

Sex, Soap and Silk: Japanese Businesswomen in North Queensland, 1887–1941

Tianna Killoran¹
James Cook University

Abstract

Few historians have considered Japanese women in northern Australia beyond their role as impoverished sex workers, overlooking their entrepreneurial activities in the sex industry as well as in laundries and shops. This article adds to research by Su-Jane Hunt (1977) and Yuriko Nagata (2004) about Japanese women who were entrepreneurs and community members in Western Australia and the Torres Strait, incorporating more detail about their business activities throughout north Queensland, both within the sex industry and outside it. A mosaic of newly accessible documentary sources—including newspaper, immigration and internment records—provides the foundation for a more complex history of Japanese women and their roles in the economic life of north Queensland between 1887 and 1941. This material reveals that Japanese women worked in partnership with their husbands, or sometimes as sole operators, to manage and run businesses such as brothels, laundries, stores and even cafes. Not all Japanese women were in business, but discussing those who undertook business activities invites us to cast aside the ‘moral suspicion’ that has loomed over these women’s stories. The reality of their lives was far more interesting.

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Beyond Framing Japanese Women as Sex Workers

In 1897, Commissioner of Police W. E. Parry-Okeden reported that 116 Japanese women were living in Queensland, and—with the exception of the Japanese consul's wife—all of them 'gain[ed] their living by prostitution'.² This confident statement was referenced by historian David Sissons in his ground-breaking 1977 work 'Karayuki-san: Japanese prostitutes in Australia, 1887–1916', which remains the only focused treatise on the history of Japanese sex workers in Australia to this day.³ Sissons's work repeated this 'largely accepted' number with few criticisms; however, historian Regina Ganter has since thoroughly debunked the commissioner's estimate. The commissioner seemed to have forgotten that other staff at the Japanese Consulate in Townsville had also brought their wives with them.⁴ Ganter's rebuttal further cited an 1895 report from the sub-inspector of police on Thursday Island who claimed that among 23 Japanese women living there, nine were 'single' and therefore 'prostitutes', while a remaining 12 were married, one widowed and one a child.⁵ This report contradicted the commissioner's estimate, and as Ganter succinctly summarised, highlights a mistaken assumption often made by Queensland police and the historians who reference their reports: 'the implication here is that single (Japanese) women were prostitutes and, in reports less grounded in detail, this implication became generalised for all Japanese women'.⁶ The label of 'prostitute' hence became the story of Japanese women who migrated to north Queensland between 1887 and 1941, when the outbreak of the Pacific War resulted in the internment and

2 Commissioner of Police to the Under Secretary Home Department, 14 September 1897, ID 861851, SRS 5384, Queensland State Archives (hereafter QSA).

3 David Sissons, 'Karayuki-san: The Japanese prostitutes in Australia, 1887–1916 (I & II)', in *Bridging Australia and Japan: The Writings of David Sissons, Historian and Political Scientist*, ed. Keiko Tamura and Arthur Stockwin, vol. 1 (1977; Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 174, doi.org/10.22459/BAJ.12.2016.

4 Regina Ganter, 'The Wakayama triangle: Japanese heritage of North Australia', *Journal of Australian Studies* 23, no. 61 (1999): 57.

5 Please note that this article uses the preferred term of 'sex worker' except in instances where 'prostitute' or 'prostitution' are part of direct quotes.

6 Ganter, 'The Wakayama triangle', 57; Regina Ganter, 'Coloured people: A challenge to racial stereotypes', in *Navigating Boundaries: The Asian Diaspora in Torres Strait*, ed. Anna Shnukal, Guy Malcolm Ramsay and Yuriko Nagata (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004), 242, fn. 4. Ganter's reference to this source has a typographical error. The original can be found at the QSA (PRE/102). The inspector also claims that all married women 'led immoral lives' before marriage.

subsequent forced ‘repatriation’ of all Japanese nationals. This labelling of Japanese women has effectively marginalised their role in the history of the region.

Ganter’s 1999 work laid the foundation for a reanalysis of Japanese women’s roles. With the availability of more archival sources today and increasingly accessible digitised records, it becomes clear that while some may have been sex workers, there is much more to the history of Japanese women in north Queensland.⁷ It is difficult to establish the total number of Japanese women in this region between 1887 and 1941, but my research has been able to identify the names and circumstances of 77 women who lived here during this period. Of these, at least one-third were businesswomen, and it is likely that up to half of those who conducted business activities were independent or sole operators at one point.⁸ Although these business activities may have been intermittent, short-term or even illegal, this article takes on Jennifer Aston’s and Catherine Bishop’s expansive definition of a businesswoman as someone who was responsible for making business decisions, seizing opportunities and assuming the responsibility and risk of their activities, however small or large they may have been.⁹ A mosaic of records—including newspaper articles, advertisements, family histories and government documents—paints a biographical and economic picture of individual Japanese women’s lives and allows the historian to construct a story of the complex and varied pattern of their experiences.¹⁰ It is likely that up to 20 of these women were involved in the management of businesses around north Queensland in partnership with a husband, operating laundries, silk stores, boarding

7 Since the 2000s, a significant number of records at the National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA) have been made available because the open access period has been reached. The advantage of keyword searches in the NAA and Trove databases, for example, has made identifying and researching Japanese women more possible. For a detailed guide to NAA records relating to Japanese migrants in Australia, see Pam Oliver, *Allies, Enemies and Trading Partners: Records on Australia and the Japanese* (Canberra: National Archives of Australia, 2004).

8 This has been estimated through a collection of archival sources, primarily from the NAA. These include, for the most part, the series: J2483: Certificates Exempting from the Dictation Test; BP4/3: Alien Registration Forms; and MP1103/2: Dossiers Containing Reports on Internees and Prisoners of War held in Australian Camps. Identified women have been correlated with other available sources such as newspapers accessed via Trove, police records and the Queensland Births, Deaths and Marriages register.

9 Jennifer Aston and Catherine Bishop, ‘Discovering a global perspective’, in *Female Entrepreneurs in the Long Nineteenth Century: A Global Perspective*, ed. Jennifer Aston and Catherine Bishop (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 5.

10 James Warren, *Pirates, Prostitutes and Pullers: Explorations in the Ethno- and Social History of Southeast Asia* (Perth: UWA Press, 2008), 225–27.

houses and smallholder farms, while a slightly smaller number of women were 'single' but independent, mobile and adaptable in their business activities. Some may have never been involved in the sex industry, and it appears that Japanese brothels began to decline after the turn of the century while some aging or widowed women transitioned to retail and domestic business into the 1920s and 1930s.

Japanese women began arriving in Australia in the latter half of the nineteenth century, with the first three women noted by the Japanese honorary consul, Alexander Marks, in 1887. Departing Japan during a time of rapid—and uneven—industrialisation and transformation, these women were often leaving behind poverty in isolated rural villages.¹¹ Those who came to north Queensland found themselves in a place that supported thriving multicultural communities. The region was home to one of the largest populations of Japanese migrants during this period, with an estimated 60 per cent—approximately 2,255 people—living throughout Queensland in 1901. This number accounted for just under 1 per cent of the total Queensland population, although these numbers decreased in the following decades.¹² North Queensland hosted a range of industries and interconnected communities that supported a highly mobile population in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This diversity contrasted with more isolated parts of northern Australia where social organisation was framed by the pearl shelling industry, such as in Broome and Darwin. In north Queensland, Japanese migrants were involved in local communities through pearl shelling and sugar cane farming and were highly interconnected with trading centres of the south and trading routes throughout Asia in the north. Even within White Australia, a combination of exemptions and substantial pre-1901 migration meant large populations of non-European migrants and Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal peoples continued to live and work in the region, participating in communities that were multicultural and cooperative. Relationships within these communities were also characterised by simmering racial tensions, with many people experiencing

11 Sissons, 'Karayuki-san', 178, 187. This is the earliest date that Japanese women were identified as living in Australia, although some may have arrived earlier than this.

12 David Sissons, 'The Lady Rowena and the Eamont: The 19th century', in *Bridging Australia and Japan: The Writings of David Sissons, Historian and Political Scientist*, ed. Keiko Tamura and Arthur Stockwin, vol. 1 (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 95, doi.org/10.22459/BAJ.12.2016; Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Data Archive, Len Smith, Tim Rowse, and Stuart Hungerford, 'Historical and colonial census data archive (HCCDA)', ADA Dataverse, 2021, doi.org/10.26193/MP6WRS.

social and legal exclusion from other aspects of north Queensland life.¹³ The diverse economic, geographic and multi-ethnic characteristics of north Queensland communities highlight the range of economic opportunities that were potentially available to Japanese women and provide a basis for investigating their business activities.

While women have generally been paid scant attention in most histories of Japanese migration to northern Australia, some historians have provided a useful starting point for investigating Japanese women's business activities.¹⁴ After Sissons's 1977 pioneering research focusing on the *karayuki-san* who were trafficked from Japan, Su-Jane Hunt was the earliest historian to argue that Japanese women in Australia had autonomy and control in their lives as 'prostitutes and madams', but also acknowledged that many were forced to work against their will. Hunt pieced together court proceedings and newspaper articles to identify women who managed brothels in north-west Australia, particularly around Roebourne and Broome, suggesting these women were 'perhaps the Japanese "entrepreneurs" of northern Australia'.¹⁵

More recently, historians have taken the story of Japanese women further, emphasising their experiences outside of the sex industry. Noreen Jones's *Number 2 Home* (2002) described the lives of Japanese migrants—both men and women—beyond pearl diving and sex work, situating them as community members and business people in Western Australia.¹⁶ Similarly, Yuriko Nagata's 2004 overview of the establishment and decline of the Japanese community in the Torres Strait integrated women into the broader history of Japanese migration to northern Australia, describing

13 Tianna Killoran, 'Visible participation: Japanese migrants in North Queensland, 1880–1941', *History Australia* 18, no. 3 (2021): 520–21.

14 For histories of Japanese migration in Australia that generally overlook women, see John Armstrong, 'Aspects of Japanese immigration to Queensland before 1900', *Queensland Heritage* 2, no. 9 (1973): 3–9; Neville Meaney, *Towards a New Vision: Australia and Japan Through 100 Years* (Sydney: Kangaroo Press, 1999); Diane Menghetti, *Sound of Our Summer Seas* (Sydney: Macmillan Art, 2004). Armstrong dedicates a single paragraph to Japanese women and discusses them only as sex workers, while Meaney devotes a single sentence to Japanese women, and Menghetti refers to the number of Japanese women in Australia, although briefly mentions the existence of some women who may have been sugarcane farmers' wives.

15 Su-Jane Hunt, *Spinifex and Hessian: Women's Lives in North-Western Australia, 1860–1900* (Perth: University of WA Press, 1986), 130–35.

16 Noreen Jones, *Number 2 Home: A Story of Japanese Pioneers in Australia* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2002), 216. Jones provides valuable research about the history of Japanese migrants in Western Australia before 1941, but some of her research is difficult to verify as it references her private 'database' (cited as 'Jones, Noreen, "The Japanese in Western Australia before 1942", unpublished computer database in progress.')

their experiences as wives, mothers and workers as well as the significant role they played in the economic and social life of Thursday Island between 1890 and 1941. Nagata used oral histories from Thursday Island residents who recalled stories of former *karayuki-san* who ran bathhouses, boarding houses and offered cooking and sewing services during the 1930s.¹⁷ Nagata's research indicates that some women shifted from sex work to other forms of domestic work sometime during the 1920s. Much further south, Pam Oliver's 2007 depiction of Japanese trading networks within Australia highlighted the range of personal, local and business connections fostered between Japanese migrants and the broader community, including through marriages, social occasions and community celebrations. Oliver shed light on Japanese women living in Sydney whose husbands worked in larger trading companies such as Mitsui and Mitsubishi Shoji Kaisha, arguing that these couples were crucial in developing business and professional relationships with the wider community.¹⁸ These histories from the rest of Australia suggest that an investigation into the experiences of Japanese women who lived in north Queensland could similarly reveal stories of women's lives and business activities beyond the sex industry. Furthermore, a greater understanding of these women's lives adds more substance and detail to the existing historiography of north Queensland's thriving multicultural communities during the White Australia era.

The Business of Sex Work

Between 1910 and 1935, anywhere from a few thousand up to nearly 20,000 Japanese women were estimated to be living and working internationally as sex workers.¹⁹ These women were colloquially labelled as *karayuki-san* in Japan, which roughly translates as 'going to China', referring to the way women were trafficked from Japan to China and eventually throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Families sold women and girls as young as seven into the sex industry, and while some may have chosen this work, they nonetheless arrived in faraway destinations,

17 Yuriko Nagata, 'The Japanese in Torres Strait', in *Navigating Boundaries*, 140, 146–47.

18 Pam Oliver, 'Japanese relationships in White Australia: The Sydney experience to 1941', *History Australia* 4, no. 1 (2007): 1–20; Pam Oliver, *Raids on Australia: 1942 and Japan's Plans for Australia* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2010), 153–56.

19 Sachiko Sone, 'The *karayuki-san* of Asia, 1868–1938: The role of prostitutes overseas in Japanese economic and social development' (Murdoch University, PhD thesis, 1990), 55.

including Australia at the far reaches of this network.²⁰ For a long time these women's lives remained unknown, but Yamazaki Tomoko's pioneering, albeit problematic, ethnographic and oral history *Sandakan No. 8* (1972) first shed light on the *karayuki-san*'s experiences. Tomoko's work, situated firmly within feminist attitudes of the time, depicted these women as victims and exploited individuals who were 'the embodiment of suffering'.²¹ More recent historians, such as James Warren and Bill Mihalopoulos, have extended Tomoko's work with documentary sources to explore these women's lives in greater detail and highlight their agency, albeit within circumstances often beyond their control.²² Mihalopoulos described the difficulties in researching the history of the *karayuki-san* and how their repeated framing as victims of sex trafficking has resulted in a selection bias when historians search archival records. He argued these women 'were never one-dimensional, nor was "prostitute" necessarily their main or only identity: they were also mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, lovers, wives, and often engaged in work besides the sale of sex'.²³ Similarly, Julia Laite's recent research into the complex lives of Lydia Harvey and Veronique Sarah White shows the way forward in depicting the subtleties of trafficked women's multi-layered experiences as victims, perpetrators, fugitives and, above all, individuals with autonomy and agency.²⁴

20 Rae Frances, 'Sex trafficking, labour migration, and the state', in *Gender Violence in Australia: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Alana Piper and Ana Stevenson (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2019), 119; James Francis Warren, *Ab Ku and Karayuki-San: Prostitution in Singapore, 1870–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 69–70. In histories of the *karayuki-san*, Australia is largely overlooked, with only occasional references to Broome in Western Australia.

21 Yamazaki Tomoko, *Sandakan Brothel No. 8: An Episode in the History of Lower-Class Japanese Women*, trans. Karen Colligan-Taylor (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 5–6. Tomoko's research methods to gather oral histories and testimonies from former *karayuki-san* and their families are problematic. Most notably, Tomoko deceived Osaki, the former *karayuki-san* she lived with for many weeks to conduct her research. Tomoko described Osaki as 'certainly the poorest of which I had ever seen or heard', but still deceived Osaki so that she would provide food and accommodation to Tomoko. Tomoko withheld her identity and purposes so that Osaki would share more information and also stole documents and photographs from families of former *karayuki-san*. For further criticisms, see Warren, *Ab Ku and Karayuki-San*, 8; Bill Mihalopoulos, *Sex in Japan's Globalization, 1870–1930: Prostitutes, Emigration and Nation-Building* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), 47.

22 See, for example, Warren, *Ab Ku and Karayuki-San*; Warren, *Pirates, Prostitutes and Pullers*; Bill Mihalopoulos, 'Ousting the "prostitute": Retelling the story of the *karayuki-san*', *Postcolonial Studies* 4, no. 2 (2001): 169–87; Mihalopoulos, *Sex in Japan's Globalization*.

23 Mihalopoulos, *Sex in Japan's Globalization*, 12.

24 Julia Laite, *The Disappearance of Lydia Harvey: A True Story of Sex, Crime and the Meaning of Justice* (London: Profile Books, 2021).

Historians of sex work in Australia have described how brothels were businesses, with sex workers providing the essential labour.²⁵ Raelene Frances has argued that, for Japanese women in this industry, sex work and entrepreneurship were intertwined; *karayuki-san* were not always workers in the employ of another, but sometimes owned and managed brothels.²⁶ This perhaps explains the profitability of Japanese brothels and income of sex workers in Australia during the late nineteenth century. An 1896 report in the *Japan Weekly Mail* suggested that women ‘living a life of shame abroad’ earned more in Australia than any other location; the average monthly income for individual women in Australia was ¥400 per month, compared to ¥200 in India, ¥120 in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, and ¥100 in Hong Kong.²⁷ These earnings made for an average annual income of ¥4,800 for Japanese women in Australia, which was a fortune compared to the ¥40 average annual male wage in Japan. Even the highly paid Japanese divers sent home only about ¥100 annually from Thursday Island.²⁸ The high level of Australian *karayuki-san* earnings makes more plausible Sissons’s suggestion that Japanese women invested in pearling luggers and contributed to Japanese migrants’ monopoly in the Torres Strait pearling industry.²⁹ Even accounting for vast exaggerations, most Japanese sex workers earned huge sums, with sole operators and brothel owners likely earning more, leaving most with plenty to spare. While it is difficult to estimate the number of brothels where Japanese women worked throughout north Queensland in this period, this number was probably somewhere in the realm of 20 to 30 if we account for two or three businesses per town throughout the region. These earnings, along with the distribution of Japanese brothels through north Queensland, therefore account for a fair proportion of economic activity within the north.

North Queensland around the turn of the twentieth century, however lucrative, could be a dangerous place for Japanese women, particularly when their presence as sex workers was regarded as an ‘accepted evil’ and

25 See, for example, Raelene Frances, *Selling Sex: A Hidden History of Prostitution* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007), 53–54; Barbara Minchinton, *The Women of Little Lon: Sex Workers in Nineteenth Century Melbourne* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2021), 22–35.

26 Frances, *Selling Sex*, 53.

27 ‘Japanese women abroad’, *Japan Weekly Mail*, 30 May 1896, 609.

28 Sissons, ‘The Lady Rowena’, 94.

29 Sissons, ‘Karayuki-san’, 181. There were suspicions, however these cannot be substantiated in any primary sources.

their bodies were used to protect white women.³⁰ Countless police and court records document the violence they endured, providing a narrow but useful insight into Japanese women's business activities. These sources need to be read with care because they are construed through the lens of legality, neatly casting individuals as either victims or criminals, with witnesses presenting specific versions of themselves.³¹ However, incidental details captured within the reports can provide critical information about Japanese women's business activities. Little is known, for example, about a woman named Omatsu aside from information surrounding her murder on Thursday Island in 1894.³² She reportedly was running a brothel on the island when her murderer, 'H. Abbe', who was a client and perhaps her lover, attacked her with a dagger.³³ Newspaper articles cast Omatsu as the object of Abbe's crime, giving more emphasis to her 'Japanese murderer' and his subsequent execution.³⁴ Within these sensationalised reports, however, there is mention that Omatsu and Abbe had discussed marrying and closing the brothel that she managed. Omatsu reneged on the deal, telling Abbe she could not close it because she needed to pay off her debts. Omatsu's discussions with Abbe suggest that she was the primary decision maker in the brothel's operation. Other women such as Orui, who was the victim of a murder-suicide in 1897 by her alleged partner, Yozo Sugimoto, was similarly identified as a sex worker but remained relatively unknown beyond the details of her death. Newspaper reports and an inquest suggest that Orui was living apart from her husband at a boarding house on Thursday Island. With no mention of other women living there, it is possible that Orui was an independent operator.³⁵

30 Commissioner W. E. Parry-Okeden, as quoted in Sissons, 'Karayuki-san', 197. Parry-Okeden stated in 1899 that 'in the sugar districts there must be outlets for the sexual passions ... and that it was less revolting and degrading if these were satisfied by Japanese rather than Caucasian women'.

31 Kay Daniels, 'Introduction', in *So Much Hard Work: Women and Prostitution in Australian History*, ed. Kay Daniels (Sydney: Fontana Books, 1984), 5. Daniels argues that historians' overreliance on legal records means that police mediate the connection between sex workers and the historian, even obscuring how the law has been selectively applied.

32 Please note that Australian archival records relating to Japanese migrants often have discrepancies and variations in spelling and naming conventions, including the anglicisation of Japanese names in official records. These discrepancies are further complicated where women's marital status changed or they used aliases. To minimise further confusion, this article refers to Japanese women by the most common spelling of their known given name followed by their family name, where relevant. This standardisation is a deliberate choice to retain clarity and consistency when referring to individuals in an Australian context. Nevertheless, the Japanese convention is to place the family name before the given name.

33 'Romantic tragedy', *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 18 May 1894, 2.

34 'Japanese murderer', *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 28 May 1894, 4.

35 'Telegraph intelligence: Thursday Island', *North Queensland Register* (hereafter *NQR*), 6 January 1897, 2; Orui [Japanese male], ID 2733713, SRS 36, QSA.

Some Japanese women not only ran businesses independent of their husbands, as in the case of Orui, but were also mobile. Tangling with the law in less violent circumstances, Nobu Ide was identified in 1910 as a sex worker in a Thursday Island brothel after she was charged with failing the dictation test. As part of the test, Nobu had to write out 50 dictated words from a nonsensical paragraph in a given European language; this was an overt attempt to label Nobu as an 'undesirable immigrant' and deport her from Australia. In the proceedings, her statement to the authorities revealed a transient and independent life. Arriving in Queensland in 1897 at the age of 15, she claimed to have spent time 'tailoring' on Thursday Island, in Townsville and in Geraldton (Western Australia) before later returning to the Torres Strait. At the time of her arrest, she was living with three other Japanese women 'next door to Kasuga's store', but stated 'I am doing business now on my own account'.³⁶ After Nobu's charges were dropped—prosecutors could not prove she had failed the dictation test within one year of her arrival in the Commonwealth—she appeared to continue living a similarly independent and mobile life. In 1921, Nobu was in Ayr, where authorities suspected she was running a brothel that employed at least two other Japanese women.³⁷ If their suspicions were true, Nobu exemplifies the Japanese brothel keepers Frances describes, with their discreet mode of operation and 'knowledge acquired through long personal experience at all levels of the industry'.³⁸ At various times Nobu was referred to as a single woman, but she was married in either (or both) 1913 and 1923 on Thursday Island to a pearl diver who left for Japan in 1927 and never returned. There are no other records of Nobu's romantic attachments, and marriage was probably not a critical factor in her business activities. Nobu continued living on Thursday Island until 1941 and, according to local memories, was a grandmotherly figure who ran a bathhouse and continued to offer domestic services such as mending and washing clothes into her old age.³⁹ Japanese businesswomen in the

36 Statement of Hayashi (Diver), 7 June 1910 and statement of Nobu Ide, 6 September 1910, Prosecution of Japanese girls at Thursday Island, 1910/5858, A1, NAA.

37 Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test (hereafter CEDT) – Nobu Ide of Ayr, 14 January 1920, 286/77, J2483, NAA; Sissons, 'Karayuki-san', 194.

38 Frances, *Selling Sex*, 54.

39 Nagata, 'Japanese in Torres Strait', 146; Sissons, 'Karayuki-san', 194; Shuji Kyuhara, 'Remains of Japanese settlers on the Torres Strait Islands', trans. Yoshihiko Yabuuchi (Japan, 1977), 16; Marriage registration for Nobu Ide and Otomotsu Tanaka, Queensland Births, Deaths and Marriages (hereafter QBDM): 1913/C/3101, State Library of Queensland (hereafter SLQ). Sissons claims that Nobu was single, while Kyuhara argues that she was married in 1923, although records of this cannot be located. The latter record indicates she was married in 1913.

sex industry were often mobile like Nobu. It is difficult to understand why, but it was likely part of a business model built upon discretion—to evade charges or escape notice of authorities—and seek out business opportunities as they arose in different towns or as the women's circumstances changed over time.

Japanese brothels continued to exist throughout north Queensland until at least the 1920s. Prosecution of Japanese women for sex work and the forced closure of brothels was very uncommon, with disincentivised police describing the Japanese brothels as 'orderly' and 'discreet'.⁴⁰ Police were forced to investigate, however, when the public complained. The Women's Franchise League periodically urged police to 'run in the bullies who were making slaves' of these 'poor fallen women' who 'inhabit the bird cages' of Charters Towers and Cairns.⁴¹ This depiction of Japanese women as victims of trafficking and slavery is strikingly similar to the concurrent preoccupation with white slavery during this era.⁴² Newspapers contributed to the moral panic by exaggerating numbers and the venality of Japanese brothels. In 1897, 170 Cairns residents petitioned for the removal of what the *Morning Post* counted as 37 women living in Sachs Street, complaining: 'the evil already large, appears to be growing. It cannot fail to have a morally detrimental effect, and ... several streets have become impassable for respectable women'.⁴³ Police 'thoroughly investigated' and found that the number of women was far fewer, 15 women, rather than 37.⁴⁴ Police claimed it was near impossible to gather sufficient evidence to prosecute brothel owners because their businesses were often kept discreetly behind the pretence of a store, boarding house or washing factory.⁴⁵

Similarly, in 1902 an outraged *Brisbane Courier* reported on the 'social evil in the north', calculating there were nearly 100 Japanese sex workers in Charters Towers: 'In Garde's [*sic*] lane there are six or seven places

40 'The old curiosity shops', *Evening Telegraph* (Charters Towers), 8 May 1903, 2; Memoranda re. movements and doings of Japanese women, A. Sergeant Griffin to Sub. Insp. of Police, Cairns, 23 November 1897 (hereafter letter from A. Sergeant Griffin, 1897), ID 86448, SRS 14182, QSA.

41 'Cairns towns council: Japanese brothels', *Morning Post* (Cairns), 16 October 1903, 5; 'The old curiosity shops', *Evening Telegraph* (Charters Towers), 8 May 1903, 2.

42 Julia Laite, *Common Prostitutes and Ordinary Citizens: Commercial Sex in London, 1885–1960* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 102.

43 'Cairns Municipal Council', *Morning Post* (Cairns), 9 September 1897, 4.

44 'Cairns morality', *Western Champion and General Advertiser for the Central-Western Districts*, 25 May 1897, 7; Sissons, 'Karayuki-san', 197.

45 Letter from A. Sergeant Griffin, 1897; Frances, *Selling Sex*, 54–56.

having 15 windows, at each of which every evening a Japanese woman is regularly seated'.⁴⁶ In defence, the local *Northern Miner* conducted their own investigation and concluded that there were only five houses occupied by around 10 women in total.⁴⁷ This is not to say that the brothels did not exist. Japanese women living in Gard's Lane in May 1903 reportedly told the *Evening Telegraph* that they rented rooms for the 'purposes of ill-fame'.⁴⁸ Women were paid £15 by brothel keepers for a three-year contract with the stipulation they earned £7 per week. It is not difficult to see how women may have continued to work after the end of their contract if these earnings, even if not always this high, were possible. The local reporter described municipal authorities' inspections of the women's houses, noting they were labyrinthine and scrupulously clean; inspectors were unable to find any breach of local by-laws, much to the reporter's disdain.⁴⁹ Misdirection with store fronts and even fake names were perhaps common tactics for Japanese women in the sex industry. Nobu Ide, the woman brought before police for failing the dictation test in 1910, sometimes went by the name of Kato Kawasaki, but photographs exist of a Kato Kawasaki of Thursday Island who did not resemble Nobu in age or likeness.⁵⁰

Between the 1890s and 1920s, Japanese women's business activities in the sex industry were carried out by both married and unmarried women who could be mobile and independent. While around 80 per cent of Japanese women who arrived in Australia before 1900 appeared to be single—if only from the absence of a formal attachment to a man—the suspicion that all single Japanese women were sex workers was misplaced. While some women managed brothels, like Omatsu, others such as Orui and the nameless women in Charters Towers may have been sole operators. Nobu Ide undertook some combination of these business activities, and this was possibly the case for the dozens of other Japanese women who lived and worked in north Queensland during this period. Following the passage of the Immigration Restriction Act in 1901, and as the decades passed, it became difficult for new migrants to arrive and sex work would have become an increasingly difficult occupation for women as

46 'Social evil in the north', *Brisbane Courier*, 17 February 1902, 3.

47 'Social evil in the north', *Northern Miner* (Charters Towers), 17 March 1902, 1.

48 'The Gard's Lane evil', *Evening Telegraph* (Charters Towers), 4 May 1903, 2.

49 'The old curiosity shops', *Evening Telegraph* (Charters Towers), 8 May 1903, 2.

50 Prosecution of Japanese girls at Thursday Island, Statement of Sub-Collector of Customs, 7 September 1910, 1910/5858, A1, NAA; CEDT – Nobu Ide of Ayr, 14 January 1920, 286/77, J2483, NAA; CEDT – Kato Kawasaki, 18 August 1921, 322/016, J2483, NAA.

they aged, prompting a shift to other sources of income. It is during the 1920s and 1930s that Japanese laundries and silk stores around north Queensland become more visible in newspaper archives and stories of Japanese brothels begin to decline. As the rest of this article will show, throughout the course of their lives Japanese women of many different backgrounds had a range of economic roles in north Queensland. Sex work constituted only one small part of a much larger, more complex history of their business activities.

Japanese Women's 'Domestic' Businesses

Japanese women, whether they were married, widowed or single, undertook business activities revolving around the sale of domestic skills, including laundering, mending, tailoring and even cooking. While some women were engaged in business that is easily recognisable—holding a shop front and employing others, for example—others were involved in the often overlooked 'informal neighbourhood economy' where individual women would offer their services and skills locally to earn a living.⁵¹ The continuum of these business practices is murky, but as Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui argues, women of many cultural backgrounds living in rural areas of north Queensland used their available skills to manage and run domestic businesses, such as laundering, tailoring and mending.⁵² It is likely there were at least a dozen married Japanese women who were responsible for laundries' advertised services of mending worn clothes, replacement of buttons and tailoring of pants, their labour hidden behind the shop signs and front doors emblazoned with their husbands' names.⁵³

A few married Japanese women, however, can be identified as undertaking managerial activities in partnership with their husbands, such as Otsume Iwanaga who took a leading role in her family's various business endeavours throughout the 1920s and 1930s in far north Queensland.

51 Raelene Frances, 'Twentieth century women's labour patterns', in *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation*, ed. Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans (Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 251; Alana Piper, 'Understanding economic abuse as economic violence', in *Gender Violence in Australia*, 37.

52 Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui, 'Female invisibility in the male's world of plantation-era tropical North Queensland', *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, no. 26 (2020): 8, doi.org/10.22459/LFHJ.26.

53 See, for example, 'H. Toyola: Japanese Laundry', *Morning Post* (Cairns), 5 August 1897, 2; 'Japanese Laundry', *Mackay Mercury*, 28 May 1901, 4. These laundries offered services such as replacing buttons, repairing holes, 'ladies clothing made up' and clothes dyeing.

Otsume's occupation was consistently described as either 'domestic duties' or 'housewife', but her domestic space was also the location of the family's business, as was common for laundrywomen throughout the world.⁵⁴ Over the years, as the couple led different business endeavours—first a farm in the Atherton Tablelands in the 1910s, then from 1922 a silk store and, later, a laundry in Cairns during the 1930s—Otsume undoubtedly managed the store and the home, all the while raising their adopted daughter.⁵⁵ It was Otsume's daughter who stated to authorities in 1942 that her father 'spent most of his time at the farm and his wife [Otsume] spent most of her time at the shop'.⁵⁶ Shared business responsibilities between Japanese couples who owned laundries was common. Another example was Chiyoe Oki. She migrated to Australia in 1931, joining her husband Hidewo in Townsville where he managed a silk store. In 1933 they moved north to the sugar-growing town of Innisfail, where Hidewo's widowed mother already had a well-established cafe. Hidewo opened the Oki Silk Store in 1938 and the family owned a laundry a few blocks away. Incidental remarks in the local newspaper make it patently clear that Hidewo conducted the silk store while Chiyoe managed the laundry.⁵⁷ Although we may know slightly less about other women whose husbands owned laundries around north Queensland, we can draw similar conclusions. Oko Shiraki, for example, lived on the premises of the Lake Laundry in Cairns, along with her husband Tameji who was nominally the proprietor.⁵⁸ Sashi Mori also lived with her husband Kensaki on the premises of a laundry in Mount Isa. In a 1939 report from Mount Isa Station, police described her occupation as 'home duties' while her husband was a laundryman.⁵⁹ These are just a small handful of the dozen

54 Marie Francois, "Se mantiene de lavar": The laundry business in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Mexico City', in *Female Entrepreneurs in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 40.

55 Iwanaga, Etsume [Otsume] – Alien Registration Certificate No 96/16, JAPANESE IWANAGA E, BP4/3, NAA; Prisoner of War/Internee Otsune Iwanaga, QJF16043, MP1103/2, NAA; Iwanaga, Tokitaro – Alien Registration Certificate No 73/16; JAPANESE IWANAGA T, BP4/3, NAA; 'Beautiful silk evening dresses', *Cairns Post* (hereafter *CP*), 9 September 1922, 3.

56 Annie Margaret Iwanga – Objection against internment, Anne Iwanaga Statutory Declaration, 19 May 1942, 255/741/416, MP508/1, NAA; Prisoner of War/Internee Otsune Iwanaga, QJF16043, MP1103/2, NAA.

57 'Child electrocuted', *CP*, 15 March 1939, 6. A prime example of incidental details, this information is from a report covering the inquiry into the death of Hidewo and Chiyoe's young daughter in 1939.

58 Prisoner of War/Internee Oko Shiraki, QJF16167, MP1103/2, NAA. Oko's personal address was 31 Spence Street in Cairns, which matches advertisements for the Lake Laundry.

59 General — Aliens, Cloncurry District Report, 7 June 1939, Q30582 PART 2, BP242/1, NAA.

or more married Japanese women who played important roles in the operation of Japanese laundry businesses throughout north Queensland without formal recognition as business partners.

Widowed Japanese women in north Queensland also had businesses. As Bishop argues for widows in colonial Australia more generally, running a business was a respectable and expected course of action that helped provide financial security for a family, with flexibility for those who were unskilled or tied to the home.⁶⁰ The apparent ease with which some widows assumed control of family businesses that had ostensibly been their husbands' enterprises also suggests those widows were already familiar with them. Shigi Furukawa, for example, helped to run a laundry in Mackay with her husband from 1926. As her husband's health declined over the years, it is likely she took over the management until she became the named proprietor following his death in early 1941.⁶¹ Kuma Oki, the mother-in-law of Chiyo Oki, had a successful cafe in Innisfail. She had not inherited a family business. Instead, in 1924, at the age of 47, she opened her small cafe some time after her husband's death.⁶² Kuma was the sole owner of this establishment on Edith Street and was successful. She was in business for at least 15 years. She would have served warm meals—probably noodle-based—to locals and sugar labourers from nearby Mourilyan, taking advantage of their desire for a nice meal cooked by a woman in an otherwise male-dominated environment.⁶³ The arrival of her son and daughter-in-law in 1933 created a small family network with three businesses between them. Kuma probably helped out with her growing brood of young grandchildren—the couple had six children by 1941—and encouraged her son and daughter-in-law in their business ventures. Perhaps this small network was mutually beneficial, with each person's business connections growing their local customer base.⁶⁴

60 Catherine Bishop, 'On their own in a "man's world": Widows in business in colonial Australia and New Zealand', in *Female Entrepreneurs in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 177.

61 'Thanks', *Daily Mercury* (Mackay), 2 September 1936, 6; Prisoner of War/Internee Shigi Fulukawa, QJF16014, MP1103/2, NAA; Application for leave to submit objections against detention order for Shigi Fulukawa, FULUKAWA/S, MP529/8, NAA.

62 Application for leave to submit objections against detention order for Mrs Kuma Oki, OKI/K, MP529/8, NAA.

63 Prisoner of War/Internee, Kuba Oki, QJF16134, MP1103/2, NAA. Among her possessions was a 'machine for making spaghetti'. Bishop, 'On their own', 185; 'Innisfail health', *CP*, 31 July 1925, 10. The *CP* article indicates the presence of a Japanese cafe at the rear of an unnamed cafe on Edith Street in 1925, which is likely to have been Kuma's.

64 Hidewo Oki and wife and family – Detention orders, Department of the Army Minute Paper, 27 January 1942, 255/742/520, MP508/1, NAA.

A small handful of women, including widows and unmarried women, may also have undertaken self-directed and independent businesses in their old age, but there are few details available. Nagata recorded oral histories that identify five former *karayuki-san* who were living on Thursday Island in 1941 and making a living by offering their domestic services in the form of laundering and mending clothes and running a bath house and boarding house.⁶⁵ Little else is known about their activities, but evidently each were independently supporting themselves as they had no known husbands or partners. Masu Kusamo, at around the age of 51, was one of these women who supported herself after her husband left for Japan in 1922 and never returned. She moved around for a few years after his departure, before eventually settling on Thursday Island.⁶⁶ While further details about Masu's business activities are unclear, along with other 'single' women like her, these small details again highlight the multifaceted work undertaken by Japanese women throughout north Queensland, regardless of their marital status or age. This range of domestic work furthers our understanding of how typically 'feminine' skills were used to Japanese businesswomen's advantage. The prevalence of Japanese women as business partners throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century contrasts with their typically piecemeal roles as sole operators in the 1930s and 1940s. This variation indicates that Japanese women adapted their business activities to changing circumstances in their lives and therefore need to be understood in the context of their individual life circumstances.

Japanese Women and Silk Stores

Prominent silk stores around north Queensland were often owned and managed by a Japanese couple or family, although a few women appear to have been independent operators. These silk stores were located in nearly every north Queensland town—Atherton, Innisfail, Townsville, Cairns, Chillagoe and more—offering fabrics and haberdashery, ready-made clothing, specialty household items and even bug repellent for tropical

65 Nagata, 'Japanese in Torres Strait', 146.

66 CEDT – Jirokichi Okamoto, 16 February 1922, 335/033, J2883, NAA; CEDT – Mrs Masu Okamoto, 9 July 1928, 440/99, J2483, NAA; Prisoner of War/Internee, Masu Kusano, QJF16234, MP1103/2, NAA.

insects.⁶⁷ With many of these items of a 'feminine' kind, the presence of a woman behind the counter to offer advice on recent stocks of crepe-de-chines, laces and georgettes would have been a sound business decision. Japanese women had more than a minor role in these businesses; they were responsible for the keeping of the store and, in some cases, managed the storefront while their husband handled the importation of stock and trade relationships. The women in these shopfronts capitalised on local gender roles that entangled femininity and domesticity with clothing and household items, giving them a specific advantage to participate in north Queensland's economic life.

Not all married women, however, ran silk stores in partnership with their husbands. Some women, like Toki Mayeshiba, were independently responsible for the management of their businesses.⁶⁸ Toki, often referred by her pre-marital name—Toki Shiomasu—lived on Thursday Island and managed a Japanese store there. Her husband stated on a 1902 application to visit Japan for 12 months that 'my wife is on Thursday Island and will superintend my business during my absence'.⁶⁹ His expression of sole proprietorship was overstated. Toki seems to have continued to manage the store herself, with Naokichi travelling back to Japan again in 1905, 1907 and 1911, each time for at least six months until he did not return from Japan in 1912.⁷⁰ Toki independently ran the store until at least 1922.⁷¹ Kame Tashima in Townsville was another woman who can be seen as a businesswoman in her own right. She was married to Yoshimatsu Tashima, proprietor of Tashima's Silk Store, which was one of the largest importers and retailers of Japanese goods in north Queensland.⁷² Little is known

67 See, for example: 'T. Iwanaga', *CP*, 23 October 1923, 3; 'K. Sakaguchi', *CP*, 17 August 1921, 5; 'K. Takaoka', *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), 11 May 1912, 4; 'Specials this week at Fujiya's', *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 13 November 1929, 2.

68 Annie Margaret Iwanga – Objection against internment, Anne Iwanaga Statutory Declaration, 19 May 1942 (hereafter Anne Iwanaga statement), 255/741/416, MP508/1, NAA; 'Child electrocuted', *CP*, 15 March 1939, 6.

69 Application for Certificate of Domicile for Naokichi Mayeshiba, 14 January 1903, 118, J3115, NAA.

70 Certificate of Domicile for Naokichi Mayeshiba of Thursday Island, 16 March 1905, 1905/32, J2482, NAA; CEDT – Naokichi Mayeshiba, 5 March 1907, 1907/101, J3136, NAA; CEDT – Naokichi Mayeshiba, 18 May 1910, 42/49, J2483, NAA.

71 CEDT – Naokichi Mayeshiba of Thursday Island, 4 March 1912, 92/43, J2483, NAA; CEDT – Toki Mayeshiba of Thursday Island, 16 December 1919, 286/19, J2483, NAA. Naokichi left for Japan in March 1912 and there was no listed date of return. Multiple CEDTs, however, show that Toki travelled in and out of Australia until at least November 1922.

72 CEDT – Kame Tashima, Yoshimatsu Tashima, Memorandum from the Sub-Collector of Customs, 25 January 1913 (hereafter CEDT Kame and Yoshimatsu), 171/1913, J2773, NAA; Oliver, *Raid on Australia*, 81.

about Kame's life, but her role as a businesswoman in partnership with her husband was clearly recognised by others. In 1913, the sub-collector of customs reported that 'these two people are well known in this town [Townsville], both in business and other circles', later reiterating that *both* Mr and Mrs Tashima were well-known businesspeople around town.⁷³ Such overt acknowledgement went counter to the 'male breadwinner – female dependant' rhetoric of the time, suggesting that Kame's role in the business was substantial. Some other Japanese women were involved in stores independent of any husband. In her application for domicile in 1903, Mrs Omiyo Yamashita from Thursday Island provided character references stating that she had been known as a storekeeper on Thursday Island for nearly two years, with her husband still living in Nagasaki during that time.⁷⁴ Little else is known about her business.

Japanese women involved in silk stores were from different classes, but often received community recognition of status, with many able to even improve their social standing because of their roles as merchants. As Oliver explained in her discussion of Japanese businesses in Sydney, most Japanese merchant families lived under a two-fold social stratification: the Australian community and the Japanese community. Within the Australian community, Japanese migrants' 'position as prosperous small business families enabled them to enter the "middle class" of Australian society where they were often well-known and respected'.⁷⁵ Within the Japanese community, merchant families involved in the import–export trade were given higher status compared to the much smaller business owners.⁷⁶ Otsume Iwanaga of Iwanaga & Co. in Cairns, and Kame Tashima of Tashima's Silk Store in Townsville, for example, both appear to be women of different, albeit generally respected, status. While Otsume may have been of a lower class on arrival to Australia—having lived in the Atherton Tablelands and married to a farmer—the Iwanaga family, Otsume included, were socially elevated when they took up their silk store in Cairns.⁷⁷ Mentioned occasionally in the social and community pages of local newspapers, Otsume was often involved in local charity benefits and the occasion of their daughter's eighteenth birthday party was a celebrated

73 CEDT Kame and Yoshimatsu.

74 Application for Certificate of Domicile for Omiya Yasashita, a storekeeper from Thursday Island, 8537/351/1903, BP342/1, NAA.

75 Oliver, 'Japanese relationships', 9.

76 Oliver, 'Japanese relationships', 9.

77 Anne Iwanaga statement.

event.⁷⁸ Despite Otsume's high social regard in Cairns, Kame Tashima's connection to the much larger importing business of Tashima's provided her an even more esteemed position within Townsville. Kame and her husband once were excused from providing photographs and handprints in their application for Certificates of Exemption after protesting through their solicitors that: 'in Japan hand prints and photographs are only taken from those who have been convicted of criminal offences, and the applicants therefore being of good birth find it especially galling to have to submit the same'.⁷⁹ Kame and her husband were also among the guests at the Japanese consul, Goro Narita's, last few events at Kardinia in Townsville in 1907, while her husband was elected to the local Chamber of Commerce in 1912.⁸⁰ Even comparing photographs of Otsume and Kame reveal Kame's carefully coiffed hair and tailored high-neck blouse, which contrast with Otsume's more casually pinned hair and her loose, low-collared blouse.⁸¹ Evidently, even Japanese women involved in the same 'type' of business had different experiences within the Australian community based on their perceived class and social standing.

Conclusion

These are but some small glimpses of the various forms of work and business undertaken by Japanese women in north Queensland between 1887 and 1941. They were sometimes mobile or independent, able to support themselves as individuals, whereas in other cases they ran businesses with their husbands. Their business activities in north Queensland were far more complex than the too-often told story of impoverished and vulnerable *karayuki-san* who were trafficked to north Queensland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In any circumstance—whether sex workers; married, unmarried, or widowed; or located in regional centres or remote locations of north Queensland—Japanese women made important contributions to the region's economic and social life.

78 'Edmonton notes', *CP*, 22 October 1936, 9; 'Edmonton news', *CP*, 10 October 1936, 9.

79 CEDT Kame and Yoshimatsu, Letter from Hobbs, Wilson & Ryan, Solicitors, Notaries Public, etc., to the Sub-Collector of Customs, 21 January 1913.

80 'Emperor of Japan's birthday', *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 5 November 1907, 3; 'Town and country', *CP*, 27 February 1912, 6.

81 CEDT – Otosune Iwanaga and infant, 16 February 1921, 299/079, J2483 NAA; CEDT – Kame Tashima of Townsville, 18 January 1903, 124/88, J2483, NAA; CEDT – Kame Tashima of Townsville, 18 April 1918, 256/63, J2483, NAA. Taken a decade apart, the first two photos provide the starkest contrast. In the later picture, however, Kame sports a similarly neat hairstyle and higher collar.

The mosaic of documentary sources such as newspaper articles and advertisements, immigration and internment records, and police reports helps build a picture of Japanese women's diverse business activities. Out of around 77 identified Japanese women who lived in the region during this time, at least one-third of them undertook business activities of some kind. These business activities may have been in the sex industry—as managers and owners, or as independent operators—but others were also involved in the sale of domestic services and goods. The undertaking of domestic business activities was common for Japanese women, whether these services included laundering, mending, cooking or cleaning. While some of these women were married to men who were laundry proprietors, other women were proprietors in their own right. Even within silk stores, Japanese women with various degrees of status benefited both socially and economically by taking advantage of gender norms to assume key roles in businesses. While it may have been their husband's name on the sign above the door, Japanese wives were often also engaged in the enterprise and were recognised alongside their husbands as respected businesspeople in the community. This range of business activities shows how Japanese women could utilise 'feminine' domestic skills to their advantage in the economic landscape of north Queensland and to build a life that was, for some, mobile and independent.

Considering their experiences as businesswomen is just one way of understanding Japanese women in north Queensland. These experiences do not simply fit conventional narratives of the *karayuki-san* and impoverished women who 'inhabit the bird cages' of northern Australia. When reading the archives, we need to ask more probing questions. What is the story behind the photograph of elusive Japanese women wearing kimonos at Hambleton Plantation outside Cairns, and who was the Japanese woman who posed for photographer Harriett Brimms in her studio in Mareeba, for example?⁸² Not all Japanese women were in business, and our understanding of those who were is still fragmentary. However, taking a broader view of these women's experiences allows us to start building a more complex story of their lives.

82 Two Japanese women on the driveway to the overseers house, Hambleton Sugar Plantation 1891, image 50236475496, SLQ; Studio portrait of a Japanese woman wearing a kimono in Mareeba, Queensland, date unknown, image 31054-0001-0466, SLQ.

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