

**DORA SEE POY  
TIGER SEE HOE**

**Interviewed by Diana Giese and Warren Lee Long, 18 May 1996, in Innisfail, Queensland, as part of the *Post-War Chinese Australians Oral History Project***

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Dora See Poy was born in 1906 in Port Douglas and her brother Tiger See Hoe in 1913; Mrs See Poy left her birthplace after the 1911 cyclone, during which her parents and the five children sheltered under the solid, wide timber counter in their little shop; in those days, 'you could start a shop with your hands...just their bare hands and growing a few vegetables to sell'; went to Tolga, where Mrs See Poy attended school: one teacher and twenty pupils, with minimal equipment: slate, pencil, ABC book, blackboard, rag; they were the only children of Chinese background in the school; others were the children of 'just ordinary pioneers'; father farmed at Tolga, but after World War I, land was resumed for soldier settlement; their father 'couldn't speak much English and we couldn't speak Chinese. So there wasn't much communication'; times were tough: no shoes, made dolls from wooden pegs and rag; after they left Tolga, older brother Billy became the breadwinner on a corn farm at Atherton; they lived in an old slab house with a dirt floor 'about the size of my kitchen or smaller', wooden slats for beds and Chinese straw mattresses; cooked in the open on two bars and a kerosene tin; grew their own food, mostly Chinese vegetables; also ate corn; scared of black snakes in the house; comparisons with circumstances of other local families: 'all the Chinese people were poverty-stricken. They came out as immigrants...they had to take anything on at all to learn a loaf of bread a day'; some families made money by smuggling and selling opium to the old Chinese men, the Ah Buks, for five shillings a little tray; police turned a blind eye: 'took bribes, I suppose'; family moved to Innisfail: 'Innisfail has always been a very rich place...sugar cane and fishing and timber and bananas...just rain and sugar cane, Innisfail'; rented a house from Caseys for five shillings a week; had to sleep on the floor; their store sold lollies and peanuts; other shops included Nolans, Duffin the chemist, On Tai's and Tam Sie's; Chinatown was in Ernest St and the Temple in Owen St; there was a row over Temple (Joss

House) being sold and relocated; there were brothels and gambling places in Chinatown: ‘The Chinese are great gamblers, you know’; many local Chinese market gardeners; at thirteen, Mrs See Poy worked Saturday mornings cleaning at a bank for two-and-sixpence; at sixteen, she got a job looking after Mrs Sue Yek’s babies, washing up and cleaning, at five shillings a week; Mr See Hoe remembers the family’s time in Innisfail as prosperous: After World War I, ‘it boomed. I didn’t have to work or anything...had a house and had shoes to go to school’; after primary school he went to All Souls at Charters Towers, where he got into the first football and athletic teams and passed the Junior exam; there were three main jobs available in Innisfail: See Poys, the Council, cane cutting; Italian migrants ‘all good workers’ used to work in gangs of twelve with a cook, earning well and staying together until they had enough to buy a farm, ‘and then they’d cut cane for that farm until everyone in that gang ended up with a cane farm’; after he left school, Mr See Hoe went down to Wollongong, where his elder brother was working, to a job in his uncle’s store, then to Moree, to work at Hong Yuens; Mrs See Poy was meanwhile already working at See Poys: ‘that’s Johnno’s business...a case of marrying the boss’; remembers a little boy saying to her when she was a (very) young wife: ‘*You’re* not Mrs See Poy’; at See Poys, ‘we worked night and day...we finished work and then went back at night and filled the shelves and did the marking off and the shortages’; See Poys grew into a department store with seven departments: grocery, drapery, Manchester, ladies’ wear, electrical, hardware, furniture; it expanded, especially after 1932, when the new building was erected, fifty years after the business had been set up by Taam Sze Pui in 1882; it became the largest store in town and in the region; the house in which this interview is taking place, a classic Queenslander, was also built in 1932; Mrs See Poy was at first paid a salary of five shillings a week: ‘I thought I was rich’; still has original savings bank deposit slip; she worked as a buyer in the store, making trips to Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne to acquire goods: ‘it wasn’t really all fun and roses...some in the family wanted to work and some didn’t’—but everyone got the same pay ‘because the father said they all had to be treated the same’; See Poys employed a lot of locals, non-Chinese, seventy-odd; Mrs See Poy became departmental manager when she was twenty; ‘we all worked together and we all fought together’; staff ate lunch together, while Aboriginal helpers did kitchen work; Ah Buks cooked and cleaned; the family was jealous of her buying trips, but she ‘itemised

everything’ so that her department paid; in 1982, a couple of months before the centenary of the store, See Poys closed; Mrs See Poy ‘just didn’t care. I thought—well, I worked and I earned it and I got paid, and I’ve saved and I’ve made myself independent and comfortable. I don’t have to ask anybody for anything’; on the site of the store now stand a Coles supermarket and car park; On Tai’s is now the only Chinese business left in Innisfail; Mr See Hoe returned to Innisfail at the beginning of the Depression of the 1930s, and had a little farm out at Goondi; he also worked as a truck driver for local farmers; the big Chinese community in the region had helped raise money for the War effort in China; when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour and the Americans entered the War, they came in their thousands to North Queensland, and ‘made this house their headquarters in Innisfail’; there were many dances and gatherings under the house; Mr See Hoe and his truck were commandeered and he was sent with the Civil Constructional Corps to Charters Towers to build airstrips for fighter bombers: ‘I went in as a truck driver and ended up as a plumber’; he was also pressed into service cutting cane; then sent up to Iron Range, near Cooktown, to do maintenance work; after the War ended, he ‘could have got ten jobs’, but went to Mourilyan to work for a branch of See Poys there; discussion of Mrs See Poy’s husband Johnno’s responsibility for the family farm, versus other less diligent family members; See Poy descendants now working as professional musicians; Mrs See Poy thinks ‘everybody is spoiled rotten today’; discussion of unions at See Poys and elsewhere: ‘you were free to run your business, but you had to obey the rules’; memories of the Depression: ‘we only had one customer in the shop the whole day...the circus came to town and went broke’; See Poys staff volunteered to work for free, but were still paid: ‘they were loyal...mostly families of the town, Nixons and Joneses’; Mrs See Poy has seen Innisfail change completely: ‘Coles and Woolworths, fifteen eating houses within walking distance of my house...the whole way of life has changed...nobody knows us...they pass everybody in the street...all strangers’; old-timers gone; more Aborigines in town now; Mr See Hoe says that ‘the Aborigines today have got a new outlook on life. They own the country’; Mrs See Poy says: ‘I was born in Australia and I consider myself as Australian’

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