

Daughters of the Flowery Land: Chinese Women in Queensland, 1860–1920

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Abstract: Until recently, little was known about the experiences of young Chinese women who migrated to Queensland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, journeying to join their husbands alone or accompanied by a servant. This article investigates the changing Chinese cultural family landscape against a backdrop of an expanding colonial Queensland. It explores the impact of arrival, conditions women faced, and the transformation of male-dominated settlements into communities after their arrival. Most of all it shines a light on a little known area of history, highlighting Chinese women's lives negotiated across the Queensland colonial environment.

Keywords: Chinese women, wives, *mui tsai*, daughters, Queensland-born

Introduction

The migration and settlement of young Chinese women who came to join their husbands in the colony of Queensland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a little known aspect of colonial history. Rendered invisible by their small numbers, and hidden from public view through confinement to the family home, the lives of immigrant Chinese women can nevertheless be investigated to reveal a rich account of separation and endurance. Queensland was declared a separate British colony in 1859, having previously been governed as part of the colony of New South Wales. Many of the towns that would later become known for their Chinese communities were settled during the colonial expansion that took place after 1860. This paper investigates the arrival, settlement and circumstances of Chinese women in the colony of Queensland. It identifies who the Chinese migrant women were and where they lived, and explores the degree to which they interacted with the colonial communities in which they lived. By investigating Chinese women's shared experiences over a sixty-year period, a deeper insight into their lives emerges to enhance understanding of the Chinese settler experience and family formation.

Arrivals and Restrictions

In 1875, the *Cooktown Herald* announced the arrival of two Chinese women migrants into North Queensland on the steamship *Brisbane*. The occasion provoked considerable interest from the European population, with the newspaper reporting:

“A Chinese Lady” – By the “Brisbane”, there arrived here, one of the fair daughters of the Flowery Land, who was curiously gazed upon by a large crowd of Europeans, all eager to push forward to see her tiny feet, painted lips and eyebrows, crowned above with a magnificent head dress, accompanied with a female servant.¹

From the moment they set foot on Queensland shores, ignorance, misconceptions and assumptions enveloped the experience of Chinese women in the late nineteenth century. With an absence of any Chinese accounts to record the occasion, their arrival (if announced

¹ *Cooktown Herald*, 22 May 1875, p. 2.

at all) was recorded through western colonial male commentary that tended to describe the occasion with a mixture of curiosity, wonderment, sarcasm and relief. The extract above is one of the few written references to a Chinese woman's arrival into colonial Queensland. Descriptive in its prose, and western in its interpretation, it nevertheless provides a valuable resource to understand Chinese female immigration to the colony.

We now know that this woman was Mrs Lee Gong.² Dressed in marriage attire, she was accompanied by another young woman, who helped pluck her hairline to open up the face for her husband's first gaze, assisted her to apply make-up to enhance her mistress's features, and gave words of comfort before they descended into the little boat that took them to shore.³ Due to her fussing over the young bride, the western journalist may have misinterpreted the role of the second woman. Was she a "servant" or was she another young wife journeying with Mrs Lee Gong to also meet her husband in Cooktown? If she were the former, she would have been the first bonded servant or *mui tsai* to arrive in Queensland.

The experiences of early Chinese female arrivals like the two women who arrived in Cooktown in 1875 shed a small historical light on the migration of Chinese women, a process that was fraught with cultural considerations associated with the Confucian family, difficulties faced in a dominant western colonial frontier society, and the limitations created by a hostile community where support and integration was limited and there were colonial immigration restrictions.

Chinese women commenced their migration around the western globe from 1848 onwards, when, six years before the first goldfield in California, a Chinese female servant along with two Chinese male servants arrived with their master Charles Gillespie on the San Francisco-bound brig *The Eagle*. Their arrival coincided with the discovery of the Suttor Mill gold and the two men immediately absconded from their master to try their luck, while the fate of the woman remains unknown.⁴ Three years later, a clandestine meeting was held between two curious groups of women, one Chinese, the other European, at a Hong Kong location so secretive, in 1851, that even the Chinese Consul remained unaware.⁵ However, by 1855, concurrent with changing Chinese ideas about women and exposure to foreigners, two young women travelled to Paris, presumably with a diplomatic envoy, as papers described the arrival of a Chinese lady accompanied by servant and child.⁶ As a snapshot

² *Western Star and Roma Advertiser*, 26 June 1875, p. 3. We know that this is Mrs Lee Gong, the wife of Lee Gong, the partner of Lee Liy in the firm Wing On and Co. Lee Liy and his wife at the time were still residing in Millchester near Charters Towers with their newborn daughter Milly. The paper reported at the time re: "Chinese at Cooktown" that "among the latest Chinese importations there is one which has caused a good deal of excitement and curiosity from its infrequency in any of the colonies viz, the arrival of a Chinese lady of high caste, the wife of a resident partner in the largest of the Chinese firms here. This lady, who arrived here by the 'Brisbane,' has been quite the rage and holds daily receptions of curious ladies and equally curious gentlemen, who look with wonder on the strange and rich costume of the foreigner who is, I dare say, pretty tired of sitting as a show to amuse people to whom she cannot speak a syllable over to relieve the tedious position of being the centre of a group of curious staring eyes."

³ *Cooktown Herald*, 22 May 1875, p. 2.

⁴ See Table 1. Liping Zhu, "No Need to Rush: The Chinese, Placer Mining, and the Western Environment", *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, 49: 3, Special Gold Rush Issue (Autumn 1999): 43.

⁵ *Empire*, 10 October 1851, p. 4. Early Western descriptions of Chinese women across South East Asia were not recorded until at least 1852, when a Chinese woman was noted as administering her deceased husband's estate on a plantations in Java. See *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 25 December 1852, p. 1.

⁶ *Morton Bay Courier*, 12 November 1855, p. 1.

to migration, Chinese women were first recorded in San Francisco in 1848;⁷ British Columbia in 1858;⁸ Colony of Victoria in 1859;⁹ British Guiana in 1860;¹⁰ Colony of Queensland on 1861;¹¹ Colony of New South Wales in 1864;¹² Cuba in 1865,¹³ and New Zealand in 1867.¹⁴ The provinces of South Africa were among the last destination countries for emigration around 1900.¹⁵ Overall, countries which attracted most of the Chinese female diaspora included the west coast of the Americas, and the colonies of Australasia. In contrast, the British West Indies, Europe and South Africa attracted very few.

Within the sixty-year period from 1860 to 1920, approximately 142 Chinese women migrated to Queensland (Figure 1). Marriage between Chinese men and women made up only 13 percent of the 1095 marriages and unions by Chinese settler men throughout the colony.¹⁶ The majority of Chinese women resided in the tropical northern regions. This is demonstrated by eighty-one Chinese women noted as having lived in North Queensland, compared to sixteen in Brisbane (the capital city, located in the south of the colony), six in southern regions outside the capital city, and nine in Central Queensland.

Throughout the 1860s, Queensland continued to expand its settlement into northern coastal districts, which developed port towns that serviced the emerging central and northern pastoral districts. By 1868, eight Chinese women were recorded in Queensland: three in Brisbane; two inland 200 kilometres (124 miles) northwest of Brisbane in the town of Nanango, which was then in the grip of a gold rush; and three in the northern port towns of Rockhampton, Bowen and Townsville, which boasted just one woman each. These women were considerably outnumbered by male Chinese; there were eight females to 2,621 Chinese males in Queensland, or one woman to every 328 men.¹⁷

The discovery of gold inland from Townsville in the 1860s, and subsequently along the Palmer River in Cape York Peninsula in 1873, brought a great number of Chinese prospectors to North Queensland. The opening up of the Northern goldfields and later development of large-scale agriculture provided a base for Chinese precincts to develop in major northern towns – a point confirmed by 97 percent of the total Chinese population of

⁷ Zhu, "No Need to Rush", p. 43.

⁸ Yuen-Fong Woon, "Between South China and British Columbia: Life Trajectories of Chinese Women", *British Columbia Studies*, 156/157 (Winter 2007): 83–107.

⁹ *South Australian Register*, 28 December 1859, p. 3.

¹⁰ Wally Look Lai, "Chinese Indentured Labour: Migrations to the British West Indies in the Nineteenth Century", *Amerasia*, 15/2 (1989): 131–132.

¹¹ *Queensland Votes and Proceedings (QVP)*, Part II, Table XXI, Numbers of Chinese, Polynesian, Prisoners, Lunatics and Inmates of Charitable Institutions in Electorates, and by Census Districts, Volume 1 (1872), pp. 1113.

¹² *Goulburn Herald and Chronicle*, 31 August 1864, pp. 2–3.

¹³ Manying Ip and Liangni Liu, "Gendered Factors of Chinese Multi-locality Migration: The New Zealand Case", *SITES*, 5:2 (2008): 31–56 (33).

¹⁴ Look Lai, p. 132. See also Jessie G. Lutz, "Chinese Emigrants, Indentured Workers and Christianity in the West Indies British Guiana and Hawaii", *Caribbean Studies*, 37:2 (July–December 2009): 133–154.

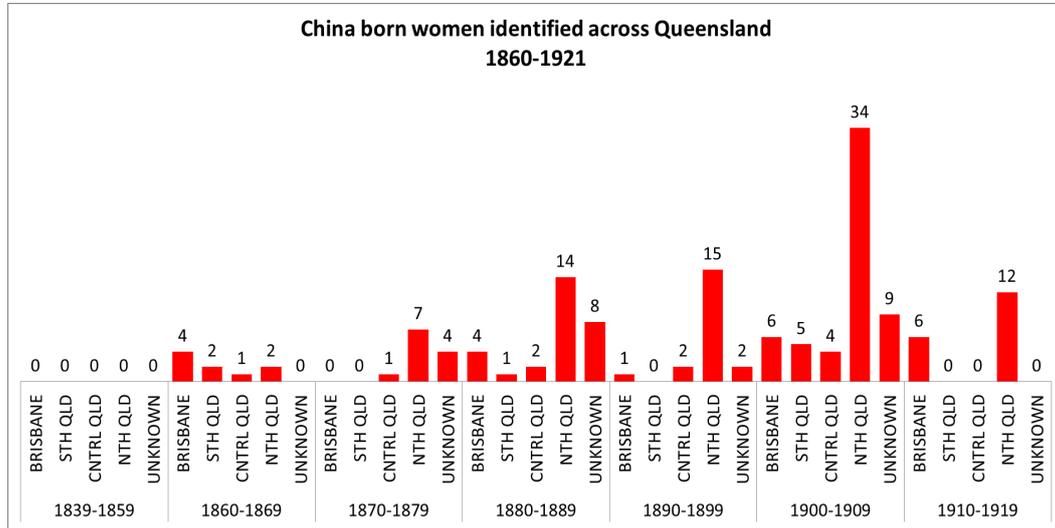
¹⁵ Darryl Accone, "'Ghost People': Localising the Chinese Self in an African Context", *Asian Studies Review*, 30:3 (2006): 261. While Chinese women did not arrive in South Africa until around 1900, Chinese men had first migrated from Guangdong in the 1870s.

¹⁶ Many Chinese men instead formed relationships with European and Indigenous women.

¹⁷ *QVP*, Part II, Table XXI, Numbers of Chinese, Polynesian, Prisoners, Lunatics and Inmates of Charitable Institutions in Electorates, and by Census Districts, Volume 1 (1872), pp. 1113.

Queensland identified as living in North Queensland. The discovery of gold encouraged the arrival of more Chinese females and, in 1876, thirteen women arrived to Queensland including six to North Queensland.¹⁸

Figure 1. China-born women identified across Queensland, 1860 to 1921



Source: Sandi Robb, 2001–2015, *Statistical Database Wives and Families of Chinese Men: 1850–1950: compiled from Queensland Consolidated Births, Deaths and Marriages, various church records, CEDTs, Commonwealth alien registration, family histories, local government records, burial registers, school attendance registers and newspaper reports.*

By 1889, up to forty Chinese women lived across the colony, including thirty-two women residing north of Townsville. Their arrival occurred at a time when anti-Chinese sentiment was reaching its peak. Whether negative colonial sentiment acted as deterrent to female immigration and precipitated the departure of women back to China, or statistical collection methods were unreliable, by 1891 the number of women had dropped to twenty-two.¹⁹

Obtaining accurate figures for the number of Chinese women in the colony for any particular period is difficult. At best, colonial figures should be viewed as an estimate only, due to the lack of statistics collectors in rural and remote areas, communication issues, and lack of cross-referencing to other official data including arrival and departure information (Table 1). In 1871, for example, the census data for Chinese females in the colony’s Vital Statistics noted that there was only one Chinese woman in the colony, yet two years before, in 1869, nine women were recorded living in the colony with no departure records to indicate that they had left.²⁰ Australian statistics used a category of “race” which meant that Queensland-born daughters of families where both parents were China-born immigrants were counted as Chinese, which is evident in official Census figures for 1901. Census figures indicate that Queensland had 192 “full” Chinese females living in the colony. Yet

¹⁸ QVP, Part II, Table 20, Numbers of Chinese, Polynesian, Prisoners, Lunatics and Inmates of Charitable Institutions in Electorates, and by Census Districts, Volume II (1876), p. 409.

¹⁹ “General News”, *The Queenslander*, 25 November 1893, p. 1044, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article20347152>.

²⁰ QVP, Queensland Register General, Census and Vital Statistics for 1869 and 1871.

data contained in Births, Deaths and Marriages clarifies that 142 men were married to China-born wives, leaving fifty females who were likely Australia born.²¹

Table 1. Chinese women in Queensland, 1861 to 1921

Year		1861	1871	1881	1891	1901*	1911	1921
"Full" Chinese	Female	1	9**	23	22	192	212	340
	Male	537	3,304	11,206	7,978	8783	5,783	3,806
	Total	538	3,313	11,209	8,000	8,975	5,995	4,146

Source: Queensland Register General Census and Vital Statistics, various years, and the Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1925

* Commonwealth records after 1901 may include daughters of mixed-heritage families.

** Vital Statistics 1871 notes only one Chinese woman, but it is estimated that there were up to nine women in the colony based on the 1869 Census.

The introduction of legislation aimed at inhibiting the immigration of Chinese men from the 1880s impacted on the immigration of Chinese women, family unification and community growth. Two pieces of legislation, the Queensland *Aliens Act of 1867* (31 Vic No 28) and the *Chinese Immigration Restriction Act 1888*, were used together to restrict the entry and activities of arriving Chinese men.

The *Aliens Act of 1867* had specific requirements set down for 'Asiatic Aliens' who wished to become naturalized British subjects; in particular, an application for naturalization hinged on proof of marriage and a demonstration that the applicant had been resident in the colony for three years. Because Chinese traditional marriage did not require a marriage certificate, and because most wives were not residing in the colony at the time of application, many applications for naturalization were liable for rejection.²²

The case of Foo Jah of Percyville, North Queensland, was evidence of the difficulties faced by many men in relation to marriage. In 1900, aged 50, after 22 years of living and working in Queensland, Foo Jah applied for naturalization. At the time of his application he was a storekeeper at Percyville, but he had previously lived in Cape River, Ravenswood, Charters Towers, the Palmer Goldfields, Thornborough and Gilberton. His commitment to remaining in Queensland was clear from the comments he made when he said: "he is in business and wishes to remain in the colony all of his life". However, he was unable to produce the crucial marriage certificate and as a result Foo Jah's application was refused.²³

The Marriage Act 1864, regulated by the office of the Registrar-General, provided a legislative mechanism for the colonial government to manage its population as a tool

²¹ Queensland Births, Deaths and Marriages (QBDM), 1856–1915. Data compiled from careful scrutiny of four microfiche sets and some online verification.

²² National Archives of Australia (NAA): BP342/1, 12938/834/1903, "Correspondence Relating to Permission for the Family of Lee Gun to Enter Queensland", and Queensland Public Records Historical Resource Kit (QPRHRK), Application for Naturalization Lee Gun, COL/72, 01/12750.

²³ QPRHRK, Application for Naturalization Foo Jah, COL/72, 01/12691.

(along with divorce, and registration of births and deaths) for verification of a person's identity in all proceedings both civil and criminal, as well as matters relating to land and property acquisition. The Marriage Act itself became weaponised as a tool for exclusion, which was used in conjunction with other legislation for non-British subjects, with the only exemption extended to Quakers and Jews.²⁴

Without proof of marriage and a certificate issued under the *Marriage Act 1864*, Chinese family unification was restricted, leaving many families separated for years or even a lifetime. Applications by couples for the wife to migrate to Queensland were often rejected on the basis that marriage was not deemed valid. This is evident in the application by Lee Gun for his wife, Mah See, who failed to provide the essential marriage certificate in his application for a permit under *The Chinese Immigration Restriction Act 1888* to enable Mah See and son Ah Sow to join Lee Gun in Queensland. The application was refused because a China-based marriage certificate could not be furnished.

Having been refused under one piece of legislation, Lee Gun tried another. He decided to submit an application for naturalization, hoping that this path would lead to his wife and son joining him. However, the lack of any colonial marriage certificate issued under the Queensland Marriage Act, as well as failure to produce a Chinese-based marriage certificate, meant that the authenticity of the claim that he was married was unable to be substantiated and the application was refused. This meant that Mah See was unable to migrate.

A certificate under the *Marriage Act 1864*, or lack thereof, remained a significant means to restrict entry of non-British subjects and kept families apart.²⁵ For couples able to marry in Queensland, an official marriage certificate issued under the *Marriage Act 1864* provided an effective tool to assist applications for naturalization: a strategy some Chinese men used to increase their advantage while overseas.

The link between the decision to legally marry under the *Marriage Act* and taking out naturalisation is unquestionable as a strategy employed by families to maximise opportunity and elevate status in the colonial environment. Just under half of the total number of China-born families in Queensland were legally married under the *Marriage Act 1864*. Naturalisation enabled Chinese men to purchase land and create wealth, as well as have an elevated status within the colonial community as new British subjects. Naturalisation enabled family transmigration between Queensland and China for filial and educational purposes to occur more smoothly and assisted with re-entry back into the colony.

One element of naturalisation was the taking of an Oath of Allegiance. Of the sixty families married in Queensland, thirty-four husbands took the Oath of Allegiance within the first

²⁴ *Marriage And Divorce: Marriage Acts, 1864 to 1956*, https://media.sclqld.org.au/documents/digitisation/v11_pp369-378_Marriage%20And%20Divorce_Marriage%20Acts.%201864%20to%201956.pdf. It noted, "Every marriage celebrated between parties being both Quakers or both Jews shall be as legal and valid as if duly solemnized under the provisions of this Act if such marriage was when celebrated a valid marriage according to the usages of the Quakers or Jews as the case may be. For the requirements of a Jewish marriage, see 19 Halsbury's Laws of England, 3rd ed., p. 793."

²⁵ QPRHRK, COL/72, 01/12750, Application for Naturalization, Lee Gun.

year of marriage to become naturalized British subjects.²⁶ Of the remaining 82 families who had a China-based traditional marriage, only twelve had taken out the Oath of Allegiance. This means that overall, one quarter of the China-born families in Queensland undertook naturalization as a means to enhance prospects in the colony, legitimize status in both the Chinese and non-Chinese communities through marriage, maximise potential commercial opportunities through suitable marriage connections, and enable the production of locally born sons and daughters. For couples, naturalization enabled Chinese families to extend any benefits in the host country for their Australia-born children which provided a long-term security when other methods failed.

The introduction of Commonwealth legislation, the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, initially relaxed immigration laws regarding Chinese wives, which enabled many young Chinese wives to join their husbands. The Commonwealth immigration legislation, which replaced earlier restrictive Queensland colonial Acts, was at first considered generous towards female migrants. As a result, a number of wives and betrothed women arrived in Queensland between 1901 and 1903. Chinese women were able to enter the Commonwealth under special provisions clause 3(n) and 3(m) of the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, which was tailored to merchant class men and storekeepers with considerable means.²⁷ This came at a time when Chinese marriages to White women were on the decline and Australia-born first and second generation mixed-heritage daughters were reaching marriageable age. For their part, Australia-born daughters became the most sought-after local marriage commodity for the Chinese male community. However, the window of opportunity for wives and women to enter Queensland under the Act was very brief. The suspension of the legislation in 1903 and subsequent repeal of these clauses in 1905 was catastrophic. New female arrivals to Queensland plummeted in numbers. The introduction of restrictions on the entry of Chinese women, combined with a requirement that exemptions only be granted for limited periods of six months, meant that Chinese communities were unable to grow sufficiently inter-generationally and cemented the fate of couples who lived apart. It can be concluded that the legislative barrier, intended to deter Chinese female immigration and stymie two Chinese parent family formation, was successful.

However, it was not just the initial immigration into Queensland which was regarded as a problem by the authorities. The re-entry of wives and families returning to Queensland after a visit to China came increasingly under scrutiny by zealous Customs officers who were suspicious of forged documentation. Respectable White members of the local community were called upon to verify women's identities, or the identities of Australia-born children, and the strength of their testimony prevented deportation (Figure 2).²⁸ It was a humiliating

²⁶ Robb Database: Chinese Marriages and Unions: 1848–1920. Refer to Figure 1. This database is compiled from various primary sources including: Births Deaths and Marriages Queensland; police gazettes; Queensland State Archives: justice records, intestacies, wills, suicides, internments into lunatic asylums, school registers and immigration shipping records; National Archives of Australia: Certificates of Exemption from the Dictation Test, shipping ledgers, and online records; local administration records including rates and valuations registers, local cemetery registers; and James Cook University newspapers and National Library of Australia newspapers. Other non-publicly available material, such as oral history and family manuscripts, have also provided valuable information. Secondary sources include entries in local history books.

²⁷ *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* (Cth), p. 3.

²⁸ NAA: J2483, 192/34, "Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test (CEDT) - Name: Mrs Lin Fay How Chin (of Brisbane) - Nationality: Chinese - Birthplace: Canton - departed for China per AKI MARU on 3 October 1917, returned to Brisbane per AKI MARU on 9 June 1919".

and frustrating period for couples and families. After 1905, women arriving as wives of resident Chinese men could only gain a temporary exemption to join their husbands for up to three years, after which, if their application for an extension was refused, they would have to return to China. This meant that under the White Australia policy the growth rate of Chinese families in Queensland remained negligible, with any meaningful or sustained expansion through the birth of Australia-born Chinese across Queensland inhibited.

Form No. 21. COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA. No. 034
Immigration Act 1901-1912 and Regulations.

CERTIFICATE EXEMPTING FROM DICTATION TEST.

I, OSWALD SEPTIMUS MADDOCKS, the Collector of Customs for the State of QUEENSLAND, in the said Commonwealth, hereby certify that Mrs Lin Fay How Chin (Brisbane) hereinafter described, who is leaving the Commonwealth temporarily will be exempted from the provisions of paragraph (a) of Section 3 of the Act if he returns to the Commonwealth within a period of three year from this date.

Date 17th February 1916. Collector of Customs.

DESCRIPTION.

Nationality	<u>Chinese</u>	Birthplace	<u>China</u>
Age	<u>37 years</u>	Complexion	<u>Dark</u>
Height	<u>5 ft 1 1/2 in</u>	Hair	<u>Black</u>
Build	<u>Small</u>	Eyes	<u>Brown</u>
Particular marks	<u>Scars on right wrist</u>		

(For impression of hand see back of this document.)

PHOTOGRAPHS.

Full Face:— Profile:—

Date of departure 3/10/17 Port of Embarkation Brisbane
Ship Aki Maru Destination China
Date of return 9.6.19 Ship Aki Maru
Port Brisbane

Compared with original found to agree. 19/1/17
Customs Officers. J. F. Snow & J. Lennon

Figure 2. Certificate Exempting from the Dictation Test for storekeeper Mrs Lin Fay How Chin of Brisbane, 1917 (NAA: J2483, 192/34)

Cultural Family Landscape

From the moment they arrived in the colony of Queensland from 1861, Chinese women were faced with a foreign cultural family landscape which offered few comforts. Language barriers, age discrepancies among couples, community gender disparities and lack of female companionship shaped each woman's experience and defined her ability to cope or prosper. Most survived, some thrived, while others it seems lived a life of unhappiness. Immediately at a disadvantage, they were denied participation in existing female circles

developed by White women in the emerging colonial settlements which sustained women in the rough, challenging landscape of a frontier wilderness.²⁹

Chinese women chosen to emigrate were not usually from the core family structure but were selected or purchased as second wife, sent as a *mui tsai* or as the daughter of a first wife, accompanying a father.³⁰ One of the first women to arrive in Cairns was Mrs Lee Yan (Ah Liew, wife of Lee Chin). Arriving from Hong Kong in August 1895, she was accompanied by twelve-year-old servant Chou Young. They lived behind the Lee Yan Kee shop in Sachs Street, in the centre of Chinatown. A year later, Mrs Lee Yan gave birth to a baby boy, attended to by Martha Ah Lett, a White woman in the community. Instead of the mandatory one month laying-in period which birth mothers experienced in China, Mrs Lee Yan (Ah Liew) found herself in the centre of attention just one week after the birth of her boy. The Cairns *Argus* noted in the “local news” section:

A remarkable event is to be celebrated tomorrow, viz the birth of the first thoroughbred Chinese boy in Cairns. Mrs. Lee Yan arrived from China about a year ago, and with the advent of a son, Mr. Lee Yan, who is one of the leading storekeepers, is delighted, and his countrymen rejoice with him. The event is to be celebrated in grand fashion and is expected several hundred Chinese will put in an appearance, and as it is customary for guests to bring along presents, the little fellow should certainly have an excellent start in life.³¹

Mrs Lee Yan’s and Chou Young’s experience over the next four years provides a window into the circumstances faced by many Chinese women who immigrated to Queensland. Here was a young bride, most likely a second wife in a “two primary wife” family, who lived with her husband in the back of his merchant store which he joint-owned with two brothers. Mrs Lee Yan had bound feet and was accompanied by *mui tsai* Chou Young, who was subsequently married off four years later, then aged sixteen, to a man twenty-seven years older than herself.³²

Family history accounts, revealed in up to fifty oral history interviews across north Queensland, when combined with church registers and the colonial birth, death and marriage registers, indicate that Chinese women sent as brides from villages in China were all young women. They were usually between fifteen and twenty years old, with the average age of sixteen. They were married to men considerably older, generally in their early forties, with at least two couples where the woman was sixteen years old and her husband was in

²⁹ Pauline Cahir, ‘Women in North Queensland’, in *Lectures in North Queensland History*, ed. B.J. Dalton, (Townsville: James Cook University, 1975), pp. 97–98.

³⁰ NAA: J3115, 100, “Correspondence relating to a Certificate of Domicile for Fat Kee and family, re-entering the Commonwealth - includes Certificate of Domicile for Fat Kee and photographs of Fat Kee, his second wife Li Ha (first wife was Ha Kam) and children Lau Un, Lau Kiu and Tsoi Wing. The family entered Cooktown from Hong Kong”.

³¹ “Chinese Baby Celebration”, *North Queensland Register*, 19 August 1896, p. 22, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article85419003>.

³² Norma King Koi, “Discovering My Heritage: An Oral History of My Maternal Family, the Ah Moons of Townsville 1888–1945”, in *Histories of the Chinese in Australia and the South Pacific*, ed. Paul Macgregor (Melbourne: Museum of Chinese Australian History, 1995), pp. 287–299.

his early fifties, an age difference of thirty-seven years.³³ Without exception, Chinese women were confined to one of the eighteen “Chinatowns” in north Queensland which developed as self-supporting communities within broader White towns and settlements. Many women remained in the colony for their whole lives and only a few returned to China. Some evidence suggests that for some, remaining in Queensland was a preferred option.³⁴ The colonial experience of migrant Chinese women reflected an emerging global trend taken by diaspora families: to transition into the distinct “two primary wife” family.³⁵

Transnational polygamy – or a “two primary wife” family where two separate households were set up and managed by the one husband, but located in two different countries – occurred across Queensland. Transnational polygamy developed in direct response to changing family needs brought on by the Chinese diaspora. In the Confucian family, the moral duty of the wife was to keep order in her husband’s household in accordance with her position, filial obligations and ancestor worship. As Manying Ip notes, the obligations of a primary or first wife were laid out before her upon entering the family home: “to respect and serve your parents-in-law was the first commandment of model womanhood”, even above obeying and serving her husband.³⁶ Consequently, joining a husband overseas became secondary to the obedience required by staying in China and caring for his parents. This view is taken further by Elizabeth Sinn, who observes that the relocation of the primary wife to another country put the spirits, cultural relationships and core family structures at risk.³⁷ Alternative options were required to be developed by families unwilling to upset the ancestral family harmony, and the second wife provided the answer to this problem.

The selection or taking of a woman as second wife provided a sustainable solution within the Confucian family system. Balance and harmony could be maintained in the ancestral home enabling overseas men to maintain filial obligations in China, while enjoying conjugal rights with a second wife overseas. The family wealth was increased through the arrival of additional children and, for her part should she produce sons, the second wife secured the transnational family as an asset to the ancestral lineage. The taking of a second wife appears to have been practised in every Australian colony, as well as among those who lived in the Americas and British Columbia. Oral history suggests that a high percentage of Chinese women who immigrated to North Queensland were second wives.³⁸

The “two primary wife” or transnational polygamous family had several advantages. Both families benefitted from kinship and family networking and trade arrangements, sons could be sent from Queensland back to the ancestral home for education, and the sons of the first wife in China could be sent to their father’s households in Queensland to be apprenticed to the family business. The positive benefit of this extended family relationship

³³ Oral History, 2001: Estelle Kingsley, Cairns, 2 May 2001, Tape 1; George Wah Day, Cairns, 5 April 2001, and Queensland Consolidated Marriage Records, 1850–1920, Methodist Church, Marriage Records 1891–1960, 18 November 1900, Ah Bow and George Sing.

³⁴ Oral History, 2002: Mabel Garvey, Cairns, 26 June 2002.

³⁵ Adam McKeown, “Transnational Chinese Families and Chinese Exclusion, 1875–1943”, *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 18:2 (Winter 1999): 98–99.

³⁶ Manying Ip, *Home Away From Home: Life Stories of Chinese Women in New Zealand* (Auckland: New Woman Press Ltd, 1990), p. 19.

³⁷ Elizabeth Sinn, “Bound For California: The Emigration of Chinese Women”, in *Pacific Crossing: California Gold, Chinese Migration, and the Making of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), p. 224.

³⁸ See Sandi Robb, “Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Wives of Chinese Men in North Queensland: Strategies for Survival, 1875-1935”, History Honours thesis, James Cook University, 2002.

is evident in the family of Fat Kee. Having left Hong Kong for Cooktown in 1902, Fat Kee arrived, not only with second wife Li Ha, whom he had recently married, but also with two adult sons and a young daughter from his first wife, Ha Kam, who remained in the family home in Hong Kong.³⁹

True polygamy, where more than one wife lived in the same household at the one time, remained a rare occurrence in Queensland. Only three true polygamous marriages have been identified: notably the Kwong Sue Duc family in Cairns,⁴⁰ the Quee Chee family on Thursday Island,⁴¹ and the Lee Tim Kin Sing family in Blackall, Central Queensland.⁴² The most prominent polygamous family is that of Kwong Sue Duc, who arrived in Cairns in 1903 and set up his herbalist business in the “Chinatown”. Kwong lived with three wives and eighteen children at the rear of his shop; the first wife remained in China.⁴³ The family was immediately conspicuous due to the unusual nature of the marriage arrangement, the number of wives, and the fact that Kwong Sue Duc displayed a prominent photo of the family in the front of his shop. A son was born not long after arrival and the *Morning Post* in Cairns wrote:

A prolific Chinaman Kwong Sue Tack [sic], the Chinaman with his four wives and 18 children, called in at this office to joyfully announce “number four wife catchem boy, half past three yesterday.” Kwong states that number one wife is in Canton and has four children. Of his 14 children in Cairns, nine are attending school.⁴⁴

Quee Chee had two wives and a number of children in the family quarters on Thursday Island. With extended kin and village links across the north of Australia to Port Darwin and further afield to Hong Kong, Chee Quee entered an arrangement to have one of his children, a daughter four years old, to be “adopted” to relieve the household burden.⁴⁵ The child moved to Port Darwin and commenced a life of household drudgery, in a ‘servant like manner’ for the prominent Chinese couple, the Hassans.⁴⁶ The young girl worked hard her whole young life, in conditions similar to female children who were employed as bonded servants. This possibly makes her the first and only *mui tsai* to be traded in northern Australia, if not Australia.

Between 1875 and 1920, five Chinese women arrived in the colony of Queensland as bonded servant girls or *mui tsai*, while another lived earlier as a *mui tsai* in Hong Kong before she was sold as concubine to a man from Thursday Island. Four of the *mui tsai* in North Queensland lived in the frontier towns of Cooktown, Maytown, Cairns and Thursday Island, while only one girl was identified in the southern area of the colony in Brisbane.⁴⁷

³⁹ NAA: J3115, 100.

⁴⁰ Oral History, 2001: Roma Leong See, Cairns, 20 May 2001.

⁴¹ Oral History, 2002: Interview: Client #1, Cairns, 16 May 2002.

⁴² John Oxley Library (JOL), undated papers of Lee Tim Kin Sing, Blackhall, unpaginated.

⁴³ Oral History, 2001: Jenni Campbell, Cairns, 8 May 2001.

⁴⁴ *Morning Post* (Cairns), 20 January 1903, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Oral History, 2002: Mabel Garvey, Cairns, 26 June 2002.

⁴⁶ NAA: A1, 1928/9742, “Quee, Moo Kim Kow Chee - Naturalisation certificate”; NAA: BP4/3, CHINESE QUEE JAMES CHEE, “Quee, James Chee - Nationality: Chinese - Alien Registration Certificate No 90 issued 13 November 1916 at Thursday Island”; Interview: Client #1, Cairns, 16 May 2002.

⁴⁷ *Brisbane Courier*, 3 October 1884, p. 6.

The first bonded servant to arrive in North Queensland came in 1875 accompanying her mistress Mrs Lee Gong,⁴⁸ followed by a second girl in 1876 who accompanied Mrs Quong Hing.⁴⁹ One of the first girls to arrive was thirteen years of age and can be traced through the Census records in the Cooktown district for over 25 years, while the youngest was only twelve years old and lived with her adopted family in Brisbane until the age of sixteen.

While an active trade in *mui tsai* occurred between Hong Kong and the United States,⁵⁰ there is no evidence to suggest that there was an active trade in young girls to the colony of Queensland for the purpose of servitude, or that any of the girls or women were kidnapped, sent illegally or worked as prostitutes in the colony. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that immigrating *mui tsai* experienced conventional “adoption” practices which denoted child servitude throughout China. This included levelling charges of worthlessness towards the *mui tsai*, her vulnerability to abuse, and subsequent disposal when she was not longer wanted. Violence wrought against a *mui tsai* is highlighted in the following case against Chick Tong.

In 1884, the Brisbane community was shocked by the behaviour of prominent Chinese merchant Chick Tong. He was charged and fined for cruelty to a sixteen-year-old Chinese girl, Yang Cue, who had been in his household since she was twelve years old. Her prior circumstances were typical – sold by her father in Canton to a man who on-sold Yang Cue to Chick Tong in Hong Kong. She was brought to the colony to accompany and attend to Chick Tong’s wife. In a foreign country, Yang Cue found herself in a household where her lowly status was defined by regular beatings which both Chick Tong and his wife meted out. Chick Tong admitted that he had beaten Yang Cue with a whip or cane about the legs, thighs, buttocks and arms; a method he apparently preferred as he regularly applied it approximately once every fortnight over a four years period. In her statement, Yang Cue said she had not complained because she was afraid of them.⁵¹

The *Crown vs Chick Tong* case highlighted the issue at the heart of western discomfort: that the purchase of a girl servant *mui tsai* as a chattel was tantamount to slavery. Yang Cue’s exploitation was reinforced by the prosecution though the emphasis on her tender age and the fact that she had worked in the household for four years, yet not once received payment or wages. The case blackened Chick Tong’s character when the public was faced with the ferocity and frequency of violence he inflicted on Yang Cue. The case also had wider implications for the colonial Chinese community. The relationship between master and servant combined with “adoption” rules associated with the Chinese *mui tsai* system was little understood by the western audience. As a result, it attracted additional condemnation against the general character of Chinese men who were portrayed as cruel and abusive towards their women. However, this was not the case.

In 1878, Wun Toong Yuan, *mui tsai* to the Ah Fun household, journeyed inland from Cooktown to Maytown where she acted as servant for the family. As part of her duties she collected the groceries from the general store Gee Kee, owned by Tam Gaun Sit, and she would often arrive in a very distressed state showing signs of physical abuse. One day after she arrived at his shop with a broken arm, the men in the Chinese community approached

⁴⁸ *Cooktown Herald*, 19 May 1875, p. 2.

⁴⁹ *Cooktown Herald*, 13 September 1876, p. 2.

⁵⁰ See Sinn, *Pacific Crossings*, and Mc Keown, “Transnational Chinese Families”.

⁵¹ *Brisbane Courier*, 3 October 1884, p. 6.

Tam Gaun Sit to do something about her situation. They proposed that he should pay her “bond” and then marry her, thus releasing her from her contract. This he subsequently did, and after a payment of a £100 bond, he married her in 1883.⁵²

Twenty years later in Cairns, another *mui tsai* was less fortunate. Despite the ample supply of eligible bachelor shopkeepers and merchants who would have provided a better economic future for Chou Young, *mui tsai* to Lee Yan and his wife, she was married off at the usual age of sixteen to a Goondi (Geraldton, now Innisfail) market gardener, Ah Moon, who was twenty-seven years older than her. She spent the next twenty-two years in poverty, tending to her family of eleven children.⁵³

Traditional Chinese practices such as selling of children or maintaining the social divide against *mui tsai* was conspicuously absent across colonial Queensland, with the exception of the Quee Chee family. This suggests reform occurred to Chinese traditions in the colony much earlier than in China. Children born within the colony were loved and valued with daughters in particular no longer considered a burden, but as tools who when married off strategically not only consolidated networks but enhanced business and kinship ties. With less poverty within the community, conditions also improved, eliminating the need to sell off daughters in order to feed the family. As well, very few women arrived with bound feet after the turn of the twentieth century, meaning that the requirement to supply a *mui tsai* to assist the incapacitated mistress declined.

Between 1876 and 1903, ten Chinese women arrived in Queensland with bound feet: five of those accompanied by a *mui tsai*. This included Ah Bow, Ah Kuw, Mrs Lee See, Chiu Chan Han, Mrs Quong Hing, Mrs Lee Gong, Yuen Luk Lau and Mrs Lee Yan in North Queensland at Cairns, Cooktown, and on Thursday Island; Mrs Lee Kim Tim Sing in Blackall, Central Queensland; Mrs Gee Chong at Roma; and Mrs Kwong Sang in Toowoomba, on the edge of the Darling Downs. By the end of the 1890s, the custom of binding the feet of daughters within China was also in decline, which contributed to a change in attitudes towards the practice.⁵⁴ Women arriving with bound feet abandoned the practice of foot binding for their daughters by choice, free from the lineage council and matchmakers’ influence when they immigrated to the new cultural family landscape. There is only one occasion where a female child was subjected to the practice, and it occurred in a family who were living at the time in Port Darwin, in the Northern Territory of South Australia, before migration to Cairns in North Queensland.⁵⁵

Faced with undertaking a new cultural family landscape in communities where Chinese females were in the minority or absent, Chinese women had the opportunity to break away from village traditions and create new ones. This brought about several advantages. Firstly, although obliged to uphold family hierarchical obligations, Chinese immigrant women were able to exercise the same female autonomy as first wife within the household which, had they remained in China, would have been denied to them. This position was strengthened by the psychological advantage maintained by the distance between the two homes and by a continuous access to the husband. The ability to self-determine and contribute to

⁵² Oral History, 2002: Darryl Low Choy, Brisbane, 8 July 2002.

⁵³ King Koi, “Discovering My Heritage”, pp. 287–297 and pers. comm., Norma King Koi, 6 September 2002.

⁵⁴ V.M. Garrett, *Traditional Chinese Clothing in Hong Kong and South China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1987), pp. 22–23.

⁵⁵ Oral History, 2001: Leong See, 2001 & Campbell, 2001.

decision-making, as well as guide outcomes for their own children, would not have been achievable had she remained as second wife under “first mother’s” jurisdiction.

Secondly, the establishment of a second family living with her husband put the Queensland-based wife in an advantageous position when her husband died. Complex probate arrangements needed to be negotiated between the China-based first wife and Queensland-based second wife in regards to distribution of family assets.⁵⁶ Traditional nineteenth-century wealth distribution for Chinese polygamous families was done according to Chinese customary law, which when applied to “two primary wife” families was most likely continued on in an informal manner between the two households to enable asset and property division to be managed between the two families. However, Chinese customary law was outside British law jurisdiction and illegal in Queensland under the terms of probate. Queensland-based second wives, aware of the advantageous position of living in a British colony, challenged the first wife’s automatic claim to Queensland-based assets in an effort to secure the future of their own families. This is highlighted in the successful efforts of Chin On Lai Foo.⁵⁷

When Lai Foo made a will appointing Chin On Lai Foo (also known as Mary Lai Foo) as his sole executrix, bequeathing her all of his estate, he made it without informing his Hong Kong-based first wife, or his brother with whom he had a partnership in a large pearling fleet. In 1928, Lai Foo travelled to China to visit his first wife and, while there, took ill and died. With no marriage certificate in Hong Kong to support the existence of Mary’s (Chin On’s) marriage, declarations as beneficiaries were lodged by his brother Lai Fook and his first wife, Mabel Chan. In ordinary circumstances, as it was a British colony, probate in Hong Kong would have been granted in Hong Kong and the probate “resealed” in Australia. However, as Mary Lai Foo was not deemed “married”, her claim was tenuous. She made it clear that she was not content with being left out from her husband’s assets. A “family” decision was made to resolve the matter to ensure equitable division of assets and acknowledgement of the two wives: one in Hong Kong and the other in Queensland. As a result, Mary was deemed eligible to receive the Australian assets, particularly because she produced the Queensland-drafted will.⁵⁸ Mary was eventually awarded his estate valued at £1,151. Her challenge to her husband’s first wife was a departure from tradition and indicated the tensions, which could arise from a family with two primary wives.

However, tensions also rose within the colony between Chinese women over community origins. Firstly, women were not all from the same district in the Pearl River Delta, so language and communication was an issue. Secondly, clan alliances and district divisions between Sze Yap and Chung Shan districts were actively maintained even when Queensland-born sons and daughters reached marriageable age. For example, the daughter of Mow Ung (George Hing) from Chung Shan married a Charles Low Yin Foo from the village of Caobian, Chung Shan.⁵⁹ Thirdly, some families just did not get along or were from conflicting clan villages. This is the case between Bow See, wife of herbalist Lum Sou San, and Yuen Ming, who lived next door. When one of Bow See’s children ate

⁵⁶ Oral History, 2002: Garvey.

⁵⁷ “At the Supreme Court”, *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 4 September 1930, p. 6.

⁵⁸ Pers. comm., Malcolm Oakes, 2014.

⁵⁹ Pers. comm., Keith Shang, 28 August 2002; Joanna Olsen and Keith Shang, *With His Gold in a Little Velvet Bag: The Story of a Chinaman and a Bonnie Lassie from Edinburgh* (Lindfield, NSW: Joanna Olsen, 2013), p. 82; and pers. comm., Andrew Leong, Caobian, Zhongshan, 2018.

a moon cake provided by Mrs Ming next door, Bow See gave her son a whacking with the feather duster saying: "Never, never, never go into the Ming's house to eat Moon cakes".⁶⁰

The range of feelings, encounters and ability to cope experienced by Chinese women were individual and varied. On one hand some women were able to navigate the new cultural family landscape and adapted to the changes around them, such as Chiu Chan Han who on arrival to Geraldton in 1897 became a noted linguist, business partner and valued member of the broader community when she married Taam Sze Pui.⁶¹ For others, the experience was fraught with isolation, hardship and misery, leading to damaging preventable or treatable physical and mental health issues which were neglected, including maternal mortality, post-natal depression, anxiety-related illnesses and suicide.

Glimpses of loneliness and depression emerge when oral history accounts and inquests are examined. For example, the daughters of young Ah Bow, wife of Hor Lin Sing of Thursday Island, recounted their mother "crying for days on end". Could she be blamed? Ah Bow had sixteen children in seventeen years, so it must have been a relief when her husband suddenly died.⁶² On the other hand, Ah Tiy of Atherton was so morose and depressed after the deaths of two children from dysentery in 1920 that she retired to her bed where she remained for forty years with a "mystery illness".⁶³

The negative impacts on Chinese women due to immigration did not always present in an obvious way. Yuen Qui Fa lived with her husband Chun Tie in the remote mining town of Croydon from 1894, where she raised a large family. Her experience in the rough and hostile environment shaped her outlook on life, and she developed into a strict and ominous woman capable of giving "the Look" that could control her offspring without argument.⁶⁴ However, the most poignant reminder of the negative impact of cultural transposition can be seen in the death of Chun Ayee on Thursday Island, in 1894.

Prominent businessman Leon King Nam had a merchant firm on Thursday Island when a young wife, Chun Ayee, was sent to him from China in 1893. She quickly fell pregnant and a baby was born by the end of the year. However, Chun Ayee was deeply unhappy and she wanted to return to China, and a quarrel ensued. Her fragile state of mind was not understood until events unfolded a week later. Early one morning, Ah Yee took a large supply of Leon King Nam's opium and consumed it all at once. She had never taken opium before and had taken a quarter of an ounce which was a fatal dose. The doctor was summoned, but despite medical intervention, she died mid-afternoon after a long and agonising demise. Medical help given contributed to the distressful situation. First, she was injected with morphia to wake her up before her stomach was manually pumped out several times.⁶⁵ At the time of her death she was the only Chinese woman living on Thursday Island. There were three other wives of Chinese men living there, but they were White women:

⁶⁰ Emily Field, "Lum So San Family Saga", private document, Cairns, date unknown, pp. 8–9.

⁶¹ Taam Sze Pui, *My Life and Work* (Hong Kong, 1925), <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-52781424>.

⁶² Oral History, 2001: Estelle Kingsley, Cairns, 2 May 2001, Tape 1.

⁶³ Oral History, 2002: Tiger See Hoe, Innisfail, 29 July 2002.

⁶⁴ Oral History, 2002: Sadie Fong On and Ruby Cahill, Atherton, 8 May 2002, and Oral History, 2002: Eleanor Chun Tie, Townsville, 21 May 2002.

⁶⁵ Queensland State Archives (QSA): JUS/N226/94/337, Yet Ah Yee, 1894.

Mrs Ah Sange (Mary Whyte),⁶⁶ Mrs Ah Bow (Charlotte Andrews)⁶⁷ and Mrs Ah Sue (Bridget O'Dwyer).⁶⁸ After her death, King Nam went back to China and brought out a second wife, Wong Sam, in 1897, but they remained only a few months before returning to China for good.⁶⁹

The broader social response to the arrival of Chinese women did not lead to greater support either. Chinese women were subject to harassment, verbal abuse and acts of violence, despite efforts by the Chinese community to shield them. This is highlighted in an incidence outlined in 1889 when the *Cooktown Courier* reported:

Two Chinese women were attending to the shop, kept by Quong Hing and Co., ... A bluejacket, and a civilian, we are sorry to say a Scotchman, went in for fruit. The bluejacket purchased and paid for his lot, the other man took what he required and then commenced pelting the women with apples and fruit, hitting them in the face, till they sat down and cried. Subsequently this brute hit one of them on the face with his fist, and afterwards on the head with a broom handle. Captain Mackay came up at this juncture and cautioned the bluejacket, who went quietly down to his ship, but the other commenced using the most abusive of language.⁷⁰

One of the perpetrators, described in disgust as a “brute”, not only physically assaulted two Chinese female shop attendants at the merchant firm Quong Hing and Co., but he kept up the assault with a verbal barrage “using the most abusive of language”. Their distress was palpable and shown by the admission that the women had “sat down and cried”. This incident indicates a number of contradictory positions by White men within the community towards the Chinese community, women, and masculine standards of behaviour in a frontier society.

On one hand, prejudice and racism against Chinese women was on public display as the recipients were female and Chinese. On the other hand, outrage and disgust was evident regarding the violent actions: not just because the behaviour was unacceptable, not only because it was perpetrated upon women, but because the victims were Chinese women who were recognised as particularly vulnerable members of the community. The abuse, perpetrated by a “Scotchman”, only added insult to the injury of unmanly conduct and this aspect was emphasised as a sad indictment unbecoming Scottish settlers. Abuse towards Chinese women came in many forms and was perpetrated not only by members of the White community but also from within the Chinese community. The abuse of some *mui tsai* has already been discussed, but abuse within the family also occurred. That conjugal abuse of Chinese wives by their husbands took place is demonstrated in the unusual move by a Chinese woman when she fled the family home in Mackay.

⁶⁶ *Brisbane Courier*, 3 June 1902, p. 4

⁶⁷ QSA: JUS/A59 AH SANG vs Bridget AH SUE for unlawfully beating child Amelia Ah Sang, Thursday Island. Mrs Charlotte Ah Bow was summonsed to court as a witness in a case against Mrs Bridget Ah Sue for indecent language.

⁶⁸ QSA: A/18963 AH SUE. Ah Sue was registered as a boarding house keeper for a large boarding house which could hold up to seventeen persons.

⁶⁹ *North Queensland Register*, 8 September 1897, p. 22. King Nam had suffered a business downturn after the 1893-94 bank crashes from which he could not recover, and he did not wish to risk his family again.

⁷⁰ “Disgraceful Scenes”, *Cooktown Courier*, 30 July 1889, p. 2.

In 1900, Charters Towers storekeeper Gee Wah married China-born Ti Yu and their first child, a daughter, was born a year later followed quickly by two sons. In 1908, now living in Mackay, Ti Yu (Mrs Gee Wah) fled her home to Cairns, then Thursday Island, before departing for Hong Kong with her daughter, Nellie. Within the community it was known that Ti Yu lived in an abusive marriage. With no time to seek a Certificate Exempting from the Dictation Test so that they could return, a photograph was taken of the pair in Cairns before they travelled to Thursday Island as a means to secure proof of Nellie's status as an Australian-born British subject. Travelling under the pseudonym "Mrs Ross", Ti Yu was supported by a female community who kept her movements and alias a secret, while they assisted her with a safe passage back to China.⁷¹ Her flight, and the prospect that domestic violence was present within the Chinese family, suggests that further work needs to be done in this area.

Conclusion

"Daughters of the Flowery Land" who migrated to Queensland from 1860 to 1920 found themselves in a hostile environment with lives completely changed from the certainty of traditional family life in the village in China. While Confucian protocols were eased to ensure a Chinese man's conjugal rights were catered to while overseas, Chinese females chosen to emigrate to Queensland, including girl *mui tsai*, faced a new world of uncertainty and often hardship, deprivation and loneliness. Their situation was made worse by the fact that support from other Chinese women remained scarce throughout their lifetimes due to the Commonwealth government's restrictive legislation, which denied or limited entry conditions for wives and families, or by joining their husbands in rural and remote places where no other Chinese women were present. Despite this, many women as second wives in a "two primary wife" family did flourish and went on to lead successful lives surrounded by family and friends from the broader community. By investigating Chinese women's shared experiences over a sixty-year period, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a deeper insight into their lives has emerged which has enhanced an understanding of Queensland's Chinese settler experience and family formation.

⁷¹ NAA: BP234/1, SB1930/3438, "Mrs Nellie Gee Wah - Application for admission of her three children - Includes photographs".