

## Chapter 7

# A journey of love: Agnes Breuer's sojourn in 1930s China

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In his 1933 book, *White China: An Austral-Asian sensation*, journalist John Sleeman discussed the story of a young Queensland woman that had appeared in Sydney's *World* newspaper the previous year.<sup>1</sup> The sensational article claimed that after marrying a Chinese man in Townsville, the woman had gone with him to China where she was treated badly by her husband and his family. The *World* wrote that a fortnight after having a baby, the woman was 'forced to work in the rice fields like a coolie', that she lived 'under conditions that an Australian would scorn to allot to a diseased dog' and that her child was taken away by her husband's Chinese wife. The story had come to the *World* from a party of Anzac members of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps who had helped the Salvation Army 'rescue' the woman from China and facilitate her return to Australia.

The *World* article was like something from the pages of a melodrama: a sensationalist tale of slavery, immorality, racial pollution, cruelty, kidnapping and piracy mixed together with tropes of female helplessness and the heroism of the white Australian male. It spoke of a 'thrilling rescue' from a 'Chinese hell', of 'terrible conditions' and 'frightful cruelties'. Its white Australian heroine, identified only by the Chinese name of Low Mun, was nineteen years old and 'very beautiful'—and she was but one of a number of women in similar situations, the article claimed, two of whom were still 'being held captive'. Moralistic as well as sensational, the article ended with a quote from one of the woman's Anzac rescuers. He said, 'Australian women who marry Chinese should heed the perils attached to such, and should on no account accompany their husbands to China.'<sup>2</sup>

In *White China*, Sleeman countered the *World's* version of the woman's experiences by reproducing a statement she gave to customs officials on returning to Australia. Her statement, as published in the book, itself given a journalistic gloss by Sleeman, highlighted the exaggeration of the newspaper reports and noted that some of her Anzac rescuers were, in fact, press men (in Sleeman's words, 'scandal-mongers intent on falsifying fact to get a thrill out of falsehood'). The statement addressed particular points of exaggeration from the *World's*

account. The woman had not had to live in a hut, nor did she have to work in the rice fields; instead, she had stayed in a flat on the main street of the town and had not even been made to do her own housework! She was certainly not held captive and could have left for Australia at any time, albeit not easily with her infant son.

The real root of her difficulties, she said, came from her father-in-law's objections to her marriage to his eldest son. Her father-in-law had been angry with her and with his son, whom he disowned for marrying against the family's wishes. Picking up on this, Sleeman argued that:

It is the sort of thing that is happening every day, everywhere. It is the story of a family dispute. The least said, the soonest mended. The girl had a very unhappy experience, the sort of experience that thousands of Australian girls have at home without taking a trip to China to find.<sup>3</sup>

The woman had married her husband of her own free will, and of her own free will had gone with him to China. According to Sleeman's argument, it was a simple example of 'domestic infelicity' and he suggested that this one case should not be made to stand for all, saying: 'Many of our women who have married Chinese have lived happily and have reared children who to-day are playing a big part in the most important stage of world history.'<sup>4</sup>

Sleeman's *White China* was, according to Shirley Fitzgerald, 'perhaps the most widely read work on [the] China–Australia relationship in the '30s'.<sup>5</sup> The book's main argument concerned the state of trade between China and Australia, yet its tone was far from that of a dry work of economic theory. Sleeman, a former publicist for NSW Labor Premier Jack Lang and editor of the short-lived but vivacious weekly magazine *Beckett's Budget*, was an old hand at wrapping politics and idealism in colour and drama. *White China* followed the same formula, ranging widely in its discussions: 'Chapters on Chinese culture and political events were juxtaposed with details of Australian involvement and attitudes, from the heroic to the villainous, in a compilation designed to target the Australian conscience.'<sup>6</sup>

Sleeman placed the Queensland woman's story in a chapter on 'The women of China'—among accounts of some of the Middle Kingdom's great and legendary women, including Madame Sun Yat-sen, the Dowager Empress T'zu Hsi and Yang Kuei-fei—and he gave it as many words as he gave any of them. There was something about the story, or perhaps more particularly about the way it had been told in the press, that was behind Sleeman's decision to include it in the book; it certainly gave him another opportunity to lecture his reader about the foolishness of Australia's attitudes towards Asia and Asians. There was, however, also an untold personal connection between Sleeman and the unnamed woman, through their separate connections to businessman and Chinese

community activist William Liu. It is likely that Sleeman was given access to the woman's statement—'duly signed and witnessed, to the Australian Government, through the agency of a Customs officer'—through Liu.

## A sensational story

The *World* article appeared on Wednesday, 21 September 1932 and further details about the dramatic events in China were revealed in the next weeks, as the press in Sydney and Queensland pursued the story. On the evening of 21 September, a Brisbane newspaper retold the story from the *World* under the banner 'Young Queensland woman rescued from Chinese—wife in Australia was slave in Orient'.<sup>7</sup> The next day, the *Townsville Evening Star* gave full details of the woman's identity, but it was likely that much of the Townsville population would already have known who she was, had they chanced on the papers of the previous day. The *Evening Star* stated that she was 'originally Agnes Breuer', and that she had married, late in the previous year, 'a cultured young Chinese named William Lum Mow, the son of a well-known Chinese merchant, formerly of North Queensland, but now resident in China'.<sup>8</sup> It outlined how in March that year the young couple left Australia for Shekki in China and how it was there that the Australian wife discovered the presence of a Chinese wife—an event that was only the beginning of her 'sensational story'. On 26 September, the *Daily Mail* published a photograph of the couple and their newborn son—a seemingly happy young family—sent to her parents and just arrived with the Hong Kong mail.<sup>9</sup>

On 27 September, the *Evening Star* reported that Agnes was finally on board the SS *Taiping*, 'bound for home and safety after a succession of terrifying experiences as the wife of a Chinese'. It quoted from a letter from one Harold Brockenshire, 'Australian journalist, resident in China', who had written to a Sydney friend with news of Agnes's plight and plans for the rescue:

After the marriage the Chinese carried the girl off to his native village. She found on arrival that he already had a Chinese wife and a couple of concubines. She has had a baby, and is in a bad way. To-morrow we catch the boat to Macao [from Hong Kong], dash to the village, and seize the girl.<sup>10</sup>

The press coverage of Agnes's 'rescue' and return to Australia drew on the themes presented first in the *World* article. Headlines included 'Rescue in China—Townsville girl's plight—sensational story of bondage', 'Fled from life of sorrow—rescue of white girl in China' and 'East is East—Australian girl's rescue—married to bigamous Chinese'.<sup>11</sup> Agnes spoke to the press on her arrival in Australia on 4 October, firmly denying the allegations made by the *World* about her time overseas. Nevertheless, her story was an unhappy one and she

confessed that during her stay she had lived under 'wretched conditions'. 'I am very pleased and excited to get back home to Australia,' she said.<sup>12</sup>

Her Anzac rescuer's comment in the *World* article—that 'Australian women who marry Chinese should heed the perils attached to such, and should on no account accompany their husbands to China'—echoed sentiments expressed time and again in discussions of Anglo-Chinese intermarriage in previous decades. These discussions, together with that of Agnes's experiences, focused greatly on troubles caused by the fact that women not only chose to marry across racial boundaries, they left Australia (or England or America) and went with their husbands to China. Crossing the racial line in choosing a husband was one thing, but going with him to 'heathen', 'barbarian' China was another. It was thought widely that the chances of a successful marriage between a Chinese man and a white woman were generally very slim, but in China were virtually impossible.<sup>13</sup>

Sleeman was unique among commentators in arguing that Agnes's situation was one common to many Australian women, that it was a personal and familial problem in which race, culture, language and place played little part. Most accounts were generally negative and frequently condescending, and there were very few published accounts by families themselves that could be used to counter the dominant narrative.<sup>14</sup> With the case of Agnes Breuer, however, there is a small but significant collection of personal documents, which together with Sleeman's *White China* and Agnes's statements to the press and correspondence with government officials, reveals a level of detail of her own thoughts and personal experience that makes it possible to go behind the superficial public commentary about her relationship and to consider from a more intimate perspective the particular challenges faced by white wives who chose to accompany their Chinese husbands to China.

In these documents, the challenges to love across racial and cultural boundaries in white Australia become apparent. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century Australia could be ambiguous and contradictory in its reactions to interracial sex and marriage between white women and non-white men.<sup>15</sup> Increasingly, white women who formed intimate relationships with Chinese men and bore their children found that the interracial and sometimes transnational nature of their love and relationships conflicted with the ideologies, policies and mechanisms of the emerging nation-state. Their lives and personal dramas became not simply stories of family trouble, but could be and were drawn into and impacted on by wider narratives of racial and national anxiety.

**Figure 7.1: Agnes and William Lum Mow, with baby William, Shekki, August 1932. Agnes Breuer told Australian reporters that William Lum Mow's Chinese wife was 'furiously jealous' of this photograph (*Telegraph*, 4 October 1932). She sent the picture to her parents from China and it was published in the *Daily Mail* on 26 September 1932 under the heading 'A cheerful couple'.**



Courtesy: Liz McNamee

## Australian wives in China

Agnes Breuer was one of a small number of non-Chinese women who travelled to southern China with their Chinese partners between the 1880s and the 1930s.<sup>16</sup> These women came from diverse cultural, social and religious backgrounds: from Australia, New Zealand, England, Europe, America, Canada, Hawai'i and South America. They had met and formed relationships with Chinese men who themselves had travelled overseas—to work as indentured labourers, to find riches in the colonial goldfields or as part of continuing familial migrations based on business and kinship. In Australia, intimate relationships had formed between white women and Chinese men since the mid 1850s, with numbers increasing as the Chinese population established itself in the colonies with the Victorian and NSW gold rushes.<sup>17</sup> Marriage records show that between the 1850s and the turn of the century, there were about 2000 legal marriages between white women and migrant Chinese men in Australia's eastern colonies, probably with similar numbers involved in de facto relationships of various kinds.<sup>18</sup>

The Chinese men who came to Australia were primarily from the areas in southern China around Canton, inland from Hong Kong, and it was to these same areas that their white wives accompanied them on journeys home. Hong Kong itself, with its British and Eurasian population, was the destination for some;<sup>19</sup> others travelled inland to the ancestral towns and villages in the Pearl River Delta region, as Agnes Breuer did. Agnes travelled to Shekki, the bustling county capital of the district of Zhongshan. Zhongshan and other parts of Guangdong Province such as Taishan, Kaiping, Dongguan and Zengcheng had prospered through the influence of significant overseas migration during numerous decades; by the knowledge, technologies, goods and money transferred from Chinese overseas. Agnes's father-in-law, Lum Mow, the 'well-known Chinese merchant, formerly of North Queensland, but now resident in China', had returned to Shekki in the late 1920s after nearly three decades as a merchant in Townsville.<sup>20</sup> The family was originally from a village called Seung Hang, several kilometres out of the town, but Lum Mow built his family a substantial and modern home in Shekki itself.

With the opening up of Hong Kong and Canton throughout the course of the nineteenth century, it was not only Chinese who were travelling back and forth. Non-Chinese claimed a presence in southern China, and there were numbers of British, Australian, American and European women resident in Hong Kong and Macau and in the Chinese Treaty ports. Most of these women had come to China with their husbands, who were employed in trade, missionary or government services. Other women came independently as missionaries (including some who lived outside the established foreign communities of the larger cities), as travellers and holidaymakers.<sup>21</sup> The differences between the experiences of these women and the wives of Chinese men were, however, significant. They might have

shared feelings of homesickness, unfamiliarity with their surroundings and isolation—as well as those of excitement, adventure and discovery—but the experiences of wives were particular. When in China, non-Chinese wives became absorbed into their partners' families and into local cultures and communities in intimate ways that other non-Chinese women did not; theirs was an experience of Chinese domestic and family life usually inaccessible to foreigners. The experiences of wives in travelling to and from China were also shaped by the discriminatory attitudes and exclusionary policies of white expatriate communities and of governments at home.

**Figure 7.2: 'Water Front, Shekki, Canton, June 1932', taken during Agnes Breuer's visit to China.**



Courtesy: Liz McNamee

## **Agnes and William**

Agnes Breuer was born in 1913, the daughter of a naturalised German father and an English–Australian mother. Her parents had married in Victoria in 1901, but the family moved north and Agnes, the only daughter after two sons, was born in Brisbane. In 1924, the family moved from Brisbane to Townsville, where her father, Adolf, an electrical engineer, took up a position as a teacher at the Townsville Technical College. Agnes was well educated and bright, and is remembered by her family as strong and stubborn; in the early 1930s, when she met her future husband, William Lum Mow, she was a lean, blonde teenager, a young woman with a talent for dancing and fond of dressing herself in the fashions of the day.<sup>22</sup>

William Lum Mow had arrived in Townsville in 1921 under the name of Lum Wie.<sup>23</sup> He had come to Australia on a Chinese student passport to live with his merchant father and attend school.<sup>24</sup> He was fifteen years old at the time and the eldest of four sons. In the following years, William attended Townsville's public school and the local Christian Brothers College. His school reports noted that he was a good student, his head teacher commenting in 1924 that he 'is really a splendid scholar; clean in his dress, thoroughly well behaved, and good at his work'.<sup>25</sup> In 1925, William enrolled in night courses at the technical college (where Adolf Breuer taught) and about the same time took over control of the family business when his ailing father returned to China for medical treatment. The family business, a successful fruit merchants and general importers in Stokes Street, Townsville, was established by William's father. It was one of about 50–60 Chinese stores in the town during the 1920s.<sup>26</sup>

**Figure 7.3: Thomas Lum Mow (front) in the Lum Mow family store, Townsville, c. 1931.**



Courtesy: Liz McNamee

At the age of twenty-two, William returned to China for nine months—from February to November 1928—and there he married a woman of his family's choosing, Li Yunying. His new wife remained in China and lived as a member of the Lum family in their home.<sup>27</sup> It seems that William disregarded this marriage after he arrived back in Australia, as he returned to the Australian life he was growing increasingly accustomed to. His father remained in China, and

William had control of the family business and care of his younger brothers: Norman, who came to Townsville in 1924, and Thomas, who arrived in 1930.

It is not clear exactly when William and Agnes began their relationship. An annotation in William's hand on the back of a photograph of himself, given to Agnes as a token, reads 'To Miss Agness [sic], Remembrance of Happy Days' and is dated 8 August 1931. Certainly, by late 1931, Agnes and William were planning to be married and William was also beginning to make arrangements for someone to manage the store while he returned to China for 'personal and business reasons' in early 1932—honeymoon plans, perhaps. Photos taken about this time (it seems William was a keen amateur photographer) show the couple carefree and relaxed, playing tennis, picnicking with friends in the countryside, posing in the office at the back of the family store—a young couple clearly much in love.

**Figure 7.4: Agnes Breuer (back centre) and William Lum Mow (back left) picnicking with friends in Townsville, c. late 1931.**



Courtesy: Liz McNamee

## A Chinese holiday

Agnes and William were married on 18 December 1931 at the Townsville Registry Office. Agnes had just turned eighteen and William was twenty-five. Before the marriage, Agnes and her father had paid a visit to the Sub-Collector of Customs in Townsville to inquire about her 'legal position' if she were to marry William. The sub-collector later stated that Adolf Breuer had 'seemed to be against that union but must have consented'; the birth of Agnes's son in early August the

next year suggests that the marriage, and her father's consent to it, could have been prompted by a pregnancy. The sub-collector told Agnes that the marriage would not confer any right on William to remain in Australia and that her nationality would change to that of her husband; in the face of these warnings, however, Agnes maintained that she 'had considered all aspects of the matter' and still wanted to be married.<sup>28</sup>

William had made preparations to leave Australia for a honeymoon in China, and his father returned in early January 1932 to care for the family shop while William was away. Lum Mow's visit was cut short, however, and he returned to China three weeks later. Lum Mow was apparently taken ill again, but knowing of the events that were to follow, it is likely that Lum Mow left at least in part in anger at his son's marriage. William and Agnes's Chinese holiday was delayed until March while arrangements for the management of the shop were taken care of. By this stage, it was confirmed that Agnes was pregnant. A medical certificate presented to customs officials before the couple's departure noted that she was about three months' pregnant, 'but is quite fit for travel and is in good health'.<sup>29</sup>

Having married William, Agnes lost her rights as a British subject. In the eyes of the Australian Government, she was now 'Chinese', and her unborn child would not only be ethnically Chinese, it would be born in China. Agnes was given permission to leave Australia and return within two years; her baby could return on 'evidence of its bona fides', providing it returned with Agnes before it was three years old. William's certificate of exemption, which allowed him to remain in Australia first as a student and then as manager of his father's business, was due to expire but as it had been renewed time and again for the previous 11 years it was presumably thought by William to be of no great matter. He would return from their holiday to resume his place as manager of the family store.

## **Transnational families**

Recent scholarship has asserted the transnational nature of Chinese migration to countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>30</sup> Transnational connections could be found in many aspects of society and culture in the home counties of Guangdong Province and in Chinese communities overseas, including in family life. Adam McKeown has suggested the idea of the transnational overseas Chinese family as a way of describing the influences that resulted from the significant numbers of Chinese men who travelled overseas for work during this period.<sup>31</sup> The family of Lum Mow was typical in many regards.

When Lum Mow arrived in Australia in about 1896, it was not a one-way migration. He sent money home to China and returned himself on numerous

occasions and fathered children. His wife remained in China, their sons were raised there and Lum Mow chose to return to China in his old age, taking a second wife, who bore him a daughter. As his sons grew up, Lum Mow arranged for them to come to Australia to be educated and to work in the family business. His second son, Norman, married in China, where his wife and children lived in the family home in Shekki until they later migrated to Australia. His youngest two sons married in Australia to Australian-born Chinese women, but they too continued the connection with China. The family of Lum Mow in Townsville was part of an extended network of kinsmen that stretched along Australia's east coast.<sup>32</sup>

The transnational nature of these families meant that they developed new patterns and strategies to support the family lineage. Among these were the taking of a younger wife to bear children or the adoption of sons to carry on the family line; coming and going to and from the Chinese home to father children (as Lum Mow did); the establishment of two or more households, and wives and families, in China and overseas; and in some cases, as Adam McKeown has noted, the formation of relationships with non-Chinese women overseas. This intermarriage could be thought of as one strategy through which Chinese men continued their family line where other factors did not allow a Chinese marriage.<sup>33</sup> William's decision to marry Agnes when he already had a wife in China was not without precedent then, nor was it perhaps as unusual an action as might otherwise be thought. Many before him had acted similarly, but in his case particular family dynamics meant that his father objected very strongly to the marriage. The precise reasons for his objections remain uncertain.

Often those writing about Chinese family life in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Australia have taken intermarriage between migrant Chinese men and white Australian women as an indicator of the 'assimilation' of Chinese men. Intermarriage and the formation of Australian families, particularly with white women, has been read as an abandonment of ideas of China as home and as a severance of ties to the extended Chinese family lineage, Chinese culture, customs and language—if not for the men themselves, then certainly for their children. Such a framework does not, however, help explain the actions of particular individuals and families who maintained strong family or business connections with the Chinese communities in Australia or with those in China itself. Thinking of interracial couples and the families they created as part of a transnational family system, however, provides a conceptual space in which to consider and perhaps understand more fully the complex dynamics operating within and around interracial relationships.<sup>34</sup>

## Family

After leaving Queensland, Agnes and William travelled to Hong Kong and then inland to Shekki, arriving in mid April 1932. Their reception from William's

father was cold. He disapproved of his son's decision to marry Agnes. Three days after arriving in Shekki, in Agnes's words, 'a big family consultation was held as to the attitude to be taken towards us and on its completion we were informed to get out of the house'.<sup>35</sup> William was to be disowned.

Agnes had experienced another shock on her arrival in China. It appears that she had been unaware of William's Chinese wife, Li Yunying, and the place she held within the wider Lum family.<sup>36</sup> Li Yunying had been living with her parents-in-law since her marriage to William four years earlier.

At first, Agnes and William, together with Li Yunying, went to stay at the Shekki home of Thomas Wing Lun, whom they knew from Townsville. After two months, they had to find other accommodation after their hosts were intimidated by the wealthy and influential Lum Mow. They moved to a flat on the main street of the town. Cards and letters sent home by Agnes, and photographs taken during the holiday, show that in spite of these difficulties there was continuing contact between Agnes and William and his family (there is a photograph of Agnes and other young women from the family, for example) and there was the opportunity for day trips, sightseeing and shopping.<sup>37</sup>

Agnes's son was born at the beginning of August, but his birth was the cause of increasing family conflict. William was an eldest son, her son likewise. For the extended Lum family, this child belonged first and foremost to their lineage, not to his natural mother. Agnes felt that Li Yunying was very jealous of the baby and stated that, besides her father-in-law's wrath, 'the only unpleasantness I experienced was from my husband's so-called Chinese wife who was prepared to vent her spite when the opportunity offered more particularly after the birth of my baby'.<sup>38</sup>

Convinced that a family reconciliation was impossible, Agnes became anxious to return to Australia. She wrote to her parents. They contacted the local Salvation Army, who arranged a passage and informed their Hong Kong colleagues. Her situation was, in Agnes's words, 'apparently exaggerated to Hong Kong' and her 'rescue' was effected in the manner described earlier. Agnes stated that she could have left of her own accord, but her main concern was whether she would have been able to take the baby with her if she had. Her father-in-law had promised to pay for her passage home only if she left the baby behind. Agnes also knew that William would oppose the baby's departure; she said that her departure from Shekki went so smoothly only because her husband had been out of the house at the time she and the baby left: '[H]ad my husband been home at the time there would have been trouble'.<sup>39</sup> Their departure shocked William and he wrote that the 'sudden and unexpected taking away—even without a parting word between wife and husband—had broken my heart'.<sup>40</sup> William regretted the way in which Agnes left, but at this point

he and Agnes felt that their marriage was not over, that they would be reunited in Australia at a later date.

Agnes waited for 16 days in Hong Kong for the next boat to sail for Australia. She was in communication with her husband, who came to Hong Kong to see her, 'but on hearing of rumours of the treatment held in store for him from the Anzacs he immediately returned to Shekki', without even seeing her.<sup>41</sup> Agnes and the baby stayed with one of the Anzacs, a Mr J. P. Way of the Manufacturers Life Insurance Company, and the Anzacs presented her with a birthday gift of \$HK100 before her departure.<sup>42</sup>

## White Australia

William wrote to Agnes and to their son from that moment of their departure in 1932 until 1950.<sup>43</sup> After Agnes and the baby left Shekki, however, they never saw William again. It was at this point that national imperatives impacted on the transnational relationship of Agnes and William.

Agnes and the baby were permitted to return to Australia as had been arranged with customs officials in Townsville before they left. Things were different, however, for William. He had been allowed to remain in Australia after his schooling as a substitute for his father as manager of the family store. Soon after Agnes and William's departure, an officer in the Department of Home Affairs was already questioning whether William should be allowed to return at all, specifically citing his marriage to an Australian woman as the reason:

Lum Wie [William Lum Mow] was here as substitute for his father Lum Mow. We gave authority for him to return to Australia to continue to act in that capacity. During Lum Wie's absence a younger brother is acting as substitute for the father.

In the case of an assistant of H Louey Pang's we refused to allow him to return for some time because of his marriage to an Australian born girl.<sup>44</sup>

In the circumstances it is submitted as to whether Lum Wie shall be allowed to come back as his father's substitute.<sup>45</sup>

While the direction was given in the first instance that William was to be allowed to be readmitted,<sup>46</sup> the same officer was firm on this point after Agnes's return: William should not be allowed back into Australia because there was nothing that recommended his readmission.<sup>47</sup>

Agnes viewed the situation otherwise. The disagreement within William's family meant that he would not be admitted to work in his father's business, but Agnes wrote to the Minister for Home Affairs in December 1932 and again in March 1933 asking if there was some other way that William could be allowed to return. She proposed that he should establish a business with capital brought from China. The sum he could bring was perhaps not large enough to meet the

requirements, but she argued that he would soon have it built into a substantial enterprise, saying, 'He was very successful in improving his father's business in Townsville during the time of his management, and was in high esteem of all local and overseas wholesale dealers.'<sup>48</sup> He was, she said, very anxious to return to Australia to support his child and wife.

The department's decision, however, was final. Before he could be admitted as a merchant, William would have to demonstrate that he was representing a reputable importing or exporting house in China and that he would be undertaking a genuine wholesale import-export business. The value of capital and goods he was required to bring was no less than £500—more than double what William could muster. Having been disinherited, William no longer had the support and connections offered by his wealthy father. William and Agnes were stuck.

Australian authorities were unwilling to make allowances for their situation, despite Agnes's polite and thoughtful requests for assistance and despite the power the authorities had to make lenient decisions in cases they felt were deserving. In November 1932, after Agnes Lum Mow's case made the headlines, the Secretary of the Department of the Interior, A. R. Peters, requested that if customs officials were approached by white wives of Chinese for passports or documents for travel to China, his department should be informed and a report provided 'as to the husband's status (i.e. whether domiciled here or merely under exemption), his occupation, the object of the intended visit and proposed length of stay in China'.<sup>49</sup> Officials did not want a repeat of the events; nor were they particularly sympathetic to Agnes's plight. In the margins of one memo from the Customs and Excise Office in Townsville are scribbled the words 'The woman is not worth this trouble'.<sup>50</sup>

## Personal journeys and public scrutiny

The public and official discussions of Agnes's experiences in China are typical of those about other non-Chinese wives of Chinese men in China. Missionaries, journalists, charitable bodies and governments focused on the unhappy, the unfortunate and the outright unsuccessful aspects of their journeys and their relationships.<sup>51</sup> They told moralistic tales of marital unhappiness, ill treatment, bigamy, ill health and maladjustment, underscored by a belief that a non-Chinese woman could never be truly happy as the wife of a Chinese man, particularly in China. Most of these discussions are one-sided or very brief and matter-of-fact, which makes the case of Agnes Breuer and William Lum Mow unusual in the comparative richness of source material about the circumstances of their separation. In the surviving documents, letters, photos and press clippings, the tensions between public discourse and private sentiment are evident.

Agnes chose to speak publicly about her experiences in an attempt to counter what the press were saying about her and her family. How far this was her own idea, or that of others, remains unknown. William urged Agnes, in a telegram from China, to tell the truth about what had happened, and to contact William Liu for help.<sup>52</sup> Liu was a businessman and social activist who devoted much of his time to improving the lot of Chinese people in Australia and to promoting greater understanding between Chinese and white Australians.<sup>53</sup> He was on amicable terms with government officials and was their frequent correspondent; he had acted on behalf of the Lum Mow family before, writing formal and personal letters to F. J. Quinlan, Assistant Secretary of the Department of Home Affairs, about their situation.<sup>54</sup> Liu had visited William and Norman Lum Mow in November 1931 in Townsville, as he travelled north from Sydney to China; he knew the Lum Mow family through his business connections with the Mar family of Wing Sang & Company in Sydney.

Liu attempted unsuccessfully to use his official connections to help Agnes and William. He wrote to the Department of the Interior in November 1932 giving some clarification of the circumstances of the case, and raising the issue of William Lum's return to Australia.<sup>55</sup> Sleeman's *White China* also stands as evidence that Liu took steps to clear the name of the Lum Mow family. Sleeman and Liu were friends, and much of *White China* was based on conversations they had about the situation in China and its importance for Australia. It is most likely that it was through Liu that Sleeman obtained a copy of Agnes's statement and heard details of the events. *White China* was widely read and praised by the Australian Chinese community, as well as the wider white community.<sup>56</sup> Although it did not mention the family by name, *White China's* Chinese Australian audience would have known who the family involved was.

The telegram from William that prompted Agnes to contact Liu came several weeks after she had left him in China. It is one of a handful of their personal letters that remain. Government officials, missionaries and the press dismissed the genuineness of Agnes's feelings and desires, yet the personal correspondence between Agnes and her family while she was overseas and the communication between Agnes and William themselves in the time after their separation suggested a different scenario, in which their relationship was inhabited by love and a desire to be together as a family with their baby son. They also reveal a defensiveness in Agnes against what was said publicly about her treatment in China and a continuing bitterness against her husband's family with whom she continued to interact in Townsville. In her letter to the Minister for Home Affairs in December 1932, Agnes wrote that her father-in-law had 'instructed his sons at Townsville to be very rude to me, and to ridicule me as much as they possibly can'.<sup>57</sup> Stories of the events passed down in the Breuer and Lum Mow families suggest the strong emotions were felt on both sides.

## Postscript

Among Agnes Breuer's remaining papers is a small, lined notebook. At one end are rough pencil sketches of ladies' suits and dresses, their style dating them to about the 1930s. Turning the notebook the other way up, in the back one finds pages of text, at first in ink, then in pencil. In this small notebook, Agnes had copied the passages from Sleeman's *White China* (in ink) and then (in pencil) the text of the *World* article from 21 September 1932. It seems unlikely that Sleeman and Agnes ever met through their connection to William Liu, yet Sleeman's words, his explanation, his justification of those dramatic and heartbreaking events in her life could well have provided her with a feeling of reassurance and comfort.

Agnes and her son, William junior, were marked by the events of 1932; the events existed, mostly unacknowledged and unspoken, in the background of their lives. Agnes's efforts to be reunited with her husband, William, continued for almost a year.<sup>58</sup> She went on to have other relationships and, after finally gaining a divorce in 1964, married again. William remained in China and kept in contact with Agnes and their son over the passing years; in 1935, while living in Hong Kong, he had made unsuccessful efforts to gain custody of William junior.<sup>59</sup> Over time, his heartfelt letters to Agnes shifted to cards and photos addressed to his son; the last contact Agnes had from him was in December 1950.<sup>60</sup> Their son never told his own family of his father's Chinese background, and it wasn't until after his death that they began to unravel some of the mysteries of his early life.

Was Sleeman right in saying that Agnes's troubles were nothing more than common 'domestic infelicity'? Reading the sensational press reports, together with Agnes's heartfelt letters to the government, the formal memos and informal comments scribbled in margins of government documents, it is hard to imagine that it was quite as straightforward as that. Agnes Breuer pursued a relationship outside the bounds of what was considered acceptable to white Australia—an imagined community that struggled with the idea and the reality of love that crossed racial and national borders. Her journey to China was made because of her love for her husband, but it was also a journey in which that love was tested by cultural difference and the expectations and prejudices of the two very different communities she and her husband were part of. Exploring her story in detail opens possibilities for considering how and why those who lived interracial and transnational lives could find themselves at odds with the communities and nations they called home.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sleeman, John H. C. 1933, *White China: An Austral-Asian sensation*, self-published, Sydney, pp. 126–32.
- <sup>2</sup> *World*, 21 September 1932.
- <sup>3</sup> Sleeman, *White China*, p. 131.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- <sup>5</sup> Fitzgerald, Shirley 1996, *Red Tape, Gold Scissors: The story of Sydney's Chinese*, State Library of New South Wales Press, p. 128.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- <sup>7</sup> Unreferenced newspaper cutting, dated 21 September 1932, National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA), A433, 1942/2/3297.
- <sup>8</sup> *Townsville Evening Star*, 22 September 1932.
- <sup>9</sup> *Daily Mail*, 26 September 1932.
- <sup>10</sup> *Townsville Evening Star*, 27 September 1932.
- <sup>11</sup> *Townsville Evening Star*, 22 and 27 September 1932; *Telegraph*, 4 October 1932.
- <sup>12</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 4 October 1932; *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 4 October 1932.
- <sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Norton-Kyshe, James 1971, *The History of the Laws and Courts of Hong Kong from the Earliest Period to 1898. Volume 2*, Vetch and Lee Ltd, Hong Kong, pp. 520–1. It is interesting to note that Chinese Australian commentators were similarly opposed to the idea of relationships between Chinese men and white women. See, for example, *Tung Wah Times* [*Donghua xinbao*], 26 August 1899, 29 November 1899, 14 and 21 September 1907. An introduction to questions of gender in the nineteenth-century Chinese Australian newspapers can be found in Poon, Yulan 1995, 'The two-way mirror: contemporary issues as seen through the eyes of the Chinese language press, 1901–1911', in Shirley Fitzgerald and Garry Wotherspoon (eds), *Minorities: Cultural diversity in Sydney*, State Library of New South Wales Press, Sydney.
- <sup>14</sup> Two examples of detailed and publicly accessible accounts of the experiences of white wives in China are Mae Franking's *My Chinese Marriage*, originally published in 1921 (Porter, Katherine Anne 1991, *Mae Franking's My Chinese Marriage: An annotated edition*, University of Texas Press, Austin), and Yue Henry Jackson, 'My reminiscences 1890–1917', Micro MS 112, Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand.
- <sup>15</sup> See, for example, Haskins, Victoria and Maynard, John 2005, 'Sex, race and power: Aboriginal men and white women in Australian history', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 37, no. 126, pp. 191–216; Ellinghaus, Katherine 2006, *Taking Assimilation to Heart: Marriages of white women and indigenous men in the United States and Australia, 1887–1937*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London.
- <sup>16</sup> It is difficult to know with any certainty the precise numbers of non-Chinese wives who travelled to China. There are scattered references to them in a range of sources. See Bagnall, Kate 2006, *Golden shadows on a white land: an exploration of the lives of white women who partnered Chinese men and their children in southern Australia, 1855–1915*, PhD, University of Sydney, Section 5.
- <sup>17</sup> On the history of Anglo-Chinese relationships in southern Australia, see *ibid.*; Hales, Dinah 2004, 'Local histories: Chinese–European families of central western New South Wales, 1850–80', *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, vol. 6, pp. 93–112; Rule, Pauline 2002, 'A tale of three sisters: Australian–Chinese marriages in colonial Victoria', in Kee Pookong et al. (eds), *Chinese in Oceania*, Association for the Study of the Chinese and their Descendants in Australasia and the Pacific Islands, Chinese Museum and Victoria University of Technology Centre for Asia-Pacific Studies, Melbourne; Rule, Pauline 2004, 'The Chinese camps in colonial Victoria: their role as contact zones', in Sophie Couchman, John Fitzgerald and Paul Macgregor (eds), *After the Rush: Regulation, participation, and Chinese communities in Australia 1860–1940. Otherland Literary Journal*, no. 9.
- <sup>18</sup> See Bagnall, *Golden shadows on a white land*, Section 2.
- <sup>19</sup> On the interactions between Chinese, Europeans and Eurasians in Hong Kong, see Lethbridge, Henry 1978, *Hong Kong: Stability and change, a collection of essays*, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong, pp. 175–7. On Eurasians in Hong Kong, see Lee, Vicky 2001, *Hong Kong Eurasian memoir: identity and voices*, PhD, University of Hong Kong.
- <sup>20</sup> Certificate of domicile for Lum Mow, 1 March 1904, NAA, J2482, 1904/57.
- <sup>21</sup> For discussion of white women in China, see, for example, Hoe, Susanna 1991, *The Private Life of Old Hong Kong: Western women in the British colony, 1841–1941*, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong

and New York; Croll, Elisabeth 1989, *Wise Daughters from Foreign Lands: European women writers in China*, Pandora, London.

<sup>22</sup> Sources for the family of Agnes Breuer include the remaining papers and photographs belonging to Agnes Breuer held by her family (hereafter Agnes Breuer Papers); other information supplied by the Breuer family; and NAA, A435, 1946/4/3678, and A435, 1947/4/3233.

<sup>23</sup> See NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297. This large Department of the Interior file documents William Lum Mow's time in Australia between 1921 and 1932, as well as later correspondence between Agnes Breuer and the Australian Government. Much of the biographical information about William Lum Mow in this article comes from this file, together with information supplied by Lum Mow family members.

<sup>24</sup> On the admittance of Chinese students to Australia on exemption, see Yarwood, A. T. 1967, *Asian Migration to Australia: The background to exclusion 1896–1923*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, especially Chapter 6; Palfreeman, A. C. 1967, *The Administration of the White Australia Policy*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, especially Chapter 4.

<sup>25</sup> School report on Lum Wie by E. J. Moorhouse, Head Teacher, Central State School, Townsville, 18 March 1924, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297.

<sup>26</sup> Harvey, Thomas 2001, *Missing persons: the Chinese in Townsville, 1864–1940*, BSS Honours, James Cook University, pp. 80, 83. In 1929, Lum Mow was the sole proprietor of his business, employing four staff, and the turnover of the business was valued at £15,000 per annum; Minute paper, Sub-Collector of Customs, Townsville to Collector of Customs, Brisbane, 15 March 1929, NAA, A433, 1949/2/7501.

<sup>27</sup> NAA, J2773, 172/1928; *Telegraph*, 4 October 1932.

<sup>28</sup> Sub-Collector of Customs, Townsville, to Collector of Customs, Brisbane, 10 October 1932, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297. Agnes Breuer later applied to regain her status as a British subject; see NAA, A435, 1946/4/3678.

<sup>29</sup> Copy of medical certificate from Dr H. J. Taylor, Townsville, 22 March 1932, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Fitzgerald, John 2007, *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in white Australia*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney; Williams, Michael 2002, *Destination Qiaoxiang: Pearl River Delta villages and Pacific ports, 1849–1949*, PhD Thesis, University of Hong Kong; McKeown, Adam 2001, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago and Hawaii 1900–1936*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago; Hsu, Madeline Y. 2000, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and migration between the United States and South China, 1882–1943*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

<sup>31</sup> See McKeown, Adam 1999, 'Transnational Chinese families and Chinese exclusion, 1875–1943', *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 18, pp. 73–93, and *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change*.

<sup>32</sup> This network included merchants Mar Leong Wah and Mar Sun Gee of the Wing Sang Company in Sydney. The Mar and Lum Mow families were from the same district in southern China, Zhongshan, and in time Lum Mow's second son, Norman, would marry a daughter of the Mar family in China. The connection with the Mar family also brought the Lum brothers into contact with businessman and social activist William Liu, who was a director of Wing Sang & Company.

<sup>33</sup> See McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change*, pp. 70–4, and *Journal of American Ethnic History*. Romanzo Adams' work on interracial marriage in Hawai'i supports this thesis. He stated that before 1900, a proportion of Chinese who married Hawaiians 'were not intending to abandon Chinese custom', but rather that 'the marriage was merely a temporary adjustment to the situation in a foreign country'. See Adams, Romanzo 1969, *Interracial Marriage in Hawaii: A study of the mutually conditioned processes of acculturation and amalgamation*, Patterson Smith, Montclair (originally published by The Macmillan Company, 1937), p. 47.

<sup>34</sup> For further exploration of these ideas, see Bagnall, *Golden shadows on a white land*, Section 5, pp. 246–50.

<sup>35</sup> Statement given by Mrs A. H. Lum Mow, October 1932, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297.

<sup>36</sup> The presence of a wife and household in China as well as one overseas was not uncommon among overseas Chinese communities; neither was the added complexity this created during visits by foreign wives to China. See, for example, 'Report of the Royal Commission into Chinese Gambling and Immorality', *New South Wales Legislative Assembly Votes & Proceedings 1891–92*, p. 138; Don, Alexander 1898, *Under Six Flags*, Wilkie & Co., Dunedin, p. 116; Ng, James 1995, *Windows on a Chinese Past: How the Cantonese goldseekers and their heirs settled in New Zealand. Volume 2*, Otago Heritage Books, Dunedin; McKeown, *Journal of American Ethnic History*, p. 109, 61n; McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks*, p. 72.

- <sup>37</sup> One newspaper reported that Agnes had 'smuggled out a letter, unfolding her terrifying experiences' (she did write to ask her parents for assistance in returning to Australia), but most of the postcards and photos sent home to her family did not reflect on the difficulties she was going through. *Townsville Evening Star*, 22 September 1932; postcards from Agnes Breuer to family members, April to August 1932, Agnes Breuer Papers.
- <sup>38</sup> Statement given by Mrs A. H. Lum Mow, October 1932, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297.
- <sup>39</sup> *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 4 October 1932.
- <sup>40</sup> William Lum Mow to Miss Rains (Salvation Army, Hong Kong), 7 September 1932, Agnes Breuer Papers.
- <sup>41</sup> Statement made by Mrs A. H. Lum Mow, October 1932, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297.
- <sup>42</sup> *Townsville Evening Star*, 20 October 1932.
- <sup>43</sup> Draft petition for dissolution of marriage between Agnes Hubertine Lum Mow and William Lum Mow, 1963, Agnes Breuer Papers.
- <sup>44</sup> The mention of an assistant of Louey Pang's refers to David Louey Shue, who arrived to work for his uncle Louey Pang in Melbourne in 1922. After he had been in Australia on exemption for seven years, Louey Shue married a Chinese–Australian woman. Officials in the Department of Home Affairs felt that he had done this as a deliberate attempt to remain permanently in Australia. After the couple and their child went to China for a holiday in 1930, the department had, as a form of chastisement, allowed Louey Shue to return to Australia only if his wife remained overseas. She was subsequently allowed to return in 1932. Louey Shue continued to live in Australia on exemption until the 1950s; NAA, A433, 1948/2/2879.
- <sup>45</sup> Handwritten note, dated 13 April, at the bottom of memorandum from Collector of Customs, Brisbane, to Secretary, Department of Home Affairs, 4 April 1932, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297.
- <sup>46</sup> Handwritten note, undated, at the bottom of memorandum from Collector of Customs, Brisbane, to Secretary, Department of Home Affairs, 4 April 1932, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297.
- <sup>47</sup> Handwritten note, dated 21 October, at the bottom of Sub-Collector of Customs, Townsville, to Collector of Customs, Brisbane, 10 October 1932, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297.
- <sup>48</sup> Agnes Lum Mow to Secretary, Department of the Interior, 6 March 1933, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297.
- <sup>49</sup> Department of the Interior circular memorandum no. 31/2306, 21 November 1932, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297. See also NAA, B13, 1932/17435.
- <sup>50</sup> Memorandum, Customs and Excise Office, Townsville, 2 November 1932, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297.
- <sup>51</sup> It is typical and indeed not altogether surprising that unhappy or unfortunate cases appear most commonly in the sources. See, for example, *Overland China Mail* [Hong Kong], 12 February 1898; *Hong Kong Telegraph*, 18 January 1898; Hong Kong Benevolent Society 1904, *Report for 1903*, Hong Kong (also reports for 1904–06); Edward S. Little, Australian Trade Commissioner in China, to the Prime Minister, 29 March 1923, NAA, A1, 1924/31745.
- <sup>52</sup> The telegram reads: 'Correct newspapers Exaggerations save our name. Consult Wm Liu Sydney, Quong Chong, So Gun, Norman. I will return Townsville soon. Money follows.' Telegram from William Lum Mow (Hong Kong) to Agnes Breuer (Townsville), 18 October 1932, Agnes Breuer Papers.
- <sup>53</sup> William Liu's papers are held by the Mitchell Library, Sydney, as ML MSS 6294. Details of his life and career can be found in, among others, Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie*; Liu, William 1979, 'Australia's Chinese connection', *125th Anniversary of the Battle of the Eureka Stockade: 5th Annual Lalor Address on Community Relations*, Commissioner for Community Relations, Canberra; Liu, William 1978, Conversation with William Liu [sound recording], 17 February 1978, Hazel de Berg Collection, National Library of Australia; Sleeman, *White China*; Walker, David and Ingleson, John 1989, 'The impact of Asia', in Neville Meaney (ed.), *Under New Heavens: Cultural transmission and the making of Australia*, Heinemann Educational Australia, Port Melbourne; Wang Gungwu 1992, 'The life of William Liu: Australian and Chinese perspectives', *Community and Nation: China, Southeast Asia and Australia*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards; Yong, C. F. 1977, *The New Gold Mountain: The Chinese in Australia 1901–1921*, Raphael Arts Pty Ltd, Richmond, South Australia.
- <sup>54</sup> See, for example, two letters (one formal, one personal) from William Liu to F. J. Quinlan, Department of Home Affairs, 26 November 1931, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297.
- <sup>55</sup> Memorandum, 11 November 1932, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297.
- <sup>56</sup> See Society of Chinese Residents in Australia c. 1934, *Relating to Chinese–Australian Trading Relationships and the International Question: An appreciation addresses to J. H. C. Sleeman, Esq., Sydney, Australia*, Author of White China, Sydney, Alert Printing & Publishing.

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<sup>57</sup> Agnes Lum Mow to Secretary, Department of Home Affairs, 23 December 1932, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297.

<sup>58</sup> Agnes wrote in June 1933 that she planned to apply for divorce on the grounds that her husband had not provided sufficient means of support. Agnes Lum Mow to A. Peters, Secretary, Department of the Interior, 28 June 1933, NAA, A433, 1942/2/3297.

<sup>59</sup> In January 1935, William wrote to the Townsville Sub-Collector of Customs about whether it would be possible for him to have custody of his son, subject to Agnes's approval. Investigations revealed that Agnes was seriously ill in hospital and could not comment on the situation, but her father, who 'had the responsibility for caring for the child since his arrival in the Commonwealth', declared that he and Agnes would be opposed to the idea of sending the child to China. William Lum Mow to Sub-Collector of Customs, Townsville, 28 January 1935, NAA, A433, 1942/3297.

<sup>60</sup> Draft petition for dissolution of marriage between Agnes Hubertine Lum Mow and William Lum Mow, 1963, Agnes Breuer Papers.