

# NT CHINESE MUSEUM

## Short History

Did you know that at one time the Chinese population outnumbered the European population in the Top End? Many were recruited by the Government of the day and by 1878 the Chinese were the largest non-Aboriginal group of the time.

According to the Government Resident's report of 1909, there were 6122 Chinese in the NT by 1888. The "coolies" were contracted to work the goldfields and later the building of the railway line from Palmerston to Pine Creek.

These early Chinese settlers were mainly from the Kwantung Province in south China and primarily spoke the Sze Yup and Hakka dialects. The local newspaper of the time noted of the Chinese arrival in the NT: "The coolies were landed here in a poor state of health, and if they had been so many cattle, instead of human beings, their low condition would have caused their employers to feed them and to strengthen them before putting them to work."

By 1881, anti-Chinese feeling in South Australia was sufficiently strong to fix a boundary between the Northern Territory and South Australia (1000 miles north of Adelaide). The Chinese could pass south of this line only if they paid a ten pound entry tax. But it was the need for cheap labour which allowed the Chinese to continue their work in the Northern Territory and soon enough they were working their own claims, establishing market gardens and engaging in general industry and commerce.

In the 1890s the economic depression and a national campaign aimed at a White Australia mean many Chinese left the Territory but some stayed on and became Australian citizens in the brief period when it was possible and settled permanently in the Territory. These families increased and extended their commercial base in Darwin.

This description from 1897: "Chinese, who are ready and willing to work night or day and seven days a week, have ousted Europeans from many branches of trade. Hairdressing, tailoring and bootmaking are all done by them....The chefs are invariably Chinamen; this applies to most of the Northern Territory." But the Chinese settlement in the NT was not approved of by the rest of Australia, as Banjo Paterson wrote in The Bulletin in 1898: "...the Territory itself is now clamouring for the introduction of the cheap and nasty Chow, notwithstanding that it is breeding its own Chinky fast enough, in all conscience. The Territory people want more Chows and would gladly cut loose from South Australia to get them." Chinatown in Cavenagh Street had become a hive of Chinese activity and commerce. It featured many stores including a "bootmaker, tailor, baker, hairdresser, several washerwomen and many gardeners." There were also many restaurants and a seed and plant shop - the first of its kind in the Territory (even the Government Resident of the time made purchases there).

By the 1920s the Chinese had become economically powerful in the region but it wasn't until sometime after World War Two that they were able to overcome discriminatory measures such as not being allowed to work in the public service. Nevertheless, the Chinese continued to forge ahead and as we look back to recent twentieth century history the impact of those who remained has been well noted. In politics, in business, in sport and recreation, in the development of the general lifestyle of the Northern Territory - these areas and more have been "touched" by the Chinese. And

not just those born and bred here, but those more recent arrivals who have chosen the Territory as their home.

Today in our proudly cosmopolitan community, there is a sharing of culture and blending of knowledge and roots. We pay tribute to our forefathers who helped make it so. This short history has been compiled from excerpts from the following books: Cathay of the North by Frances Chan The Chinese in the Northern Territory by Timothy G Jones Beyond Chinatown by Diana Giese Sweet & Sour compiled by the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT.

## Background to the Chinese in the Northern Territory

The first group of Chinese labourers arrived in Darwin in 1874 as indentured labourers or 'coolies'. Many were highly skilled tradesmen and they were employed on roads, in the mines, on the Overland Telegraph and on railway construction. In the late 19th century, there were up to seven times more Chinese in the Territory than any other ethnic group and since then, the Chinese have continued to play a very important part in the development of the NT. Their early contributions to all branches of industry and business were essential and without their enterprise, skills and the food they grew, life in the Territory would have been significantly less attractive. They faced extreme hardships and discrimination but their determination and perseverance helped them to overcome these difficulties and have earned them a very important place in Territory society and history.

## Purpose of the Museum

The Museum aims to encourage greater awareness and understanding of the history of the Chinese in the Territory. The Museum is open to the public and other institutions, for general interest, research and education. The Museum is a stimulus for families and individuals to research and document their histories and serves to remind present and future generations of their heritage. The opening of the NT Chinese Museum is just the beginning. There is much more research to be undertaken; more themes to be explored and developed; many more stories to be told and photos and objects to be found and displayed. The Museum highlights the importance and explores the history of the Chinese contribution to the development of the Northern Territory and is committed to documenting and preserving the history of the Chinese in the Territory, particularly Darwin and the surrounding regions.

## The Museum Project

For the Chinese, honouring our ancestors is a duty, a passion, a belief and a commitment. It was with great determination, then, that in the 1990's, the Chung Wah Society undertook a project which today stands proudly at the Society's headquarters - the Northern Territory Chinese Museum.

Born from the Chinatown '42 display which was put together as part of the Bombing of Darwin, 50th Commemorative Year, the Chinese Museum is packed with material documenting the lives and times of Darwin Chinese through the years. Small but well-appointed, the Museum is a tribute to our ancestors and contains many colourful insights. Elements of it featured in the 1996 Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory display, Sweet and Sour. Personal histories, family trees, prominent Chinese citizen, pay tribute to the contributions made in the past to Darwin society.

A model of the old Chinatown allows the visitor to visualise that bustling street in the early days. And the history of the painstakingly hand crafted silk banner presented to William G Stretton in 1913 demonstrates the Chinese connection with the officials of the time. Photographs of times past

are dotted throughout the Museum, depicting the business, social, religious and cultural elements of Darwin Chinese.

This fascinating journey of Darwin through the eyes of its Chinese inhabitants is proudly available for all to see and experience. We invite you to come and spend some time in the Chinese Museum - a tribute to our ancestors and the many who helped build Darwin's multicultural society.