

The banana trade: its importance to Melbourne's Chinese and Little Bourke Street, 1880s-1930s

Sophie Couchman

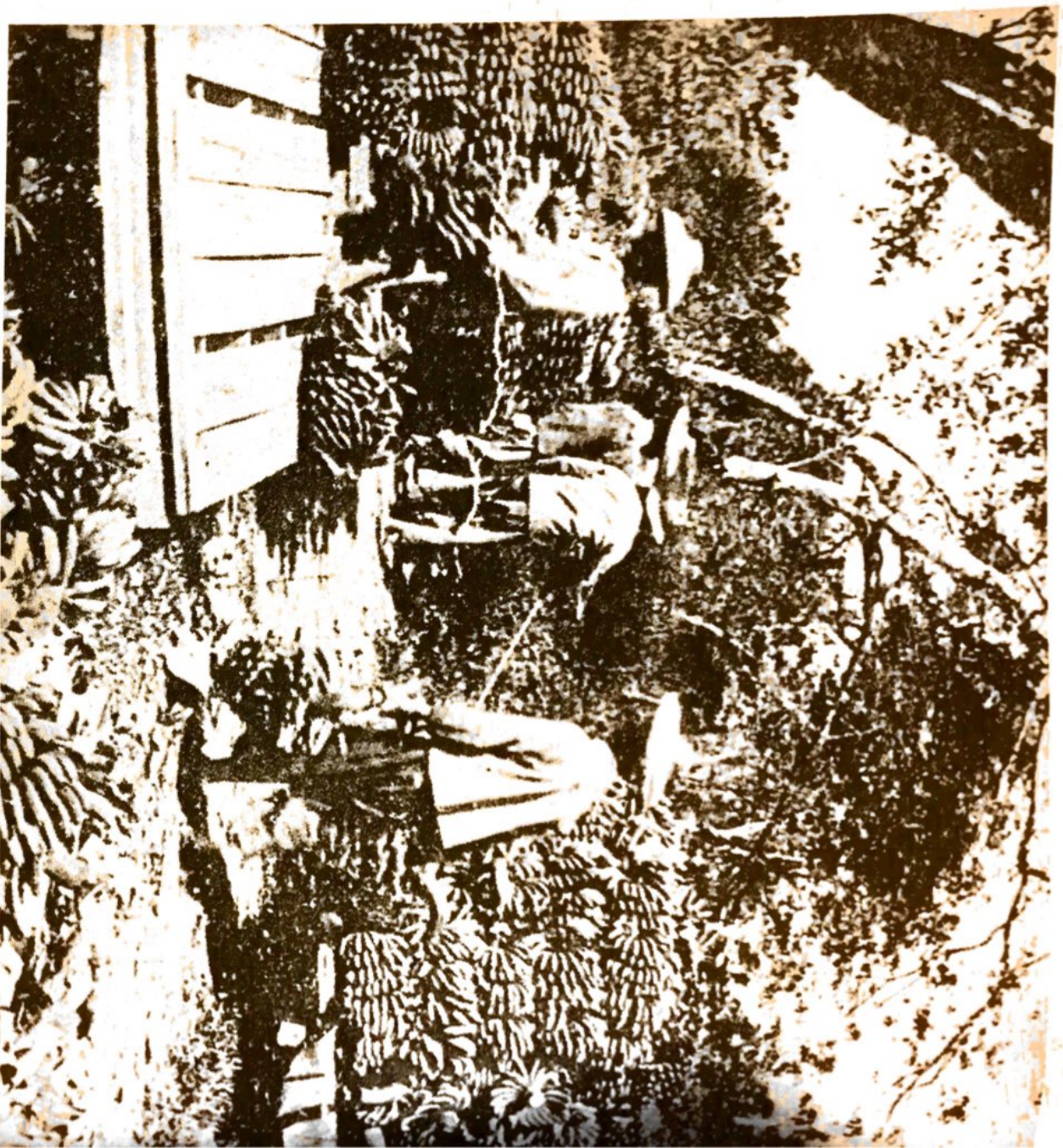
At the turn of the nineteenth century Little Bourke Street was a focal point of the banana wholesaling industry in Melbourne. Chinese banana merchants were an important part of the Chinese community and also a substantial part of banana wholesaling in Little Bourke Street.

The research in this paper relies on the Sands and McDougall Melbourne Directories and the Statistical Register of Victoria supplemented by a number of oral accounts. Using these resources it investigates the importance of the banana industry to the Chinese in Melbourne and to Little Bourke Street from the 1880s to the 1940s. It will examine the distribution of the industry in Little Bourke Street and how it changed over that period.

There has been very little research done in this area. The main research into the Australian Chinese banana industry has been done by Yong (1964). Yong's paper examines the Chinese banana merchants in New South Wales and Victoria, though most of his research is supported by evidence from New South Wales sources. His paper is based on old newspaper accounts, both Chinese and Australian, and the Royal Commission on the Fruit Industry in 1913-14. Yong's research has been an important starting point for this paper, which aims to broaden the statistical base that Yong used and to provide more detail about which and how many Chinese merchants were involved in the industry in Melbourne. This paper is geographical rather than historical in approach.

Blake's honours thesis (1975) was also useful as she used the Sands and McDougall Melbourne Directories in her study of Melbourne's Chinatown. Her study is of Chinatown as a whole and although she has some discussion of the fruit and vegetable merchants in Little Bourke Street, she has not covered the area in depth and relies on Yong for much of her information.

Cole (1980) has edited a book which pieces together a history of Melbourne's fruit and vegetable markets. Although it is poorly sourced it



provides important information about Melbourne's markets from their origins to the present day. Unfortunately it makes scant reference to the Chinese in the fruit and vegetable industries. His research is based on information in the archives of the Melbourne City Council and its Markets Department, the Market Trust and personal recollections. It also uses information from an unpublished history of the fruit trade written by H. J. Davis in 1958.

Other work on the Chinese and the banana industry concentrates on the Chinese growers in Queensland and Northern New South Wales. Jones (1961) examines the banana industry in Cardwell Shire, May (1985) in the Cairns district, while Bolton (1970) gives a more general discussion of Chinese activities in the banana industry in Queensland. Their research demonstrates the importance of Chinese growers in the North and the issues which

Loading bananas
Queensland
Photo courtesy Owen

concerned them, in particular Victoria's ban on importing Queensland banana's because of fruit fly fears and competition for sales with Fiji.

Overview of the banana industry 1880-1920s:

The Queensland side of the story

Bananas have been grown in Australia since the 1830s, when government botanist Walter Hill conducted experimental plantings in Bowen and Cardwell, in Northern Queensland (Bolton 1963). However, commercial production of bananas in Australia did not really develop until the 1880s when crops from Queensland were exported south. Business rapidly took off and by 1905-6 Queensland was growing 31,878 tonnes of bananas. Production dropped off between 1910 and 1921, partly because of World War I and partly due to competition from Fiji and Northern New South Wales. Production rose back to previous figures after that date (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Production of Bananas in Queensland, 1880-1941

<i>Year</i>	<i>Production (tonnes)</i>
1880-81	914
1885-86	2,108
1890-91	27,941
1895-96	18,873
1900-01	29,491
1905-06	31,878
1910-11	14,250
1915-16	15,393
1920-21	15,215
1925-26	32,818
1930-31	38,965
1935-36	22,023
1940-41	19,787

Source: 1992 Queensland Yearbook, Australian Bureau of Statistics

Imports of bananas into Victoria

Queensland was the dominant exporter of bananas to Victoria. According to the Statistical Register of Victoria, bananas have been imported into Victoria since 1897, probably earlier (see Table 2 below). Banana imports from Fiji were spasmodic until 1909, when direct trading was established

between Fiji and Victoria (Yong 1964). New South Wales became an important player from 1906.

Table 2. Volume of bananas imported into Victoria 1897-1912

Year	Classification	Origin			
		Qld	NSW	Fiji	Other
1897	Banana, etc	208,903b	6,241b	446b	56b
1901	Bananas, pines, etc.	227,138b	274b	-	-
1902	Bananas	78,488c	-	-	-
1903	Bananas	42,309c	-	7c	-
1904	Bananas	50,441c	4c	-	-
1905	Bananas	42,309c	-	7c	-
1906	Bananas	137,894c	3,659c	2,504c	-
1907	Bananas	160,178c	1,105c	22c	-
1908	Bananas	141,177c	288c	15c	135c
1909	Bananas	127,511c	4,015c	-	-
1910	Bananas	n/a	n/a	19,234c	31c
1911	Bananas	n/a	n/a	83,532c	-
1912	Bananas	n/a	n/a	89,259c	-

b Bushels: a measure of capacity containing 4 pecks or 8 gallons, equal to 2218.19 cubic inches.

c Centals: weight of 100 pounds avoirdupois. Introduced in 1859.

Other category in 1908 and 1910 is New Caledonia.

Source: Statistical Register of Victoria, 1897, 1901-1912.

Nervous about spreading fruit fly by infested bananas from Queensland the Victorian government supported the import of Fijian bananas by subsidising shipping. From 1909 they supplied £2,000 a year which led to an extra charge of 1s.2d per bunch on Queensland products. In addition to this the Fijian government provided £5,000 annually (Yong 1964).

There was concern that Victoria would ban Queensland bananas altogether, and on 26 March 1907 three Chinese banana merchants from Melbourne, Messrs Wong, Young and Loon, went to visit Mr Philp, the Queensland Premier, to discuss Victorian fruit fly regulations (copy of letter 15034, 26 March 1907, from B. Wareham to R. Philp, Premier, in ADS/N62 Queensland State Archives). B. Wareham argued in his letter of introduction that *The Age* newspaper had been adopting a protectionist policy aimed at blocking Queensland fruit imports to the advantage of Victorian fruit growers. They were hoping to get the Department of Agriculture to "take such steps as may be necessary to guard the interests of the Queensland Fruit Growers... which are being seriously threatened"

(*ibid.*). Presumably Melbourne banana importers who did not have links with Fijian banana growers had been threatened by this push towards Fijian bananas. It is interesting that three Chinese delegates were chosen to represent the "Melbourne Banana Importers". This may have been the beginnings of the Chinese banana trade association mentioned by Yong (1964). This association was formed by Chinese banana merchants in Melbourne in 1909 to promote the banana trade and to strengthen cooperation among members (Yong 1964).

However it was not just fear of fruit fly which led to a move by some merchants to import bananas from Fiji rather than Queensland. The reasons behind the shift of preference to Fijian bananas by both Melbourne and Sydney merchants was discussed during the Royal Commission on the Fruit Industry in 1913 and 1914 (Royal Commission on the Fruit Industry 1913).

Supplies from Queensland were unreliable. A number of banana growers disheartened by a few severe cyclones changed to sugarcane, a more economically stable crop (May 1985). During World War I, delays were experienced in shipping bananas, as older ships were used (Jones 1961). Even before the war the ships used were no comparison for the fast steamers used by the Fijians (Royal Commission on the Fruit Industry 1913), which were specially fitted with compartments which provided adequate ventilation (Cole 1980). This meant Fijian bananas arrived in better condition.

Samuel Wong, a fruit merchant trading as Wing Mow & Co at the Western Market, told the Royal Commission on the Fruit Industry that after a few days Queensland bananas were unsaleable, while Fijian bananas could be sold for up to a month. The 'Gros Michel' banana, which came from Fiji, was also believed to be a better looking fruit and therefore more saleable (Royal Commission on the Fruit Industry 1913). According to Bolton (1970) the Australian United Steam Navigation Company, which had a monopoly on coastal shipping between Queensland and Sydney and Melbourne, saw no reason to adapt ships to better transport bananas. Often bananas rotted in humid badly ventilated holds or were piled on deck where they were subject to pilfering. The *Cairns Post* in 1890 noted one occasion when Melbourne Wharf labourers had to use pumps to remove the remnants of a shipment of Cairns bananas from the hold!

However in 1911 tariff duties were placed on Fijian bananas by the federal government, and were further increased in 1920 and 1921. The duties went from 1s per cental, before the 1911 increases, to 8s.6d per cental in 1921 (Yong 1964). This practically barred the import of any Fijian bananas into Australia. While Queensland's production was gradually recovering in 1919 and 1920 banana production in the Tweed River area on the North Coast of New South Wales began to grow. During World War I Chinese merchants in Sydney began purchasing land in Northern NSW. After the war returned

soldiers also began purchasing land there. The price of land rose due to strong Chinese competition; this led to discontent, and eventually anti-Chinese race riots in 1919. This boom in Northern New South Wales however did not last long, because in 1925, an outbreak of the 'bunchy top' virus devastated crops.

Why did the Chinese become banana merchants?

When the Melbourne Chinese were first establishing themselves as banana merchants at the turn of the century, Queensland was the largest exporter of bananas to Victoria (see Table 2). It appears the decision by Melbourne Chinese to become banana merchants was a natural extension of the domination of the Chinese growers in Northern Queensland.

The Chinese in Queensland were partly attracted to the industry because of the quick turnover of the banana crop. The majority of Chinese migrated to Australia with a sojourner attitude, keen to make their fortunes and then return to their homes and families in China. This meant that land was leased rather than bought. Once a banana tree reaches maturity they can be harvested continuously. After 5 to 6 years it is necessary to pull up the old trees, plant new suckers and fertilise the soil. Rather than do this the Chinese found it less labour intensive and more economical to clear another block of land (May 1985). Much of the area around Cairns was cleared in this fashion.

Because European Australians were not initially interested in banana growing there was an opportunity for the Chinese to become involved in an industry not pursued by European Australians. There is also some evidence to suggest that Chinese migrants from southern China may have had a background in banana cultivation (personal account, Mabel Wang).

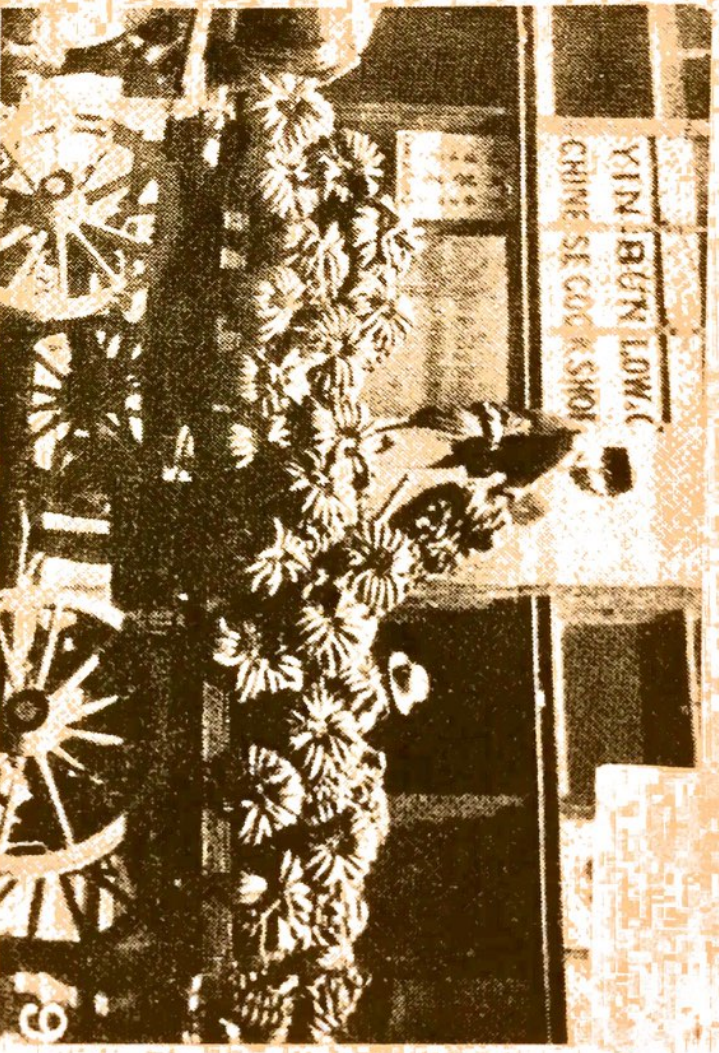
At least one Chinese wholesaling company opened in Melbourne as a result of success in Queensland. The Geraldton Trading Company was established in Queensland in 1901 and then opened a wholesaling outlet at 185-187 Russell Street in Melbourne as well as outlets in Sydney, Adelaide and Perth. It is possible that merchants in Melbourne had family ties in Queensland and later in Northern NSW. The Wing Young Company, established in 1925-6, leased about 100 acres of land near Noosa (personal account, Philip Chen). This meant that the company partly wholesaled their own bananas.

Banana merchants needed to liaise closely with growers in order to secure continuing business. Chinese merchants would therefore have had a much greater chance of establishing good business links with the Chinese growers as there would not have been the cultural and language difficulties that European Australians would have encountered.

Why did Chinese banana merchants locate in Little Bourke Street?

There was already a wholesale fruit and vegetable market, the Western Market, in Melbourne in the 1880s when banana merchants first started

Unloading bananas in
Little Bourke Street, 1899.
Reproduced from *The Leader*,
11 February 1899, p. 34.



getting established. However the majority of banana merchants established their businesses in Little Bourke Street. Part of the reason why can be found in conditions at the Western Market.

The main area for wholesaling fruit until 1930 was at the Western Market, with some wholesaling at the Eastern Market until the 1880s (Cole 1980). The Western Market was located in the block bounded by Market, Collins, William Streets and Flinders Lane. It opened in December 1841 as a general market but by 1908 had become "the chief wholesale fruit supply centre for the city and suburbs and the sale point of Queensland bananas" (*Australasian* 1908). It was a bustling centre of activity.

Every day, fruit is distributed from this centre, but Mondays and Fridays are the chief days of the week. Then the great quadrangle is as busy as a beehive. From nearly all the suburbs retailers come in their carts for their bi-weekly supply. Business begins very early in the morning and slackens off somewhat towards midday. Street hawkers, too, buy in the Western Market, and, as will be seen by their barrows in Swanston Street, are adepts at picking good fruit... There are peaches from Mildura, packed splendidly, pineapples and banana from Queensland, golden plantains from Fiji, tomatoes as large as

your two fists from Bendigo, raspberries from Lilydale and giant figs from all parts of the State. Buying and selling go on smartly, and very few words are wasted on either side (*Australasian* 1904).

However, despite renovations to the market, there was still not enough space to adequately accommodate wholesalers. It lacked facilities such as banana-ripening rooms and cool-storage chambers (Cole 1980). The Western Market stores were described by the Victorian Fruit-growers Central Association to be “small, badly ventilated, congested and unsuitable for storing fruit” (The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Railways on the proposed South Melbourne Perishable Fruit Produce Market 1915).

The pressure of space at the market meant that a number of wholesalers established businesses and storerooms outside the market area. Banana Alley, which consists of 18 tubular vaults 60 metres long by 5 metres wide, is located on Flinders Street near where the old Western Market used to be. These vaults were built in the late 1890s (*The Australian* 1985) as a viaduct for the Port Melbourne rail line. They were later found to be ideal for storage as they were located close to the main Melbourne Wharf and the Western Market. They were used for storing bananas as well as other goods, hence the name Banana Alley. Discussions with Diana McLeod, who researched an exhibition on Banana Alley, have revealed that fruit and vegetable merchants leased the area, including at least one Chinese fruit merchant.

It is probable that this pressure of space is why banana merchants and stores developed in Little Bourke Street. From my discussions with Mabel Wang and her brother Phillip Chen, whose father and uncles were involved in the industry at the time, it seems that the wholesale fruit and vegetable industry was not as centralised as it is now (personal accounts, Phillip Chen and Mabel Wang). It was quite common then for fruit and vegetable wholesalers to sell outside the main market (Cole 1980), unlike today where all fruit and vegetable wholesaling occurs at Footscray Market.

Since the Western Market was overcrowded and didn't have banana ripening facilities it seems logical that the Chinese would locate their wholesaling premises on Little Bourke Street, the Chinese precinct of Melbourne. Locating their businesses in Little Bourke Street meant that the owners could then live on the premises, they also had the security of being surrounded by the Chinese community, both good reasons for locating there. It may also have simply been a good business move. Little Bourke Street is nicely located between the wharfs (then near Flinders Street Station) and the Queen Victoria and Eastern Markets where produce was sold to the public. Some merchants also had retail outlets attached to their premises (Blake 1975). So by locating their wholesaling business in Little Bourke Street merchants also were able to service the Chinese community living there.

How did the banana industry operate?

It must have been quite a sight to gaze down Little Bourke Street at the turn of the century. Horse drawn carriages and carts would have been the norm. The streets would have bustled with Chinese in both traditional and European-style dress. European Australians were generally too nervous to venture into Chinatown, and did so mainly for business dealings with the merchants and furniture makers. Bananas were quite a feature of Little Bourke Street and are well remembered by those who lived at the time.

Ron Wong Loy, born in 1913, recalls that "wholesale fruit merchants in Little Bourke Street used to have banana-ripening rooms there, in those days bananas used to come down in bunches, and in those days it was quite a feature for these horse-drawn lorries to come rumbling up Little Bourke Street and up the lane into these various wholesale fruit merchants' premises and unload their loads of bananas, and they'd go into the ripening storerooms, and not only that they'd have facilities for roasting peanuts, that was quite a big trade..." (interview with Ron Wong Loy). Another person interviewed by Eve Young for the Museum of Chinese Australian History, who wishes to remain anonymous, remembers Little Bourke Street as being a wholesale fruit area with lots of banana stores. Two or three times a week on market days bananas were loaded onto open horse trucks in the early morning and would travel to the Victoria Market to be sold (interview, anonymous).

Russell Moy's father, Leong Moy, managed the Leong clan's Hoong Chong banana store which operated from 1902 out of a group of four shops at 141 Little Bourke Street. In 1912 they also had an outlet at 112 Little Bourke Street. By 1932 Hoong Cheong's, by then known as Leong Hoong Chong, had moved to the Victoria Market along with a number of other banana merchants in Little Bourke Street. The Hoong Chong banana store was a banana wholesale outlet with ripening rooms (interview with Russell Moy). The business also sold roasted peanuts.

Mabel Wang and Phillip Chen are children of George Wing Dann Chen. George and his three brothers ran the banana wholesaling company Wing Young & Co established in 1924-5 at 139 Little Bourke Street (personal accounts, Mabel Wang and Phillip Chen). The name of the company was taken from the name of one of George's brothers, William Wing Young Chen. This site was coincidentally later bought by Mabel and her husband David and was where they set up the "David Wang" department store. When Phillip became involved in running the business in the 1950s they had become general fruit merchants, like several other earlier banana merchants.

The Wing Young & Co. ripening room was located downstairs. It was a fairly small room about eight feet square. A corridor ran down the middle of the room and on both sides wooden shelves stored boxes of bananas

(personal account, Mabel Wang). The rooms were sealed and heated with town gas and the bananas ripened with raw gas as a ripening agent. For some companies this proved to be a lethal combination and resulted in a number of explosions and at least two fatalities until better methods were developed. Town gas was eventually banned and new methods adopted, including replacing raw gas with small amounts of ethylene (Cole 1980).

Above the ripening rooms Wing Young & Co. had a cabinet-making business. This was secondary to the wholesaling business and was operated by George Chen (personal account, Mabel Wang). The Chens lived off the premises in Carlton. Other banana wholesalers also had additional sources of income. As previously mentioned Russell Moy's father's clan's banana wholesaling business also sold roasted peanuts.

Cole suggests that the merchants at the turn of the century were really more like commission agents. They sold the growers' produce and then took a cut giving the grower the best deal that they could. It was important they give farmers a good price so that they would continue to sell produce through them. This is why it was important that the merchants make regular visits to the growers. They needed to reinforce business ties and to try and enlist more suppliers. For the merchant at the turn of the century without access to aeroplanes, these trips must have been quite an adventure.

Chinese banana merchants in Melbourne were generally very successful, with many companies operating for several generations. Some businesses are still operating today or closed only in the last decade (personal account, Mabel Wang). Yong argues that they were more successful than those in the furniture and laundry trades. Fruit merchants emerged at the beginning of the century as a merchant elite in the Chinese community.

The importance of the banana industry to Little Bourke Street and the Chinese

It is very difficult to obtain information about the proportions and significance of the Chinese in the banana industry because databases which have been established are often not specific to bananas or change classifications part way through the study period. The Sands and McDougall directories have one section which lists the location of businesses by occupation. "Fruit merchants" is the closest classification to banana merchants. By separating those merchants who had Chinese names the following data was obtained (see Table 3 below). The proportion of Chinese fruit merchants was considerable and remained constant at between 30 and 40 per cent. They started entering the industry between 1892 and 1902.

By separating the list of Chinese fruit merchants obtained into those located in Little Bourke Street and those located elsewhere Table 4 was

obtained. Interestingly no non-Chinese fruit merchants were located in Little Bourke Street. Table 4 shows the high proportion of Chinese fruit merchants located in Little Bourke Street, particularly between 1902 and 1922. After 1930 the fruit and vegetable industry started to become centralised at the Queen Victoria Market, which had been newly expanded to accommodate the merchants from the recently closed Western Market (Cole 1980). It was clearly more profitable operating in this new centralised environment as those fruit merchants who didn't move to the Victoria Market soon went

Table 3. Number of Chinese fruit merchants compared to the number of fruit merchants, 1882 to 1942

Year	1882	1892	1902	1912	1922	1932	1942
No. Chinese Fruit Merchants	n/a	1	17	21	15	23	19
No. Total Fruit Merchants	n/a	27	36	50	46	79	67
Chinese % of Total Fruit Merchants	n/a	4%	47%	42%	33%	29%	28%

n/a = category not listed

Source: Sands and McDougall Melbourne Directories 1882, 1892, 1902, 1912, 1922, 1932, 1942.

Table 4. Numbers and proportions of Chinese fruit merchants located in Little Bourke Street compared to elsewhere in Melbourne, 1902-1942

Year	1902	1912	1922	1932	1942
	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)
Little Bourke St	13 (76)	14 (67)	12 (80)	7 (30)	0 (0)
Elsewhere	4 (24)	7 (23)	3 (20)	16 (70)	19 (100)
Total	17	21	15	23	19

Source: Sands and McDougall Melbourne Directories 1902, 1912, 1922, 1932, 1942.

out of business.

It was possible to narrow these studies further by cross-referencing the addresses obtained for the Chinese fruit merchants in one section of the directories with the section which lists the main occupant and business at every address in Melbourne. The result was very interesting. Most of the "fruit merchants" in Little Bourke Street were in fact banana merchants (see Table 5). This gives us some indication of the importance of the Chinese and Little Bourke Street to the banana industry. The large drop in 1932 is probably due to the diversification of businesses into multiple fruits.

Table 5. Number of Chinese fruit merchants who were banana merchants, 1902-1932

<i>Year</i>	<i>1902</i>	<i>1912</i>	<i>1922</i>	<i>1932</i>
<i>No. Chinese fruit merchants in Little Bourke St</i>	13	14	12	7
<i>No. of the above that were banana merchants</i>	11	12	9	1

Source: Sands and McDougall Melbourne Directories 1902, 1912, 1922, 1932.

Conclusion

The banana industry in Australia, from its beginnings in Queensland in the 1880s until the 1940s, has had a colourful history. There has been expansion, competition from Fiji, shifts in markets with fears of fruit fly and racial tension. The Chinese have been important players in this history. As growers in Queensland they made significant contributions to the early economy and settlement of places such as Cairns. However, they have also been very successful as banana wholesalers in both Sydney and Melbourne. In Melbourne they concentrated in Little Bourke Street until the Queen Victoria Market was expanded and used as a wholesaling market in the 1930s. A large number of the companies who were banana merchants were Chinese at the turn of the century in Melbourne. A number of banana firms operated for several generations, some still trading in fruit today. Banana merchants became an elite class within the Chinese community.

The research done has been largely statistical, examining the numbers of firms and where they were located. The next step is to start uncovering the people behind the numbers. Who ran individual firms? Who worked for them? Why did they close down or move? How profitable were they? This paper really just opens the way for further questions. There are many more stories to be uncovered.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books and Articles

- Blake, Alison. *Melbourne's Chinatown: The evolution of an inner urban Ethnic Quarter*, unpublished honours thesis in Geography, Melbourne University, 1975.
- Bolton, G.C., *A Thousand Miles Away: A History of North Queensland to 1920*, ANU Press, 1970.
- Cole, C.E. (ed.), *Melbourne Markets 1841-1979: The Story of the Fruit and Vegetable Markets in the City of Melbourne*, Melbourne Wholesale Fruit and Vegetable Market Trust, 1980.
- Jones, D., *The Cardwell Shire Story*, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1961.
- May, Cathie, *Topsauyers: The Chinese in Cairns, 1870 to 1920*, James Cook University, 1984.
- Yong, C.F., "The Banana Trade and the Chinese in NSW & Vic 1901-1921", *ANU Historical Journal* 1964, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 28-35.

Newspaper Articles

- Australasian* 1908 (in Cole 1980).
- Australasian* 1904 (in Cole 1980).
- The Australian*, 23 May 1985.
- The Cairns Post*, 29 October 1890.

Government

- Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers*, Royal Commission of Fruit Industry 1913, No. 4, Part 1, pp. 532-535 and *CPP* 1914, II, p. 14.
- Letter 15034, 26 March 1907, from B. W. Acland to R. Philp, Premier, in ADS/No2 Queensland State Archives.
- The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Railways on the proposed South Melbourne Perishable Fruit Produce Market 1915.
- Queensland Yearbook*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1992.
- Sands and McDougall Melbourne Directories 1882, 1892, 1902, 1912, 1914, 1924, 1932, 1942.
- Statistical Register of Victoria*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1897, 1901-1912.

Personal Accounts

Recorded Oral Histories

- Anonymous, recorded interview with Eve Young, 1988, Museum of Chinese Australian History Collection.
- Ron Wong Loy, recorded interview with Eve Young, 1988, Museum of Chinese Australian History Collection.
- Russell Moy, recorded interview with Eve Young, 1988, Museum of Chinese Australian History Collection.

Interviews

- Phillip Chen, interview with Sophie Couchman, 1993.
- Mabel Wang, interview with Sophie Couchman, 1993.