The Emergence of Chinese Businesswomen in Darwin, 1910–1940

Natalie Fong

In a portrait taken in 1917, Selina Lee, the sixteen-year-old granddaughter of Northern Territory midwife Sarah Bowman and her merchant husband, Lee Hatg Gong, poses somewhat awkwardly in traditional Chinese tunic and trousers, hair pulled back neatly (Figure 4.1, see p. 78). A portrait of Selina in a similar pose taken in the 1920s shows a more mature, pensive woman wearing a Western-style ankle-length dress (Figure 4.2). A decade later still, Selina has blossomed into Mrs Selina Hassan, who—wearing fashionable 'bopper' dresses, modern cheongsam and a permed bob—was now a widow, businesswoman, and secretary of the Darwin Kuomintang (KMT), supporters of the Chinese Republic and women's rights (Figure 4.3). The short hair (and unbound feet) of Chinese women of this time was, as historian Antonia Finnane has remarked, a visible 'symbol of liberation from the past and the patriarchy'.

In 1930 Selina was pictured alongside fellow KMT members congratulating English avatrix Amy Johnson on her extraordinary solo flight from London to Darwin (Figure 4.4). Two years later, in a photograph taken at a KMT banquet to commemorate the Darwin visit of the Chinese Consul General to Australia, Dr W.P. (Weiping) Chen, Selina is seated beside Dr Chen. She was given the distinction of delivering an address at the banquet in which she praised Chen and the KMT for promoting 'equality of opportunity' for Chinese women.

The evolution of Selina Hassan between the 1910s and 1930s was emblematic of the modernization of Chinese women, particularly those in merchant families in early twentieth-century China and diasporic communities like Australia. Despite cultural expectations of being neither seen nor heard, some women became public figures, and some became businesswomen. Selina Hassan is among several remarkable Chinese businesswomen in the Northern Territory (hereafter 'the Territory') whose lives form the subject of this chapter.

Alanna Kemp, Kate Bagnall and Jan Ryan have all called for further examination of Chinese women's involvement in businesses in Australian history. This call is supported by historical statistics, earlier histories of Chinese Australian women, and the findings of this study, which demonstrate that Chinese Australian women were more actively involved in business than current scholarship suggests. Historian Catherine Bishop has written extensively about businesswomen in colonial Sydney, New South Wales, concluding that they were predominantly white. In considering Chinese businesses, Bishop noted that Chinese men 'were rarely accompanied by wives and families, and that non-European businesswomen are difficult to locate in records'. In the early to mid-1900s, however, we see the emergence of Chinese businesswomen in Australia, particularly in the Territory.

There were few Chinese women in Australia during the colonial period, and thus few Chinese businesswomen. Many of the Chinese women who were in Australia had entered as wives, daughters, and servants of merchants, or were Australian-born daughters raised in merchant households. By the 1933 Commonwealth census, there were 3,137 Chinese or part-Chinese women in Australia. Their status as dependent females was not reflected in the census data. Of the 543 Chinese or part-Chinese women in Australia in employment (about 17 percent of Chinese or part-Chinese women in Australia), thirty-six stated they were employers. Elsewhere in the census, 773 Chinese women (or 24 percent of Chinese or part-Chinese women in Australia) were married women, 61 percent of whom were either a wife, a widow, or the mother of children. In the 1939 Census, 313 Chinese or part-Chinese women (or 27 percent of Chinese or part-Chinese women in Australia) were employed in business, while 25 percent of Chinese or part-Chinese women in Australia were in domestic service.


Figures 4.1-4.4: The evolution of Selina Hassan (née Lee), 1917-1935.

4.1: Selina Lee, 1917.

4.2: Selina Lee, c. 1920s.

4.3: (left to right) Selina Hassan (née Lee), Ethel (Goot Ying) Cheong (née Lee, front), Ruby Hassan, Myrtle Huang On Yee (née Fung), unidentified, Pauline Chin (front), Mabel Ma (née Lee), c. 1935.

4.4: (left to right) Dolly Yuen, Selina Hassan (née Lee), Amy Johnson, Gee Ming Ket, Arthur Lee, 1930.

Australia) were identified as breadwinners. I would argue that Australian Chinese businesswomen are present in the archives and need unearthing. Alanna Kamp, Sophie Couchman, and Patricia Sumerling have identified Chinese Australian businesswomen in Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide, respectively, using sources such as newspapers, oral histories, immigration documents, and land ownerships. As Kamp has noted, Chinese Australian wives were more than just 'crucial contributors' to family businesses; they may have been critical to businesses' survival, particularly after their husbands' deaths.

Previous histories have drawn attention to 'noteworthy' Chinese women in the Territory as part of wider surveys on women (by Diana Giese and Barbara James) and Chinese (by Morag Loh, Glenice Yee, Regina Ganter, and Timothy Jones); Julia Martinez and Sophie Couchman have also discussed the politicizing of Territory Chinese women through the KMT. The significant role of Chinese women in busi-

16. Regina Ganter, Mixed Relations: Asian-Aboriginal Contact in North Australia (Crawley: University of Western
ness in the Territory has, until now, remained unexplored. As this chapter demonstrates, closer examination of archival material reveals the considerable involvement of Territory Chinese women in business, a traditionally patriarchal domain.

Various factors contributed to Chinese women's involvement in business in the Territory: Chinese merchants' wives and daughters were expected to assist in family businesses in domestic or manual roles. European businesswomen were active in the Territory when Chinese women arrived in the late nineteenth century, thus women running businesses was not an uncommon sight. In many cases the deaths of husbands and economic depression left wives with little choice but to work to support their families. Some Chinese merchants' widows were left with multiple children, including sons too young to manage family businesses, so widows became custodians of businesses or started businesses. In China, Sun Yat-sen, the KMT, and feminist movements promoted progressive attitudes towards women from the 1910s onwards. The involvement of young Darwin Chinese in the KMT may have encouraged couples to form business partnerships and women to register and run businesses in their own names. Some women ran businesses named after themselves.

When Australia is considered alongside China, America, Canada, New Zealand, and the Philippines, it is apparent that there were common socio-economic, cultural, and political factors that facilitated Chinese women's independence and involvement in business. Through collective biography, using individual lives to explore 'collective experiences' in a community, this chapter builds on existing studies by demonstrating the considerable documented participation of Chinese women in business in the Territory, and the influence of circumstantial and contextual factors. As Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers comment:

The once ubiquitous stereotype of the long-suffering, meek, submissive Chinese woman as simply a victim of family interests, a vision of compliance and self-sacrifice, stands thus revealed for what it is—a stereotype in need of reappraisal and an empirical context.

Chinese Women in the Northern Territory: On Record

The first major arrival of Chinese immigrants in the Territory occurred in 1874, two years after the first significant gold discovery at Pine Creek in 1872. The challenging climate and demand for cheap labour prompted South Australian authorities, who administered the Territory from 1863 until 1911, to contract 187 Chinese miners from Singapore in 1874. As news spread, more Chinese arrived via the credit-ticket system facilitated by Chinese merchants. The majority came from Guangdong, albeit from different dialect groups—See Yup (the majority), Heungshan, and Hakka. By 1881 the ratio of Chinese to Europeans in the Territory was reportedly six to one.

Census data suggests that from the late 1880s to the mid 1900s the number of Chinese females in the Territory remained small, but the proportion of Chinese females to males increased over time. Table 4.1 (see p. 82) contains official figures for the Chinese population of the Northern Territory from 1881 to 1947. According to these figures, the population of Chinese females (classified by race not birthplace) grew significantly in the decades between 1881 and 1901 and between 1921 and 1933, then declined between 1933 and 1947. The population of Chinese males halved each decade between 1901 and 1947, contributing to the growing proportion of Chinese females to Chinese males. By 1947 the Chinese population in the Territory was about 60 percent male and 40 percent female—this proportion of Chinese females was higher than that in other Australian states.

Legislative and economic factors contributed to the fluctuating numbers of Chinese in the Territory and the increasing proportion of Chinese females to males.
Table 4.1: Chinese in the Northern Territory, 1881–1941

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total NT Population</th>
<th>Total No. Chinese (Full and Part)</th>
<th>Chinese Males and Percentage of Total Chinese Population</th>
<th>Chinese Females and Percentage of Total Chinese Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Full-Blood&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Half-Caste&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Full-Blood&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>4 521a</td>
<td>3 804a</td>
<td>3 800</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(99.9%)</td>
<td>(0.1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>4 898</td>
<td>3 704</td>
<td>3 598</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(97.1%)</td>
<td>(1.2%)</td>
<td>(0.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>4 811</td>
<td>3 120</td>
<td>2 962</td>
<td>24b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(94.9%)</td>
<td>(0.8%)</td>
<td>(3.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>3 310</td>
<td>1 339</td>
<td>1 224</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(91.4%)</td>
<td>(0.3%)</td>
<td>(8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>3 867</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(83.4%)</td>
<td>(0.7%)</td>
<td>(15.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>4 850</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(65.2%)</td>
<td>(2.7%)</td>
<td>(31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>10 868</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(48.4%)</td>
<td>(11.9%)</td>
<td>(30.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: a = Includes 1,070 Chinese, in transit, on board vessels at Port Darwin; b = Not available

Source: Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, Census (1933, 1947); Official Year Book (1925, 1973); Australian Data Archive, South Australia 1881 Census

South Australian and later Commonwealth legislation that regulated Chinese immigration did not specifically forbid the entry of Chinese women to the Territory. These laws also made exceptions for those who were economically desirable to authorities, particularly merchants, who facilitated trade between Asia and Australia, and their households. The earliest documented Chinese woman in the Territory that I have located is my great-grandmother Lie See (1874–1962). According to her World War II alien registration record, Lie See arrived in Australia in 1879 at age five, and

she is believed to have come to Australia as a mui tsi (หมู่เมีย; M: mèizì). Mui tsi were 'little sisters' bought from poor families to serve as maids who, in the best of circumstances, were considered 'adopted daughters'; their masters usually arranged marriages for them when they were old enough. If these accounts and the census data are accurate, Lie See was one of the four Chinese females in the Territory in 1881. Historian Claire Lowrie notes that of the few early Chinese women in the Territory, some may have been mui tsi for merchants' families. Thus, in a sense, some of the earliest Chinese women in the Territory were employees.

The first law restricting the immigration of Chinese into the Territory was the South Australian Chinese Immigration Restriction Act 1888, which limited the number of Chinese passengers arriving by ship to one per 500 tonnes of shipping. While provision was made for resident Chinese to apply for exemption certificates, the South Australian parliament reserved the right to declare at any time which people or classes were exempted. Exemption categories were defined clearly in the later Coloured Immigration Restriction Act 1896 as including merchants, their families, and domestic servants. After Federation the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 introduced the notorious Dictation Test, with exemptions granted in the form of a Certificate of Domicile, a Certificate Exempting from the Dictation Test (CEDT), or a Certificate of Exemption. Exemptions again favoured merchants and their households, being primarily granted to those already 'domiciled' in Australia—for example, those who were Australian-born, owned land and property in Australia, had a permanent business address in Australia, or a wife and children resident there. The authorities' privileging of merchants and their households meant that the early Chinese women in the Territory, as in many overseas communities, were typically merchants' wives, daughters, or servants. Legislation regarding immigration and other matters such as employment disadvantaged labourers, who made up the bulk of the Chinese population, and many left the Territory (some were even repatriated to China). This contributed to the declining population of Chinese males from 1891 onwards, and the increasing percentage of Chinese females.

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24. Lie, See [Alien Registration File] (Department of Immigration, Northern Territory Branch, 1942–1953); NAA: E90, Q2787.

25. Barbara Fong, "The Life and Times of Mary Sue Yook Fong see Law" (unpublished manuscript in possession of the author, 2007).


29. Immigration Restriction Act 1901 (CBA).


32. For a fuller discussion of how legislation affected the Chinese in the Northern Territory, see Natalie Fong, "Kuo Petitioners Will Ever Pray": Chinese Merchants and Organised Protest in the Northern Territory, 1880–1920, Limina 22, no. 2 (2017), pp. 31–47.
Documenting Chinese Women in Business

Sources relating to Chinese women in the Territory demonstrate the significant involvement of at least several Chinese women in business. Chinese businesswomen feature in newspapers, land and business records, immigration documents, oral histories, wills, and photographs, and many of the richest sources are the result of events in the Territory during and after World War II. In 1942 and 1943 Darwin was bombed by Japanese forces, most brutally on February 19, 1942. Anticipating an attack, the government had evacuated women and children from Darwin from December 1941 to February 1942, which may explain the corresponding decline in the number of Chinese females. Businesses in the once-thriving Chinatown in central Darwin were badly damaged by bombs, looting, and fire.\(^{37}\) The federal government made rebuilding Darwin a major focus, acquiring all freehold land. Landholders could apply for compensation based on 1946 valuations, and buildings and improvements that existed before the bombings. Historian Michael Christie notes that of 491 town blocks acquired 106 were owned by Chinese.\(^{38}\) Federal authorities used acquisition to minimize Chinese economic domination, with Territory Administrator Aubrey Abbott praising it as a means to 'entirely prevent the Chinese quarter from forming again.'\(^{39}\) With authorities reclaiming prime commercial land and offering low amounts of compensation, many Chinese businesses closed or moved. Of twenty-five compensation claims made by Chinese that I have examined, fourteen involved women applicants, eight regarding businesses.\(^{40}\) Applicants contested the low compensation, involving much correspondence and taking years to reach unsatisfactory resolutions, but also leaving behind valuable sources regarding Chinese women and their business activities.

Separate Spheres

One way in which early Chinese women in the Territory were involved in business was behind the scenes of family firms. Chinese businesses began to be established in the 1880s in Palmerston (as Darwin was called until 1911) and elsewhere in the Territory. Typically, these businesses were headed by patriarchs, with male relatives as managers and shop staff—the public faces of businesses. By 1888 the overall Territory business landscape was dominated by Chinese merchants, and immigration concessions, technology (steamships, telegraphs), and transnational, transnational, familial business networks allowed them to create 'Chinatown' in Cavenagh Street in central Palmerston. In 1888 Territory Police Inspector Paul Foelsche compiled a report on the Territory, an excerpt of which was published in the South Australian Register.

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38. In Mittura, merchants’ wives were said to be ‘hidden behind the windows of half-closed carriages’ (Chau, Chinese and Chinese Austrians, p. 201). In America, mission workers described merchant ‘wives as ‘housed in by cultural prescriptions and by their own bound feet..., “very few of them are allowed to go on the streets” (Ling, Surviving on the Gold Mountains, p. 41).
40. Ling, Surviving on the Gold Mountains, p. 100.
Table 4.2: Darwin Chinese merchant patriarchs, spouses, and firms, 1880s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Merchant Patriarch and Date of Arrival</th>
<th>Territory-Based Spouse, Rank Number and Date of Arrival (If Known)</th>
<th>Name of Firm and Main Business, Date Established</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chin Mee Leung (陳美良 M: chén měi lǐáng), 1882</td>
<td>Lum See, Wong See, 1893</td>
<td>Wing Cheong Sing (楊昌盛 M: yán chāng shèng), tailors and drapers, 1883</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Chin) Ah Cheong (陳振榮 M: chén zhèn róng), 1882</td>
<td>Wong See, 1887</td>
<td>Sun Hing Kee (孫記記 M: xūn jì ji), merchants, grocers, c. 1885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chin Yan Yan (陳炎賢 M: chén yán xián), c. 1879</td>
<td>Ah Ngoi</td>
<td>C. Yan Yan and Company, merchants and importers, 1892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chin Toy (陳春生 M: chén chūn shēng), 1883</td>
<td>Lieu/Lew See</td>
<td>Fang Cheong Loong (楊昌隆 M: yáng chāng lóng), tailors, drapers, goods, 1886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fong How (豐裕榮 M: huáng yù róng), 1882</td>
<td>Young See (楊氏 M: yáng shǐ) (2nd wife), 1895</td>
<td>Wing Wah Loong (永和隆 M: yǒng hé lóng), storekeepers, importers, 1882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee Chow (李兆 M: lǐ zhào), c. 1879</td>
<td>Violet Fung (范氏 C: fǎng shì) (2nd wife), 1902</td>
<td>Mao Fong Lau (毛方樓 M: máo fāng lóu), grocers, storekeepers, importers 1886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee Lim (李霖 M: lǐ lín), 1884</td>
<td>Moo Sue Quen (毛素群 M: wù suí qún), Australian-born</td>
<td>Wing Sang Tong (永生堂 M: yǒng shēng táng), importers, storekeepers, c. 1891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuen Yet Hing (袁業興 M: yuăn yè xīng), c. 1877-78</td>
<td>Low See (3rd wife, replacement for 1st wife)</td>
<td>Yet Loong (梁錦 M: liáng jǐn), storekeepers, c. 1888</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from Glenice Yee, Through Chinese Eyes: The Chinese Experience in the Northern Territory, 1874-2004 (Parap, Northern Territory: Glenice Yee, 2006); Sub-Collector of Customs, Darwin, National Archives of Australia: E752; Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography, revised edition (Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2008); Shui Kwan Lo, From My Darwin Notebook and Chinese Temple or Inn House (Darwin: Northern Territory Archives Service Oral History Unit, 1989); 'Folder Containing (1) Index to Immigration Files (2) Miscellaneous Unregistered Correspondence' (Sub-Collector of Customs, Darwin, 1938), NAA: E758, INDEX ETC.

Hakka) and thus more limited in the work they could do. In the Territory, Low See (1880–1950), third wife of merchant Yuen Yet Hing, had bound feet. According to her youngest daughter Lilian Chan (née Yuen, 1916–2006), who was born in Darwin, 'she couldn't do anything' except embroidery, so Yuen Yet Hing brought two mui tsi from China to do the housework. Young See (1879–1929), also my great-grandmother and wife of Fong How, arrived in Palmerston in 1895 with two mui tsi—Leung Tem Choy (1891–1938) and Lee Toy Kim (later known as 'Granny Lum Loy'), 1891–1980. This suggests Young See also had bound feet. Despite bound feet, Young See travelled overseas three times between 1903 and 1920, for periods of one to three years, and both Low See and Young See became actively involved in businesses after the deaths of their husbands, as will be seen later in this chapter. And, although they began as mui tsi, Leung Tem Choy and Lee Toy Kim went on to run businesses and become matriarchs of well-known families.

Chinese traditions did not prevent women from gaining agency.

Similar patriarchal limitations that kept Territory Chinese daughters at home suggest the guarding of sexual purity. Lilian Chan reminisced that even until the 1920s and 1930s girls 'were not allowed to go out anywhere', they stayed inside and did needlework, with exceptions being Chinese New Year or if they were accompanied by their brothers. Nellie Fong (1916–1998) was the Darwin-born second daughter of Wong Quee and Chan Fon Yuen, a partner in Fong Cheong Loong. Her young brother married Lilian Yuen and was elected Mayor of Darwin in 1966. As a young girl, Nellie delivered orders for Fong Cheong Loong and ran errands, but always accompanied by a male Aboriginal servant, Dilly. When Nellie turned thirteen, her mother told her to stay at home and work in the shop, 'because anything could happen to a girl'. Nellie was still expected to contribute to Fong Cheong Loong by cleaning the shop and serving tea to the men, while her mother and aunts cooked for the men. The men ate in the shop, but the women had their meals separately.

42. Ling, Surviving on the Gold Mountain, pp. 18-19.
47. After Lee Toy Kim's husband died, she leased four hectares of land in Darwin in 1930, establishing a mango plantation and exporting produce to Western Australia (Agnes F. Hanson, Lee Toy Kim [Mrs Lum Loy] in Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography, revised edition [Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2008], p. 338). When Leung Tem Choy's husband contracted tuberculosis in the mid-1920s, she ran the family's store in Pine Creek and learned to bake bread and brew hop beer to sell. This business was continued by son Jimmy Ah Toy and his wife, Lily, and their descendants until 2015 (Ellen Cronand, interview by Margaret Gillespie, 1996, NTAS Oral History Unit: NTAS 220/2000(33), 75, 493).
48. Lilian Chan, interview by Diana Giese, pp. 8, 12.
50. N. Fong, interview, p. 4.
51. N. Fong, interview, p. 14.
at home. Chinese women in Sydney and Canada had similar supporting roles in family businesses. Chinese traditions and customs did not preclude women from the world of work. While Hills’ observation of Territory Chinese women being kept at the back of shops may have been accurate, her remark that the Chinese women were just ‘rearing innumerable babies’ was not. In the Territory, as in other Chinese communities, residences were typically behind or above businesses, thus women could move between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of the business unobserved from the street. Hence the perception that they rarely left home. Scholars have found that in China in the early twentieth century women worked to contribute to household economies in various ways. In certain communities in southern China, for example, women who worked as silk labourers went through a ‘delayed transfer marriage’ because of the value of their labour outside the family. Even women with bound feet could work from home to support their families—for example, by weaving.

Sewing was a flexible form of employment for immigrant women, allowing them to fulfill domestic duties while contributing to the family’s income. When Nellie Fong’s father died, she and her mother learned to sew trousers, buttonholes, and buttons as further assistance to the business and to earn money. Nellie was paid ten shillings per week. Mrs Sue Wah Chin (1901–2000), daughter-in-law of Ching Toy, sewed up to six pairs of shorts or trousers a day for Fang Cheong Loong, for which she was paid fifteen shillings—more than the general manager. This encouraged other women to take up sewing work. American and Canadian Chinese women also earned incomes by working in family businesses or starting home-based businesses.

52. N. Fong, interview, p. 14.
58. Ling, Surviving on the Gold Mountain, pp. 70–71.
59. N. Fong, interview by Gieco, p. 8, 17.

62. ‘Group of Darwin Ladies’ (Shu Ack Fong Collection), in PictureNT [online database], Northern Territory Library, http://hdl.handle.net/10070/53500.
63. To date, Sarah Bowman is the earliest Chinese merchant’s wife known to have worked, and she did so while her husband was alive. She was a well-known midwife and advertised herself as a stewardess or lady’s maid for steamship travellers (See, Through Chinese Eyes, p. 7; Notice, Northern Territory Times and Gazette, March 18, 1882, p. 2).
68. Loh, ‘Testimony from White Australia’, p. 119.
also gained financial independence and protection with the 1883 South Australian Married Women's Property Act. From the 1870s Territory women were working as hoteliers and publicans, conducting educational establishments, managing cattle properties, and running stores, boarding houses, and esteries. Women were accepted, even respected, as owners and managers of businesses. So when Chinese women began arriving in the Territory from the 1880s, businesswomen were already a familiar sight.

From the 1910s to the 1940s several key Chinese merchant patriarchs in the Territory died, some unexpectedly. The age gap between merchants and their younger Territory-based wives made it likely that women would outlive their husbands. These widows were often left with a number of children in a country whose

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71. NAA: AR87, CL24190.
72. ‘Folder Consisting (1) Index to Immigration Files (2) Miscellaneous Unregistered Correspondents (Sub-Collector of Customs, Darwin, 1930).’ NAA: E759, INDEX ETC.
73. E759, INDEX ETC.
74. ‘Yet Loong & Sons’, NTAG, February 2, 1918, p. 16.
three years later Low See was awarded £3,800. She passed away the following year (1950), having appointed daughters Lucy Lee and Rose Moo Fatt as executrices of her estate—recognition of the worth of daughters.  

Like Low See, Young See's husband, Fong How of Wing Waa Loong, died unexpectedly while in China in 1920, leaving her with eleven children. Albert, the eldest male child then in Darwin, was twelve. Young See, as 'Mrs Wing Waa Loong', seems to have assumed leadership of her family and providing for her children, even though she may have had bound feet and was literate only in Chinese (she signed documents in Chinese characters—見F)41. In 1923 she placed a newspaper advertisement offering lot 564 on Mitchell Street for lease—for particulars, apply Mrs Wing Waa Loong.42 This would later be the site of her sons' Fong Yuen Kee cordial factory. Young See purchased the lot next to Wing Waa Loong and set up a general store, Fong Yuen Kee, in 1924.43 She moved her family into the residence at the store's rear.44 Young See reportedly established this business as an inheritance for her sons. Soo Kee stated after Young See's death that she had told him she was the registered owner of Fong Yuen Kee and her son, Albert, was managing it for her.45 In 1946, Albert Fong, now a leading member of the KMT and Chinese Commercial Society and the first president of the Chung Wah Society, submitted compensation claims estimating the value of the land on which stood Fong Yuen Kee Brothers and Bakers and Wing Waa Loong as £25,550, and lot 564 Mitchell Street (Fong Yuen Kee cordial factory) as £5,620.46 He was awarded £10,957 in total for these claims.47

In 1925 Violet Fung (1886–1958) also lost her husband, Lee Chow of Man Fong Lau, to a sudden illness, leaving her with eight children. The business, Man Fong Lau, was £25,000 in debt at the time.48 A decade later, in 1935, 'Mrs Lee Chow' remained the proprietress of Man Fong Lau, with her sons assisting. She depended on the living from the business; selling fruit and sweets brought in thirty to fifty shillings gross per week.49 Like other widows, she took in a boarder at ten shillings per month.50 In 1935 Mrs Lee Chow was charged with selling liquor without a licence. In the court case, it was noted that she did not have a good command of English; she testified through an interpreter.51 Mrs Lee Chow gave several justifiable reasons as to why she had alcohol on her premises.52 Despite witnesses also stating that she did not sell them liquor, Mrs Lee Chow was fined £50 in default of imprisonment.53 The stewardship of Man Fong Lau by Mrs Lee Chow and her sons ensured its survival until the bombing of Darwin in 1942.

Mrs Moo Sue Quen (1898–1963), widow of Lee Lim of herbalists Wing Sang Tong, was the executors of his estate when he died in 1940.54 He gave her his 'right title and interest as a partner in the firm of Wing Sang Tong' and the land on which the shop was built, After the settling of debts, however, his estate was only valued at £441.55 Moo Sue Quen had advantages over other merchants' wives: she was Australian-born and educated in English, signing documents with an English signature ('Moo Sue Quen').56 Her stewardship of the estate is evident in her applications for compensation for the acquisition of Lee Lim's properties. On these holdings had been several businesses in addition to Wing Sang Tong. The total amount requested, the largest of the claims by Chinese women I have examined so far, was £44,180. The government offered £8,136. After three years and much correspondence, the claims were settled for £13,250.57 Moo Sue Quen pleaded for quicker processing as she was in 'urgent need of the advances to finance her ex-servicemen sons in business in Darwin'.58 When she died in 1963 she left an estate worth almost £7,000; she left her interest as a partner in the family's Lee Transport Company worth £3,733 to one son, Lee Bing Chow.59

78. NAA: A877, CL24147.
79. NAA: A877, CL24147.
80. 'Certificate of Exemption from Distillation Test - Fong How' (Sub-Collector of Customs, Darwin, 1919-1920), NAA: E752, 1919/50.
82. To Let on Lease, NTTAG, October 27, 1923, p. 5.
83. Fong Kee - Application to Enter Commonwealth Assistance Fong Yuen Kee Bros (Sub-Collector of Customs, Darwin, 1940-1941), NAA: E756, 63.
86. See 'Yuen [probate file]' (Supreme Court of the Northern Territory, 1929), Northern Territory Archives Service (NTAS), NTRS 362/5P0001/3, 21/1929.
88. NAA: A877, CL24238; NAA: A877, CL24238.
89. 'Death of Lee Moo', NTTAG, May 29, 1925, p. 3.
91. NAA: E72, DL494, p. 25.
92. NAA: E72, DL494, p. 8.
93. NAA: E72, DL494, pp. 21–22.
96. 'Lee Lim' [probate file] (Supreme Court of the Northern Territory, 1943), NTAS: NTRS 362/5P0001/7, 39/1940.
98. NAA: A877, CL24235; NAA: A877, CL24235.
99. NAA: A877, CL24235.
100. 'See Sue Quen' [probate file] (Supreme Court of the Northern Territory, 1965), NTAS: NTRS 362/5P0001/19, 2955; 'Firm Registration File, Lee Transport Co (General Carriers, Hardware Contractors and Forwarding Agents)' (Register of Companies, c. 1950–1966), NTAS: NTRS 285/5P001/99, Firm 499.
Thoroughly Modern 'Missus': Merchant Daughters

Evolving attitudes towards women worldwide from the late 1800s meant that subsequent generations of women had greater access to education and work than their forebears. In China the early 1900s saw the rise of the anti-imperialist, modernizing Republican movement and the KMT, and the formation of women's rights groups, but also the beginning of the Great Depression. Revolutionaries believed the evolution of society depended on improving the position of women. Dr Sun Yat-sen's call for equality for all, jiăngfēng (解放, 'emancipation') and particularly fūnǐ jiăngfēng (婦女解放, 'emancipation of women'), was espoused by the May Fourth Movement (1919–1923), spawned campaigns in China such as anti-mjui tsai protests, education for women, and the end of footbinding. The Chinese in Darwin kept abreast of Chinese politics and the majority of business owners appears to have been pro-Republican. In 1911, when news broke of the Republicans’ triumph in China, the Republican flag appeared in all the Chinese business premises.

This pro-Republicanism meant that some Territory Chinese families were supportive of women being educated, legislation also mandated schooling for children. The South Australian Education Act 1875 and Northern Territory Education Ordinance 1917 made schooling compulsory for children aged seven to thirteen and six to fourteen, respectively, so merchants’ daughters attended local schools and were instructed in English. In 1916 at Darwin Convent School, Dolly Yuen came second in the sixth class, while Sarah Fong topped the fourth class; in 1940, Mavis Moo was the dux of Darwin Public School. Education enabled women to gain clerical work in Darwin. Lena Pak Fong (1902–1930), daughter of Ah Ngoi and Chin Yam Yan, was Australian-born but educated in Hong Kong. At the time of her death, she had been working as a bookkeeper at Yuen See Kee's. Alice Gum, daughter of San She (Ah Gow) (1873–1931) and Gum Fong Sing of the Sun Hop Lee laundry and store, was working as a bookkeeper at Carey and Company (once

102. Ibid.
104. Education Act 1875 (SA); under the Education Ordinance 1917 (NT), children aged six to nine had to attend school if schools were within two miles of their residence, and between nine and fourteen years if schools were within three miles of their residence. A secondary school operated in Darwin from 1921 to 1925 (the only one in the Territory), but closed owing to low enrolments; secondary schools began operating again in the Territory from 1948 (Ted Ling, "Education", Commonwealth Government Records about the Northern Territory (Canberra: National Archives of Australia, 2011), http://guides.naa.gov.au/ records-about-northern-territory/pdf/chapter13/12.2.aspx).
106. For examples of daughters working for family businesses, see Ip, Home Away from Home, p. 57; Kamp, 'Chinese Australian Women's "Homemaking"', p. 11.
108. 'Inquest on Mrs Lena Lee', Northern Territory Times, January 24, 1930, p. 6.

Natalie Fong

owned by her sister, Mary Yamamoto, discussed below) in 1939, and lived on site.108 Similarly, in New Zealand in the 1940s and 1950s, Chinese daughters who excelled academically worked in administrative roles in businesses.109

One of the earliest documented Territory Chinese businesswomen is Mary Yamamoto (Mao Chun Gum, 1899–?). Mary was Australian-born and married to Japanese storekeeper Tsunematsu Yamamoto. In her 1918 CEDT, she gave her occupation as 'storekeeper and housewife'; it is not known what business she was operating at that time.101 In 1924 Mary purchased the Kwong 'Tung Café in Cavenagh Street, and in 1927 she acquired Carey and Company, Bakers, also in Cavenagh Street.102 Her 1935 CEDT stated that her husband and children were domiciled on Thursday Island.103 The reason for this domestic situation and its influence on Mary's business operations or vice versa is unclear.

Founded in 1924, the Darwin KMT put into practice new ideas about women and many of the young Chinese in Darwin were active members; according to Martinez, by 1925 its executive members were all aged between twenty and thirty.104 They advocated the participation of women, and in 1927 Lena Pak Fong, now Lena Lee after her marriage to Willie Lee (brother of Selina Hassan), and Selina Yuen (daughter of Yuen See Kee) were members of the KMT committee that welcomed a Prince of Siam to Darwin. This was reportedly the first time Chinese women participated in an Australian public function.105 In 1929 Lena became secretary of the KMT and attended the KMT conference in Sydney as a Darwin delegate.106 Tragically, she took her own life in 1930. Lena's sister-in-law Selina Hassan (1901–1996), who was featured at the beginning of this chapter, served as KMT secretary from 1931 to 1932. In Selina Hassan's aforementioned speech to the Chinese Consul General to Australia, Dr W. P. Chen, at a KMT banquet in 1932, she proclaimed:

Equality of opportunity is all China wants . . . China with her great natural wealth and her countless patriotic men and beautiful women will very quickly take her rightful place as the greatest power in the world . . . The Chinese women are even more patriotic than the men.107

110. Ip, 'Yuen Gold Mountain Women to Astronauts' Wirec', p. 279.
111. 'Certificate of Egyptianisation from Dictation Test – Mary Yamamoto' [Sub-Collaborative of Customs, Darwin, 1918–1919], NAA: E752, 19/6/17.
112. NAA: 'Notice, NTAG, April 8, 1924, p. 3; 'Carey and Co – Application Admission of Chinese Assistant [George Gumi]' [Sub-Collaborative of Customs, Darwin, 1943], NAA: E757, 1.
113. 'Certificate of Exemption from Dictation Test – Mary Yamamoto' [Sub-Collaborative of Customs, Darwin, 1933], NAA: E752, 1953/8.
Perhaps reflecting the KMT's capitulationism, some young KMT couples formed business partnerships. Before her marriage to Charlie Houng On Yee, Myrtle Fong (1914–1997), daughter of Wong See (1890–1961) and miner Fong Ding, worked for her brother George Lim in his store in Emungalan, and operated a store and bakery in Matanaka with another brother, Charlie On. Together Myrtle and Charlie Houng On Yee ran a laundry and sold bicycles as 'M. Houng-On' in Cavenagh Street, Darwin. When Lucy Lee (née Yuen, 1909–1986, daughter of the aforementioned Low See and Yuen Yet Hing) and her husband, Walter, made a claim for compensation for their loss of land in 1946, Walter was described as a 'merchant', with Lucy as joint tenant. At the time of their claim they were proprietors of a café in Maroubra, Sydney. Lily Chin (1912–1981, daughter of Chin Kwong-Lung of Kwong Hai laundry) married Charlie On in 1932. In 1946 she made a claim for compensation for the land in Parap, Darwin, where there had been a shop, office, and residence. While the claim was made by Lily because the title was in her name, the business was called 'Charlie On: Draper, Tailor, Grocer'.

There were two Territory women with KMT affiliations who, like Adelaide's Gladys Sym Choon (described as 'the first woman importer in Adelaide'), had their own businesses in their own names and styled themselves as merchants. Thus, they heralded themselves as successors to merchant patriarchs, even though they were daughters, not sons. One of these women was Lorna Lim, the other was Selina Hassan.

**Selina Hassan**

Family circumstances may have contributed to Selina Hassan's independence and interest in the KMT. Selina was born in 1901 in Darwin, the daughter of Hong Kong-born Emily Louie (1868–1935) and businessman, police constable, and interpreter Arthur Lee Hang Gong (born to Sarah Bowman and Lee Hang Gong when they resided in Cresswell, Victoria). In 1904 Arthur, Emily, and their family moved to Hong Kong, where Arthur Lee Hang Gong died in 1906. In 1908 Emily returned to Darwin with one son; Selina and two of her brothers went to live in Guangdong with their father's second wife, reuniting with their mother in Darwin in 1910, when Selina was around nine. Selina attended her ailing grandmother, Sarah Bowman, until Sarah's death in 1911, after which Selina attended school. Emily set up a tripe soup business with another Chinese woman and also sold snacks and soft drinks to support her family. Selina returned to China when she was eighteen to marry businessman Ali Hassan, a Chinese Indian Muslim born in Hong Kong who had gone to Australia as a crew member of a pearl lugger. The couple settled in Darwin.

When Ali Hassan died suddenly in 1929, leaving Selina with three young children, she worked to support her family. Ali Hassan had, however, left Selina the bulk of his estate, about £1,000, and in 1927 and 1928 he had transferred ownership to her of two lots on Cavenagh Street, on which stood their residence and several businesses. Widowed Selina was therefore not without resources, but in an interview in 1979 she said she had to work because the Depression hit and there was no rent coming in, and they did not already have a family business for her to work in or manage. She set up a tailoring and car hire business with Charlie Houng On Yee; Selina recalls, 'I was the leader'. Like other (male) Chinese business owners, in 1930 she placed a notice in the *Northern Territory Times* advising that she would soon be absent from Darwin; her brother, Willie, would 'receive all money owing and payable, accounts for car hire were to be paid to Alfred Jan'. In 1932 she opened her own store, S. Hassan and Co., registered as 'tailors and merchants', in Cavenagh Street. It presented as mercantile, advertising as 'Denizens of the Jungle', as they imported rubber goods from Singapore. The business was unsuccessful. Selina Hassan also had mining interests—in 1934 she was approved for a gold-mining lease for twenty acres in Fletchers Gully in the Territory. In 1938 Selina married Hamdan Bin Mahomed Amid, a Malay indented pearl-seaman, in Darwin. At the completion of her husband's indenture, he was ordered to leave Australia, so he moved to Singapore. He was joined there in 1940 by Selina and her children by Ali Hassan, Allan and Connie. During the Japanese occupation, they were compulsorily domiciled in a Malayam kampong. Daughter of her solicitor in Australia, Selina applied for compensation for the acquisition

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118. 'These couples had KMT weddings'—see Sophie Coachman's chapter in this volume (Chapter 3). They also have the KMT twelve-point star on their headstones in Darwin General Cemetery (Photographs held by the author).


123. *Summering*, 'The Sym Choons of Rundle Street', p. 86.


126. Selina Hassan, interview by Barbara James [transcript], p. 15.

128. Hassan, interview, p. 22.


132. Hassan, interview, p. 23.

133. *Mining Lessee, Northern Standard*, November 9, 1934, p. 10.
of her Darwin land, estimating its value as £13,450, including several businesses and her residence.\textsuperscript{124} She was offered £3,575. In the ensuing negotiations, Selina explained that the property had been her only means of livelihood . . . assuring her) of a regular rental income of £51 per month. Having been compulsorily domiciled, she was in financial difficulties and poor health.\textsuperscript{125} The claim was eventually settled in 1949 for £5,292.\textsuperscript{126}

In 1947 Selina applied for the entire family to be allowed to settle in Australia, which authorities permitted with the exception of Hamdan bin Mohamed Amid and Omar Jauhari, fearing it would set a precedent. Jauhari was admitted temporarily on a student visa, as he and Connie had a child, with another on the way. Selina then tried another approach—in 1936 she had proposed a live-cattle export scheme between Darwin and Singapore, with the assistance of a pastoralist and the support of the then Acting Minister for the Interior.\textsuperscript{127} Now that the war was over, and with her husband unable to return to Australia, she asked whether she could at least have her son-in-law assist her in establishing this scheme? MP for the Northern Territory Macalister Blain wrote to the Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell, urging him to consider Selina’s proposal and making reference to historical precedent—that is, the administration of the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, which frequently made exceptions for Chinese merchants, who facilitated trade between Asia and Australia, and their staff. The minister was unmoved.\textsuperscript{128} Jauhari did end up residing permanently in Australia, but Selina and Amid divorced in Singapore, and Amid remained there while the rest of the family returned to Australia.\textsuperscript{129} Selina continued to support herself and her family through businesses and other means in Victoria. She died in 1996.

**Lorna Lim**

Lorna Lim (née Lowe, 1904–1982) was the Territory-born daughter of Lie See and market gardener and blacksmith Lowe Dep. In 1921 she married tailor George Lim, son of Wong See and miner Fong Ding, in Pine Creek. George and Lorna’s exact involvement in the KMT is not known; however, both have the KMT star on their headstones, as does Wong See, George’s mother.\textsuperscript{130} Historian Mei-fen Kuo notes that this was generally an honour bestowed with Party approval.\textsuperscript{131} In 1926 they moved to Katherine, where they and their family, which eventually included five daughters and four sons, ran a store, bakery, and peanut farm.\textsuperscript{132} In 1938 they moved to Darwin, and that year Lorna purchased Jessop and Company, tailors and general storekeepers, and was advertised as proprietress.\textsuperscript{133} This was the first Chinese business in Smith Street, the European economic area of Darwin.\textsuperscript{134} The business imported fresh fruit and vegetables and was granted the tender to supply produce to hospitals and other government institutions in Darwin.\textsuperscript{135} From 1940 the company traded as ‘Lorna Lim’s’, although the *Western Australian* newspaper reported that it was George Lim ‘trading as Lorna Lim’.\textsuperscript{136} George and Lorna’s son, Alec Fong Lim (who was elected Mayor of Darwin in 1984), said that George was assisted by his wife and children in building a ‘thriving business’.\textsuperscript{137} In Lorna Lim’s compensation claim for the acquisition of their Smith Street property, she stated that she was the title holder because ‘she had previously conducted the business, and in the claim she listed her occupation as “merchant.”\textsuperscript{138} The amount of compensation she requested was £8,900; she was initially only offered £5,935. The claim was settled in 1949 for £6,700.\textsuperscript{139}

During the war, the Lim family was evacuated to Alice Springs where they ran a shop, tailoring business, and teamroom with a gross annual income of over £7,000.\textsuperscript{140} The Lim’s returned to Darwin in 1946, and again established a store in Smith Street—‘Lorna Lim and Sons’; ‘Lorna Lim and Sons’ also became proprietors of the Victoria Hotel.\textsuperscript{141} According to Alec Fong Lim, the store was actually run by Lorna and her daughters and ‘could not have survived without them’, while George and his sons ran the Victoria Hotel.\textsuperscript{142} The Lim’s daughters registered their own business in 1958—Lim Sisters, storekeepers in Smith Street. The Lim’s sold the Victoria Hotel to Carlton and United Breweries in 1965 for £400,000.

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\textsuperscript{124} *NT Darwin Freehold Acquisition 17 January 1946 – Claim of Selina Hassan – Holding No 244* (Property and Survey Branch, 1946–1949), NAA: A877, CL24137.

\textsuperscript{125} NAA: A877, CL24137.

\textsuperscript{126} NAA: A877, CL24137.\textsuperscript{127} NAA: A877, CL24137.\textsuperscript{128} NAA: A877, CL24137.

\textsuperscript{129} Lassan – Selina and Others (Department of Immigration, 1946–1957), NAA: A446, 1956/61282.

\textsuperscript{130} Suzette Pedersen, correspondence with the author, August 27, 2019.

\textsuperscript{131} Photographs held by the author.

\textsuperscript{132} Mei-fen Kuo, correspondence with the author, June 15, 2018.

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\textsuperscript{140} Alec Fong Lim, interview by Sandra Saunders [transcript], 1981, NTAS Oral History Unit; NTAS 226/P00011/3, TS 211, p. 2.


\textsuperscript{142} Alec Fong Lim, interview by Sandra Saunders [transcript], p. 4.


\textsuperscript{145} Alec Fong Lim, interview by Sandra Saunders [transcript], p. 5.

\textsuperscript{146} ‘NT Darwin Freehold Acquisition 17 January 1946 – Claim of Lorna Lim – Holding No 275, 324, 549’ (Property and Survey Branch, 1946–1949), NAA: A877, CL24359.

\textsuperscript{147} NAA: A877, CL24359.

\textsuperscript{148} ‘Trading Results – Lorna Lim & George Lim, Alice Springs – Tailors and Drapers’ (State Deputy Prices Commissioner, South Australia, 1942–1946), NAA: A559, 1945/56/9622.

\textsuperscript{149} Firm Registration File, Lorna Lim and Sons [Draper, grocer and hostkeeper] (Register of Companies, 1946–1963). NTAS NTAS 225/P00109, Firm 259; Hotel Victoria, Northern Standard, November 29, 1946, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{150} Alec Fong Lim, interview by Sandra Saunders [transcript], p. 11.

Conclusion

The Australian Chinese women in this study traversed the boundaries of separate spheres—public and private, work and home—as they had increasing opportunities to work in business over the first half of the twentieth century. The proliferation of women entrepreneurs in the Northern Territory in the late nineteenth century had set a precedent for Chinese women, creating an environment in which businesswomen were a common sight. While most of the earliest Chinese women in Darwin were members of merchant households and were largely confined to the home, they contributed to family businesses and earned incomes through their unseen labour in sewing and undertaking domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning. Despite Chinese businesses being traditionally patriarchal, as merchants died, widows became heads of families and businesses. Economic necessity, exacerbated by the Depression in the late 1920s, was a common motivation for Chinese women's involvement in business in the Territory.

In the early twentieth century, increased access to education in English and modern attitudes towards women promoted by the Chinese Republican movement, and the KMT further enabled and encouraged Territory women to become employees and employers in their own right. Merchant daughters were able to leave the domestic sphere to work in family businesses or to set up their own. By naming businesses after themselves and calling themselves merchants, Selina Hassan and Lorna Lim represented a new generation of Chinese women, revolutionizing centuries-old trades previously the preserve of men and ushering in an era of greater gender equality.

As the approach of collective biography taken by this study and others mentioned reveals, there are common patterns of Chinese women's growing participation in business in China, Australia, New Zealand, and America in the early twentieth century, and Canada and the Philippines in later decades. This study contributes to this broader scholarship and to recent work on Australian Chinese women in business, such as that by Alanna Kamp and Sophie Couchman, by drawing on a range of archival materials to demonstrate the nature and extent of Chinese women's business involvement in the Northern Territory. This study also provides examples of the kinds of documentary evidence in which overseas Chinese businesswomen may be found. Hopefully, it will prompt more sources to be located and further studies to be conducted of Chinese businesswomen in Australia and overseas, continuing to challenge understandings about racialized and gendered spaces of home and work, and including more enterprising Chinese women in history.

Appendix: Selected Darwin Family Trees

Chinese wives were often known by their maiden family surname + ês (C: sih; M: shi), meaning 'dun' or 'family'.

Women's names in bold indicate those discussed in this chapter. An ordinal number (e.g. 2nd, 3rd) in front of a woman's name indicates her position as second or subsequent wife.

Names marked with an asterisk (*) indicate those with known Kuomintang (KMT) affiliation.

Figure 4.6: The families of Chin Yam Yan and Lee Hang Gong.
Figure 4.7: The families of Lee Chow (of Man Fong Lau), Yuen Yat Hing (of Yet Loong), and Chan Fon Yuen (of Fang Cheong Loong).

Figure 4.8: The families of Chin Mee Leung (of Wing Cheong Sing), Fong How (of Wing Wah Loong), and Lowe Dep.
Figure 4.9: The families of Lowe Dep and Fong Ding.