

The Top End Chinese Experience



Diana Giese provides the background to the writing and recent reprinting of her very successful publication *Beyond Chinatown*

B*eyond Chinatown* began with the stories. Many different stories are told of the experiences of Chinese Australians in the Top End. There are the stories of hard work through good times and bad, told by Essie Yuen to her grandchildren, Kathleen and Charles Chong-Fong. There are the stories of business dynasties, including those of the Ah Toys and the Chins. There are the stories of success in public life. Charles See-Kee became in the 1940s the first Chinese to win a white collar job in the Northern Territory Administration. In 1966 Harry Chan was the first person of Chinese descent to be elected mayor of an Australian city.

These stories are told by descendants of the Chinese pioneers who built up the Northern Territory's infrastructure, industries and services. Many of them are recorded on tape, in the Northern Territory Archives and, through my oral history project on the Chinese in the north, in the National Library's Oral History Collection. Now they are also set down in written form in *Beyond Chinatown*,

counterpointing the European documents of Territory history—official reports, newspaper articles, administrators' letters and contemporary theses. The oral stories add a vital historical dimension. In them, Chinese Australians place themselves in the mainstream of Australian history.

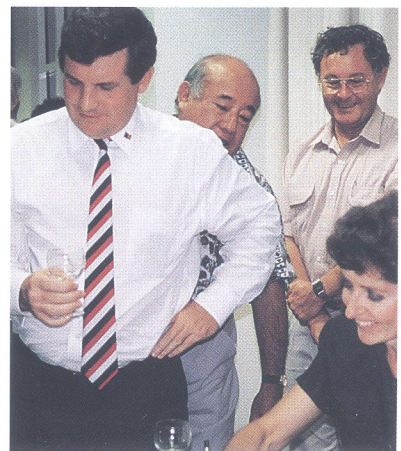


Diana Giese with her very successful book *Beyond Chinatown* at the recreated Chinese Temple altar at the Cairns Museum, April 1995

Photograph courtesy of the *Cairns Post*

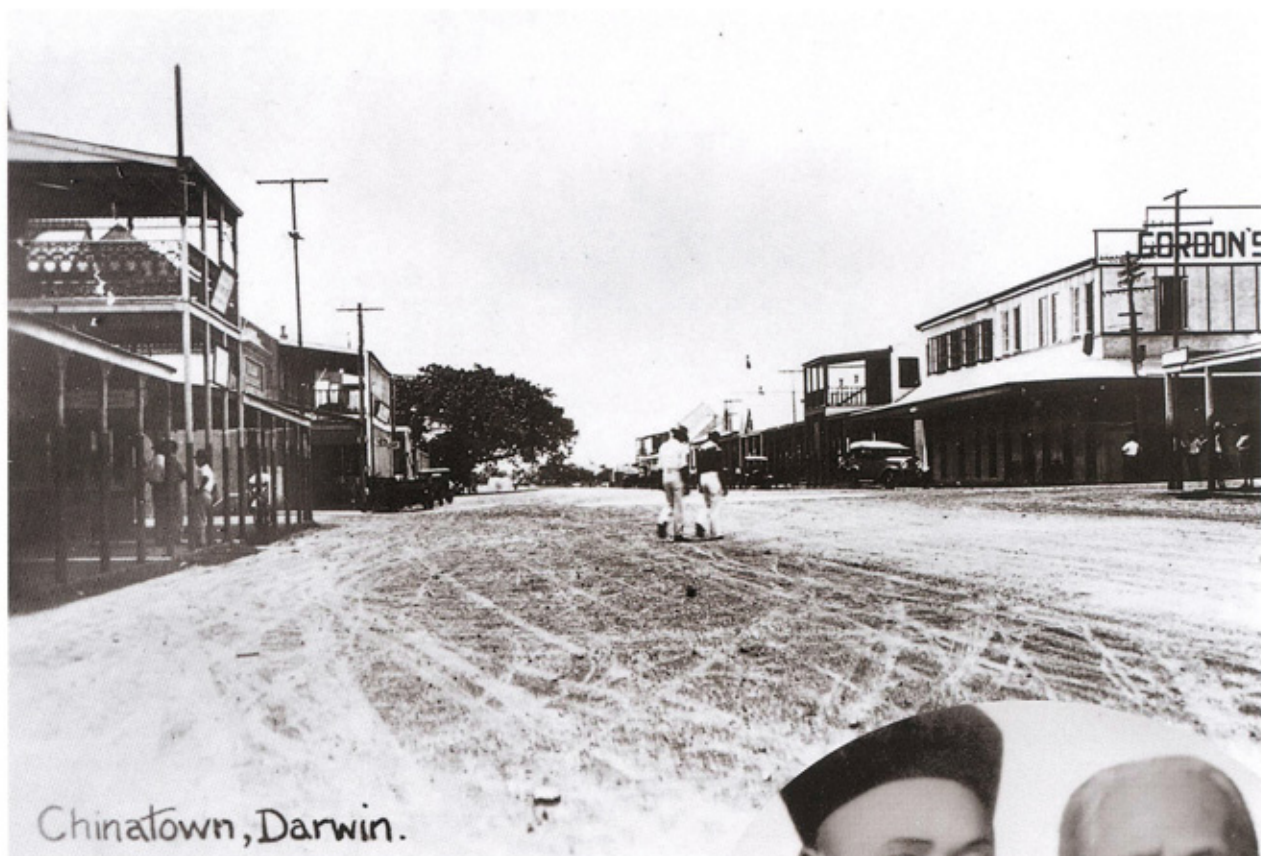
It was only when I began to listen to the voices of Chinese Australians retelling the stories of their history—those that have been written down in someone else's version, those mistranscribed, those never before told—that I felt I was approaching something authentic about those times, something true 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.

(*Beyond Chinatown*, p. 14)



The Hon. Shane Stone, NT Minister for Asian Relations and Trade and Minister for the Arts, at the launch of Diana Giese's book *Beyond Chinatown*, January 1995

Photograph courtesy of Northern Territory Archives



(top) Darwin's Chinatown before the Second World War
Photograph from *Beyond Chinatown*; from NLA Pictorial Collection

(right) Darwin's Chinatown after the Second World War
Photograph from *Beyond Chinatown*; from NLA Pictorial Collection

(above) One of Diana Giese's fascinating subjects in *Beyond Chinatown*, Yuen Yet Hing is shown here in mandarin costume with his wife, Yuen Low See
Photograph courtesy of Pam Con Foo

(left) Yuen Yet Hing and his son Ernest Yuen, aged five, 1910
Photograph from *Beyond Chinatown*; photograph courtesy of Pam Con Foo



Beyond Chinatown was made possible as a book by the foresight and hard work of a vast number of people. After the interviewees had given so generously of their time, memories and resources, others entered the scene. Mark Cranfield, who oversees the National Library's multifarious oral history projects, had always seen my tapes' potential for transformation into other forms. Ian Templeman and Paul Hetherington had published in the Library's journal *Voices* (Spring 1991) the article which began this work. With their rich publishing experience they were quick to see how it could be made into a book. In 1992 I had been awarded a Northern Territory History Grant, administered through the Northern Territory Archives, to document my oral history work. On the basis of this manuscript, in mid-1994 John Thompson and Carol Miller assessed the book project as a possible publishing venture for the National Library. The manuscript was assigned to editor Leora Kirwan. Within weeks, she was sitting in my Sydney home suggesting pertinent amendments and posing useful questions. Not long afterwards, designer Andrew Rankine from the National Library was sending suggestions for what became the striking cover.

I read the proofs of the book in December, just before leaving for Darwin to continue interviewing for my oral history project. By January, copies were being displayed in the windows of Darwin bookshops, and

the Northern Territory Minister for Asian Relations and Trade, and Minister for Ethnic Affairs, Shane Stone, had agreed to launch the book at Darwin's splendid new Parliament House. Lily Ah Toy, Eddie Quong and Daryl Chin from the Chinese community agreed to speak at the 17 January launch. Melanie Chin organised the display of the exhibition *Chinatown 42*, pictures and documents she had collected of Darwin's now-vanished, pre-World War II Chinatown. This demonstrated what active conservators of their own history the Chinese have been.

The National Library offered to sponsor the launch of the book—the first event held at the Northern Territory's bright new premises in Parliament House. Soon after my arrival in Darwin, I met with a committee from the Friends of the Northern Territory Library. Greg Coleman from the Archives and Michael Loos from the Library had been long-time supporters of the project. Over the following weeks, they, together with Sheila Forrest and Barbara James, proved crucial to the organisation of the launch and the publicising of the book. With other Friends, they printed and sent out invitations, chose and ordered champagne and the Jade Garden Restaurant's good food, transported and moved furniture, sent out press releases and tirelessly followed them up.

My first radio interview was with Dave Waterman on 8 Top FM, the community radio station which

broadcasts from the Northern Territory University in several languages, including English. Liz McGrath interviewed me on her ABC Radio program on the morning of the launch. That evening, as people were gathering at Parliament House, ABC TV news carried coverage of the book and the event, as well as excerpts from an interview Tracy Chamberlain had recorded with me that morning at the Chinese Temple.

The launch was a large and lively celebration. The Administrator, the Honourable Austin Asche, and Dr Valerie Asche, Malcolm Nairn, the Vice-Chancellor of the Northern Territory University, Senator Grant Tambling, and Kevin Diflo, Mayor of Palmerston, were among those who mingled with local booksellers, academics, historians, librarians and—most importantly—members of the Chinese community ranging in age from toddlers to the very elderly.

Lily Ah Toy told a responsive audience how her grandmother had had the foresight to bring from China to the New Country 'dried vegetables, seeds and other necessities of life, like herbal medicine'. Ah Toy went on to talk of inter-community cooperation. She paid tribute to people of European descent who, over the years, had helped her family, well known in the Top End for their businesses in Darwin and Pine Creek. She then described her memories of how, after Cyclone Tracy, the Pine Creek



Community Hall had been thrown open to provide food, showers and rest for evacuees as they streamed down the Stuart Highway. Everyone in the town had helped on a roster basis, cooking stews, soups and curries at their homes, with the communal barbecue 'going 24 hours'.

Eddie Quong spoke next, in his forthright amusing way. Daryl Chin was the third speaker, representing the younger members of the community. He said he found publications like *Beyond Chinatown* 'invaluable to help me discover, understand and appreciate what our forebears experienced when settling in a foreign country against the odds'. He talked of the 'utmost respect' of the younger generations for their elders, and offered recognition of 'the hardships they went through, fighting for total acceptance in society which we now enjoy'. 'The extensive research behind the book serves to preserve the many stories and experiences which are generally only passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. It does not take long,' he rightly observed, 'for many such stories to be lost forever.' He felt the book helped to 'paint the big picture and enable me to relate



experiences of other families to those of my own'.

The Minister, Shane Stone, spoke of his own early experiences of Chinese Australians, and the importance of the Territory's cultural, commercial and educational links with its Asian neighbours. After he had officially launched the book, I was kept busy inscribing and signing copies of it and the Northern Territory Library Services occasional paper, *All the Flavour of the Time Returns*, a well-illustrated version of a talk I'd given at the old Library premises the previous year.

The follow-up to the launch showed that a book about Chinese success in the Territory struck a real chord in the wider community. Genevieve Hussey from ABC TV interviewed me the following day at the Library, and this appeared the following week on the *7.30 Report*, together with interviews with some of the people featured in the book, including Lily Ah Toy, Eddie Quong, Daryl Chin, and Tanya Fong Lim and her children. The *Northern Territory News* ran a Page 2 news story the next day, and the *Sunday Territorian* carried photographs the following weekend of

(left) Gathering at Darwin's Government Residency for the Governor of South Australia, 1905
 Photograph featured on the cover of *Beyond Chinatown*; from the Roger Nott Collection, State Library of the Northern Territory

(below left) At the January launch of Diana Giese's *Beyond Chinatown* in Darwin, (from left) Kathleen Chong-Fong, Dawn Chong-Fong, Diana Giese, Harry Con Foo and Pam Con Foo
 Photograph courtesy of Dawn Chong-Fong

Cover of *Beyond Chinatown* by Diana Giese

some of those who had attended the launch. Most of the bookshops, including Angus and Robertson, Tivoli Music and Books, and Bookworld reordered copies, and businessman Des Fong, whose parents William and Darwina feature in the book, placed an order for sale through his retail outlet in suburban Nightcliff. ABC Radio Alice Springs did a phone interview, and copies of the book were ordered by Bookworld and the newsagency in Katherine, where Alec Fong Lim, elected Lord Mayor of Darwin in 1984, grew up. I met Jacky Healy, Director of the Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery, whose shop is selling copies, to discuss the work of the committee of young Chinese Australians she has set up to organise an historical exhibition intended to tour Australia-wide.

Back in Sydney, on Australia Day I spoke about the book at the 'Memories into Multimedia' session at the Sydney Writers Festival, held at the State Library of New South Wales. The Library Shop displayed copies, soon selling out. Gleebooks and Abbeys Bookshop also took copies as, interstate, did the Museum of Chinese Australian History in Melbourne and Bendigo's Golden Dragon Museum.

By early March, the first print run was almost sold out. With a north Queensland promotion planned to coincide with the expansion of the oral history project there, and engagements such as talks to the Sydney Australia-China Friendship Society and the conference of the Chinese Studies Association coming up, it was clear that more copies would soon be needed. The National Library rapidly set about organising a reprint.

'Everybody likes to find out where they came from,' said Daryl Chin in his speech at the Darwin launch. The Top End response to *Beyond Chinatown* shows how important cultural traditions and community history are to Australians—and not only to those directly documented. Most booksellers report good sales to non-Chinese Australians. In fostering, publishing and sponsoring *Beyond Chinatown*, the National Library is helping one vibrant Australian community highlight its vital contributions to northern development.

DIANA GIESE is a Sydney-based writer, broadcaster and oral history interviewer. She is now extending her National Library oral history project outside the Northern Territory to other areas of the country, recently completing interviews in Cairns, Innisfail, Bendigo and Sydney

Diana Giese
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