

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Lily Ah Toy
1917-2001
Northern Territory Pioneer

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 4 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: Lily Ah Toy

Director/Producer Frank Heimans **Executive Producer** Sharon Connolly

Duration 27 minutes **Year** 1995

Study Guide prepared by Diane O'Flaherty © NFSA

Also in Series 4: Graeme Bell, Frida Brown, Professor Helen Hughes, Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, James McClelland, Shirley Strickland de la Hunty

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SYNOPSIS

Lily Ah Toy was born in Darwin in 1917 of Chinese parents and schooled in all the old Chinese traditions. She became a housemaid for a European family after leaving Darwin Public School at 14. Then she met Jimmy, a hawker with his own market garden and truck. Lily and Jimmy married and moved to Pine Creek to set up a general store.

Apart from supplying the Pine Creek population with provisions, Lily bore five children and raised another five adopted children. She and Jimmy were also responsible for rescuing many people stranded by floods or lost in the bush.

When Darwin was bombed by the Japanese, the family was evacuated to Adelaide and did not move back to Pine Creek until 1945. Lily then ran the Pine Creek store while Jimmy opened a new shop in Darwin. That shop, like most of Darwin, was devastated by Cyclone Tracy in 1974.

In her later years, Lily spent her time with her children and grandchildren, whom she describes as 'the lucky generation'. Her philosophy for a happy life was 'Work hard, always be honest and don't keep guilty secrets.'

CURRICULUM LINKS

Threads and activities developed in this study guide will have interest and relevance for teachers and students from middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels studying English, Studies of Society and Environment, History, Media Studies, Cultural Studies, Geography, Beliefs and Values.

CONTEXTUALISING LEARNING

The Northern Territory is the least populated of all Australia's states and territories. It harbours some of our most remote and inhospitable country. The program provides opportunities to learn about the contributions made by Chinese Australians in developing parts of the Northern Territory from the late 19th century onwards. Of equal importance is the record of Lily Ah Toy's memories, which allow insight into the Chinese belief system, values and rituals. All this has influenced and enriched the Australia we know today.

Activity

Before watching, the following activity will enhance students' learning opportunities. Each location listed below is part of Lily's story:

- Darwin (Lily's birthplace. She lived her teenage and later years here.)
- Pine Creek (Location of Jimmy's general store. Much of Lily's married life was here.)
- Katherine (township of major route south)
- Umbawarra (man lost in the bush here)
- East Alligator River (buffalo shooter out of food; rescued from the region)
- To gain some feeling for isolation, plot each location on a map.
- List some characteristics of slavery. Why is it suggested that the Islanders on the cane fields were slaves?
- How far from Darwin is each town? The program will give you some answers, but a detailed atlas is your best resource.
- For perspective, add your own town or city.

BELIEFS AND VALUES

Lily is a woman with strong beliefs and values. Many of these obviously come from her inherited culture, but the unique mix of her ethnicity and her determination makes Lily the colonist she is. Let's look at some important ingredients emerging from her story.

The Temple

Lily remembers the Chinese temple as integral to her life. 'The family go to the temple and pay their respects to the different deities.' The program acknowledges the importance of religion in Lily's life by establishing the atmosphere of the film with a shot of the temple.

- What else in the opening sequence confirms the importance of religion for Lily?
- Why does the camera pan across wafting incense smoke before the title of the program appears?
- How does the film's ending tie in with the opening? Why does the director make this choice?
- Research the significance of Lily's action which closes the film—three strikes upon the gong and bell.
- What mood is served by the music at the beginning and end of the program? Why is it important?

Sensitivity to Others

For her whole life Lily saw her role as helping. She would say it was her destiny. '...from the moment you're born, you cry, that's it...All is destiny.'

- What is the label in Christian religion that is given to the concept of destiny?
- List at least four instances where Lily helped others.
- Choose a specific example from one of the four examples and examine the link to Lily's belief in 'Jing Chin...what will be will be.'

FAMILY AND IDENTITY

Traditionally, Chinese people value family and extended family.

- What evidence to support this statement can you find in the program? Cite a couple of examples.
- There is much to be learned from the family photographs. What observations can you make about them as a series, and how do they contribute individually?

The first five minutes of Lily's story details the history of her mother and father. Lily's father was typical of the Haka men who came from China to work on the railroad from Palmerston to Pine Creek and later in the gold mine. The first Chinese arrived in the Northern Territory in 1874 through recruitment by government. In 1888 the Chinese population was 7,000 and the European population was between 1,000 and 2,000. (As it would be about another 80 years before Aboriginals were included in government statistics, there is no official record of their number in the Territory at that time.) The 'White Australia policy' and the 1890s depression meant that the balance between Chinese and European became more even by 1910. This population shift could help to account for Lily's parents' poverty.

- What was the White Australia policy?
- Why did the 1890s depression cause men to go to the Northern Territory?

- What are the implications, both moral and historic, of the omission of Aboriginal Australians from the Census?

Lily's mother was born in Darwin. Later she insisted to her husband, 'I'm an Australian.' Her parents were 'here and she wants her children to be living in Australia. In Darwin.' So, Lily tells us, she wouldn't go back to China.

- What can you deduce about Lily's mother's aspirations for her children?
- Why does this tie in with Lily's and Jimmy's hopes that their children 'can have a better life'? What did Lily mean by 'a better life'?
- Can you see a progression with each generation? Explain why this might occur.

Lily hoped her daughters would marry 'people of Chinese background' but emphasised 'if they liked the chap...well that's alright.'

- Look at the photos of Lily's children's wedding days. Does your observation add understanding to Lily's gender specific comment? Do you think any of them have chosen partners from other ethnic backgrounds. Why did Lily prefer the children marry within their own culture? What are the possible consequences of marrying outside one's culture, both negative and positive?
- Compare Lily's wedding photo to those of her children. What conclusions can you draw from the differences?
- Intermarriage is occurring more today than in the past. Put forward some reasons why this is happening.
- Find out about Australia's multicultural policy. How is multiculturalism defined? In what ways is the policy implemented? How big a factor do you think it has been in encouraging 'celebration' of diversity? What has been its effect on racial tolerance in Australia?

It was obviously difficult for Lily's parents to survive in an English-speaking country when the language was so difficult for them.

- Why could Lily's mother not speak English?
- Lily is adamant about the handicap of not writing English. Why is it so important that records of birth are accurate? List some other areas that suffered because her parents could not write English. Would it be the same today for any immigrant who could not write English? Brainstorm the importance of basic communication in everyday life. Make 2 lists beginning with 'If I could not speak/write English, I would be excluded from....'

Children

Lily's life was filled with children—her own and those of other people.

- Within Chinese culture, sons are often considered more important than daughters. Consider the following statements and explain why each situation shows the boy being favoured over the girl.

'...the war's on [WW1] and another girl'—Lily's father (attributed)

'...a Chinese lady from Darwin...wanted to adopt me, but my mother said no...save the milk for my grandson'—Lily's father in law (attributed)

'...my first son and my second son...when they go to high school'—Lily

- Research the Chinese government's regulations about restricting the number of children per family, in both rural areas and cities. Why did this lead to the practice of some people ensuring their surviving offspring were male?

- The 'flying doctor' delivered Lily's child, Edward. Look at the role of the Flying Doctor Service in making the outback a safer place.

Diet

The anecdotal evidence Lily supplies about what she ate as a child allows us insight into the ancient remedies of China, which many Australians embrace enthusiastically today.

- The memory, 'we have an egg, specially if it's our birthday' is typical of a child. What does the child's point of view contribute to the narrative?
- Lily speaks of some traditional Chinese medicinal understandings about how diet regulates health. To understand more about this area, research the principles of Yin and Yang. You will then grasp more of the meaning attached to 'blood heating' and 'blood cooling' foods.
- Why did Lily's mother bathe her in warm, bitter melon vine water to reduce fever?

RITUALS

Chinese New Year

- Chinese New Year was celebrated, even for a poor family such as Lily's, with a 'new suit of clothes... (and a) new pair of clogs painted red.' These clogs were carved out of the boxes that kerosene tins came in. What was the symbolism of the clogs and of painting them red?
- Lily's memories as a child are of the goodies she received rather than the religious rituals of the day. This adds spontaneity and authenticity. Use this incident as a starting point to bring together your thoughts on the importance of memories.

- Lily recalls that the family ate 'chicken and pork and crackers.' Why do these foods suggest the importance of the occasion?

Chinese Marriage Ceremony

- The wedding day preparation was elaborate. List some of the rituals adhered to and look for a connection with Jing Chin.
- Is there any Chinese tradition that is similar to an Australian tradition?. Could we have adopted their tradition and changed it slightly to fit our way of life?
- Feng Shui works with mirrors that serve a similar purpose to the one hung around Lily's neck. What is this Chinese principle?
- Research why the day of a marriage must be propitious according to 'the book they go through'. What is the name of this book?

WAR

During World War 2, the Japanese bombed Darwin and as far inland as Katherine.

- When Pine Creek was bombed, Lily and her family took cover in the Enterprise Mine tunnel. Why was this a good air-raid shelter?

Lily and her extended family were evacuated during the war, after the bombing of Darwin and Katherine. They travelled by train and army truck convoy from Pine Creek to Adelaide. This was their route: Pine Creek, Katherine, Burden, Eliot (via army truck), Barrel Creek, Alice Springs (via army truck)

- What is the distance between each city? Estimate the time involved for the trip by the means of transport then available. The program will give you some help here.

- Plot the towns on your map.
- What does the black and white photo of the 'one-eyed Chinese chap' add to Lily's story?
- Considering this was wartime and Lily was traversing such remote country with at least eight adults and fourteen children, how would you describe:
 - the journey?
 - the character of those involved?
- In 1945, the family returned to Pine Creek to rebuild their general store and begin their life again. What does their return tell you about Lily's and Jimmy's feelings for the Territory?
- The detail of the 'big snake crawling along the window' near the children adds a very human touch to Lily's memories. Specifically, what does the detail add? Why does this incident act as a contrast to Lily's previous behaviour, and how would you describe the emergent picture of Lily after viewing this segment?

PIONEERS

This program gives Lily the title of 'pioneer'. Most people think of Australia's pioneers of British origin and male.

- Discuss the concept of 'pioneer'.
- Read Judith Wright's poem 'Bullocky' as a typical example of the traditional view.
- Consider the following excerpts from Lily's story. Explain why these incidents denote Lily as a pioneer.
 - Lily and Jimmy ran 'just a little country shop...groceries and odd bits and stuff.' Lily 'helped...unpack and serve and...clean.'
 - 'My part was to help people' When a man was lost 'tin scratching' she sent out the truck and they found him 'crawling around in circles.'
 - Lily responded to the distress message scratched on the back of a mirror by the buffalo shooter who was in dire need of food. Her actions resulted in not only the rescue of the shooter but also of the stranded boat, which had failed to meet him.
 - She saved the life of a sick Aboriginal child brought to her store by a medicine man who worked as a linesman for the Post Master General's department.
- Who would Lily and Jimmy have been supplying and how would those people have survived without such a shop?
- What was 'tin scratching'?
- What irony can you see in the medicine man's employment as a linesman? Can you see further irony in the recount, 'a witch doctor, medicine man, rushed to us for help'?
- There are many other examples to back Lily's claim as a pioneer. Name two more.

ORAL HISTORY

To research this program, the filmmakers relied largely on oral history transcripts. These are housed in archives.

- Find out about the archive service in your state/territory. Why is it crucial that such archives exist?
- How does oral history 'work'? As well as those of archive services and history organizations, many public libraries operate oral history programs as part of their focus on local area study. Interviewers are usually volunteers. Find out more about the process, including:
 - Who decides the subjects?
 - How interviews are conducted.
 - Who can lodge an oral history in a collection.
 - How is material accessed?
 - What questions would you have asked Lily?
- Who do you know who has history to contribute? Older people such as grandparents make perfect subjects. Prepare for an oral history interview with your chosen subject by doing some preliminary research. Use 'time' and 'place' as your starting points. What will be your sources? Will you use only books? Construct a set of questions developed around theme areas. Tape the interview, then transcribe it. Compare the findings of your oral history interview with published sources of information about the same time and place. Is there agreement in the stories? Are there topics or elements not included in 'official' history? What reasons can you give for any variations or differences? Write about what you have learnt. Include the unique insights that you have gained by conducting the oral history interview.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

The Northern Territory Archives Service:

Lily Ah Toy—<http://www.territorystories.nt.gov.au/handle/10070/218063>

A List of Records Holdings Relating to Chinese People in the Northern Territory—<https://artsandmuseums.nt.gov.au/northern-territory-archives-service/archives-subject-guides/chinese-people-in-nt>

Lily Ah Toy has deposited the following items:

- NTRS 226 Oral history interview TS 1 (1-2)
- NTRS 234 Photographic copyprints of Pine Creek n.d.

Annette Shun Wah & Greg Aitkin, **Banquet—Ten Courses to Harmony**, Doubleday, 1999

The Territory—a website from the Northern Territory Government—<https://nt.gov.au/>

Judith Wright, **A Human Pattern: Selected Poems**, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1990 (Includes 'Bullocky')