: "Thank you, grandfather. I'm your greatest fan." I love my grandfather for giving us this easy life we've got. If we were born in China!'

'You build for the future, but still remember the past' says Bill Wong. 'When I first went back to the New Territories in 1958, then again in 1971 and 1972, they reminded me of my early days in Darwin.' He was very nearly not born

Chinese Australian, but Chinese. His father was to take his mother back to her village for his birth. 'Probably be a real country bumpkin then!'

Talking to Wong, you are made constantly aware of the fragility of material success. 'Don't take anything for granted' he tells his children. Five of the seven are educated professionals. He takes care to remind them of their opportunities: 'not like their parents or grandparents. They look forward to a soft cushy job.' But he is insistent that they remember harder times. 'Don't think of luxury. Don't forget to work for what you want.' And he adds the homily of a man who has worked himself up from bare survival: 'In my day, you were lucky to get one egg in a month. You had to sell the eggs.'

The Chung Wah Society is today housed in a large hall used for functions and classes. By contrast with the neighbouring temple, it is a modest fibro and louvre building, incorporating a tiny meeting room and a small office for the welfare officer who deals with immigration problems. The walls are hung with photographs, from sepia groups, stiffly posed, through solemn sporting teams of the 1920s, 1950s and 1960s, to colour posters of dressed-up, smiling girls, ready for a traditional dance.

'A complete history of the Darwin Chinese has yet to be written' writes Hannan.<sup>721</sup> Perhaps only something more provisional is possible, either from 'us' or 'them' or the new 'we'. We are all involved from birth to death in a kind of tension between home and homelessness, movement and rest, rootedness and disconnectedness.<sup>623</sup> The aim of defining identity is to bring the self, the place and the others into some sort of dynamic and creative relationship, to feel oneself into the physical place, into the landscape with the 'others' in it. All the many contributions to our history, from the school project to the most sweeping historical overview, are episodes in the great collaborative adventure in which we seek to discover who we are, and are becoming.

## Notes

1. Ernestine Hill, *The Territory*, Sydney: Walkabout Pocketbooks, 1970, 1951, p. 209
2. Timothy G. Jones, *The Chinese in the Northern Territory*, Darwin: Northern Territory University Press, 1990. Quoted from the *Northern Standard* (no date given, but the context is the 1930s)
3. Knut Dahl, *In Savage Australia: An Account of a Hunting and Collecting Expedition to Arnhem Land and Dampier Land*, London: Philip Allan and Co, 1926, pp. 6–7
4. Australian Archives: Department of External Affairs; CRSA3, NT14/4383, Correspondence Files, NT Series, 'Removal of insanitary Chinese tenements—Darwin, 1913–1914'
5. Called Palmerston until 1911, when the Commonwealth took over the government of the Northern Territory from South Australia
6. Eddie Quong, interview with Diana Giese, recorded 2 January 1991, in Darwin
7. Charles See-Kee, *The Chinese Contribution to Early Darwin*, Northern Territory Library Service Occasional Papers, no. 3, Darwin: NT Library Service, 1987
8. 'Kwong Sue Duk (1853–1929), herbalist, scholar and merchant came to Darwin in the 1880s and went on to Melbourne, from where he travelled the country treating people. He was well known among Chinese and Australians in Queensland and Victoria. His many descendants are now scattered throughout Australia and New Zealand, Southeast Asia, Canada and the United States, Britain and France.' (From Australia–China Friendship Society, *Harvest of Endurance: A History of the Chinese in Australia 1788–1988*, 1988)
9. Northern Territory Archives: Shui Kwong Lo; LO NTRS1079/48/3/3, p. 20
10. Eddie Quong, interview with Diana Giese
11. J. Cross, 1956, A survey of Darwin's social history 1868–1956, with particular emphasis on the growth of a provincial society, BA Honours thesis, University of Adelaide, p. 69
12. Albert Chan, interviewed 4 September 1984, NTRS226, TS376
13. Charlie and Myrtle Houng On, n.d., NTRS226, TS246

14. Information, here and following, from interviews with Lily Ah Toy done by S. Saunders, for the Northern Territory Archives, 10 April 1981, NTRS226, TS1/2, and Ann McGrath, NTRS226, TS1
15. Bill Wong, interview with Diana Giese, 3 January 1991
16. Dahl, *In Savage Australia*
17. Jones, *The Chinese in the Northern Territory*, pp. 39, 57. At Mt Wells, for example, he employed 90 Chinese workers
18. For instance, see M.J. Holmes, China Town, Darwin, PH203/1-PH203/14, Northern Australia Collection, Northern Territory Library
19. Mervyn J. Holmes, *Report of the Medical Officer of Health for the Year Ending 31 December 1912*. Northern Territory Bulletin no. 6, Melbourne: Dept of External Affairs, 1913
20. For instance, Australian Archives: CRSA3, Item 4383, photos 5 and 6
21. South Australian Public Library, Accession no. T1741, SC401
22. South Australian Public Library, Accession no. T1744, SC404
23. Australian Archives: ACT Regional Office, Department of External Affairs, CRSA3, Items 4383, Worksheets attached to pictures
24. Plate 12, p. 56
25. A.F. Hanman, 1985, All out! The effects of evacuation and land acquisition on the Darwin Chinese 1941–1954, BA Honours thesis, Monash University, p. 36
26. See Eric Rolls, *Sojourners: The Epic Story of China's Centuries Old Relationship with Australia: Flowers and the Wide Sea*, St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1992, *passim*
27. Cross, pp. 63–4
28. Government Resident Price, quoted in Jones, p. 41
29. A temple had been constructed at Pine Creek in 1882 and at Brocks Creek in 1884; see Shui Kwong Lo, LC NTRS1079/48/3/3, p. 36



30. See-Kee, *Chinese Contribution...*, p. 11
31. Jones, p. 123
32. J.P.M. Long, *Asian Immigration into the Northern Territory to 1910*, Darwin: Historical Society of the Northern Territory, n.d.
33. E.M. Andrews, *Australia and China: The Ambiguous Relationship*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1985, p. 15
34. Jones, p. 62
35. C.B. Inglis, 1967, *The Darwin Chinese: A study of assimilation*, MA thesis, Australian National University, p. 31
36. Inglis, p. 23
37. See-Kee, *Chinese Contribution...*, p. 10. The Dictation Test wasn't abolished until 1958
38. See discussion in S.J. Hutchings, 1983, *The Darwin Chinese 1874–1983: Transformations in ethnic identity and its situation*, BA Honours thesis, University of Adelaide
39. Cross, p. 64
40. Quoted in Rolls, pp. 259, 297
41. South Australia. Parliament. *Debates*, 10 October 1888, p. 1308
42. South Australia. Parliament. *Debates*, 3 July 1888. Second reading speech by the Premier, Mr Playford
43. South Australia. Parliament. *Debates*, 10 October 1888, p. 1306. Letter quoted by H. Scott, re Chinese Immigration Restriction Bill
44. Cited in M.P. Rendell, 1982, *The Chinese in South Australia and the Northern Territory in the nineteenth century*, MA thesis, University of Adelaide, p. 163
45. Australia. Parliament. *Debates*, 1901, p. 5239
46. Quoted in Jones, p. 92
47. Cross, pp. 65–6

48. *Report of the Administrator of the Northern Territory, 1913*. A. Searcy, In *Australian Tropics*, London: Kegan, Trench & Trubner, 1907, pp. 331–2, reports similar destruction in the 1880s
49. Cross, p. 66
50. Hannan, p. 73
51. Hannan, p. 44
52. Hutchings, p. 57
53. Dr John Cockburn, Minister for Education, quoted in Charles See-Kee, 'The ethnic Chinese—an integral part of Darwin', *Living North*, 9 June 1985
54. Jimmy Ah Toy, transcript of undated talk to the Historical Society of the Northern Territory
55. Pam Con Foo, interview with Diana Giese, December 1991; subsequent quotes are from this interview or the one conducted in 1990
56. For Charles Chong-Fong, Year 12 English Major Project, September 1989, and Kathleen Chong-Fong, Major Research Essay in Australian History, October 1991; all subsequent quotes are from my interviews with the Chong-Fongs, December 1991, or from these projects
57. Hannan, p. 5
58. Lily Ah Toy, interview with S. Saunders, NTRS226, TS1/2
59. Northern Territory Archives: Essie Yuen, interview with Wendy James, Tape 670, 1983
60. Barbara James, *No Man's Land: Women of the Northern Territory*, Sydney: Collins Australia, 1989, p. 8
61. See-Kee, *Chinese Contribution...*, p. 7
62. For example, Alan Powell, *Far Country: A Short History of the Northern Territory*, Clayton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1982
63. In the early years of this century, Harry Chin's father, Chan Fon Yuen, did the accounts and paperwork for a grateful Chin family; see Hannan, p. 62

64. Northern Territory Archives: Shui Kwong Lo; LO NTRS1079/48/3/3. The following quoted material relating to Shui Kwong Lo is all contained in this archival file
65. Rolls, p. 276. Of the 186 original arrivals, 27 were dead or missing after one year
66. Charles See-Kee, interviews with Diana Giese, December 1991, 1992. All subsequent unacknowledged quotes are from these interviews
67. An attitude which had earlier produced the brothers George Lim, Charlie On, Harry Loong and Ernest Fong; see See-Kee, *Chinese Contribution...*, p. 9
68. *Living North*, 9 June 1985
69. See-Kee, *Chinese Contribution...*, pp. 9–10
70. *Ibid.*, p. 6
71. Quotes from interview between William Fong and Diana Giese, 4 January 1993, NLA TRC2904
72. Quotes from interview between Darwina Fong and Diana Giese, 28 December 1992, NLA TRC2903
73. Quotes from interviews between Diana Giese and Pam Con Foo, December 1990, 1991
74. Harry Chan, quoted in See-Kee, *Chinese Contribution...*, p. 5
75. Hannan, p. 73
76. *Northern Territory Library Service Occasional Papers* no. 19, Darwin: State Reference Library of the Northern Territory, 1990
77. Alec Fong Lim, quoted in Jones, p. 106
78. Jones, p. 108
79. Lily Ah Toy, NTRS226; TS1/2
80. Northern Territory Archives: Shui Kwong Lo; LO NTRS1079/48/3/3, p. 12
81. *Ibid.*

82. Interview in Darwin, 19 December 1990 between Diana Giese and Tanya Fong Lim
83. In interviews with Diana Giese, December 1990, 1991; also National Library of Australia interviews, 7 and 23 December 1993
84. See *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography*, Casuarina: Northern Territory University Press, 1990
85. Interview with Diana Giese, December 1990
86. Hannan, p. 74
87. Interview with Diana Giese, December 1990
88. Interview with Eddie Quong for the National Library, 7 December 1993
89. Hannan, pp. 43–4
90. Australian Archives: Northern Territory Regional Office, AAD Series, 46/159/1, Abbott to Carrodus, 15/12/43, p. 2, quoted in Hannan, p. 42
91. Australian Archives: Northern Territory Regional Office, AADF1 Series, 46/159/1, Carrodus to Abbott, 18/7/46, quoted in Hannan, p. 47
92. Interview with Diana Giese, 4 January 1993, NLA TRC2904
93. Northern Territory Archives: Shui Kwong Lo; LO NTRS1079/48/3/3
94. Cross, p. 131
95. William Fong speaks of building the house in which his family still lives, in an interview with Diana Giese, December 1991
96. Interview with Diana Giese for the National Library, 14 December 1993
97. Inglis, p. 19
98. C.B. Inglis in a paper summarising her thesis, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1968
99. Cross, p. 71
100. Bill Wong tells the story (December 1990 to Diana Giese) of Harry Chan being informed he was not welcome on a tennis court

101. Cross, p. 135
102. Hannan, pp. 50–6; also for information in next paragraph
103. W.J. Sowden, *The Northern Territory As It Is*, Adelaide: W.K. Thomas, 1882, quoted by Jones, p. 34
104. Quoted in Jones, p. 10
105. Jones, p. 37, quoting the *Northern Territory Times* correspondent in the goldfields
106. As in Hutchings' thesis
107. See also Diana Giese, *All the Flavour of the Time Returns*, Darwin: Northern Territory Library Service Occasional Paper no. 45, Darwin: Northern Territory Library Service, 1994
108. *Voices*, Spring 1991, Canberra: National Library of Australia. See also my interviews in *Migration*, Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs, March/April 1991 onwards. All subsequent unacknowledged quotes are from my interviews with the people concerned, December 1991, or from the first interviews with them, December–January 1990
109. Beginning in the March/April 1991 issue
110. Hutchings, pp. 63–83
111. Cassettes are available from ABC Radio Tapes, GPO Box 9994, Sydney 2001
112. In *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1990
113. Cross, p. 71
114. Inglis, p. 40
115. Northern Territory Archives: NTRS226, TS1/2
116. Interviews with Diana Giese, 7 and 23 December 1993
117. Interview with Diana Giese for the National Library, 9 December 1993
118. See-Kee, 'The ethnic Chinese...', p. 63

119. Northern Territory Archives: Shui Kwong Lo; LO NTRS1079/48/3/3; p. 36
120. See-Kee, *Chinese Contribution...*, p. 12
121. Hannan, p. 5
122. Professor Edward Baugh, at the conference 'A Change of Skies: The Literature of Migration', Post-Colonial Literatures and Language Research Centre, Macquarie University, 21–22 October 1989



How are the stories of history told, and by whom?

From the beginning of immigration to Australia's 'Top End', the Chinese have been involved in every industry and service.

*Beyond Chinatown* is based partly on European documents, official reports, newspaper articles, Administrators' letters and contemporary theses. But its major storytellers are the Chinese Australians themselves who, through oral history, family stories, photographs and their own accounts, place themselves in the mainstream of Australian history.

In this fascinating overview, Diana Giese shows how Chinatown in today's Darwin exists not as a physical entity but as a transmuted state of mind, based on pride in identity.

*Diana Giese is a Sydney-based writer and oral history interviewer who recorded many of the accounts and stories presented in this book for the National Library of Australia. She was awarded a 1992 Northern History Grant to document this work.*



ISBN 0-472-10633-9



9 780642 106339