

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

## Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood

Kate Bagnall

In June 1910, Frances Allen received a letter from her thirteen-year-old son, Charles. 'Dear Mother,' it began, 'I received your letter to-day and was very pleased to hear from you. I don't like been here at all. I want you to try and bring me home'.<sup>1</sup> Lonely and homesick, Charles was in China, far from the familiar sights and sounds and smells of Sydney where he had grown up and where his mother remained. After nearly a year in China Charles noted, 'I can talk the China talk now so it is all right' – a brief reassurance for his distant mother before homesickness took over again. 'Do do try and bring me home every minute I think of you, and long for a piece of bread and butter this tucker is not doing me well. I long to be back in Sydney.'<sup>2</sup>

While Charles Allen longed to be back home with his mother in Sydney, he was writing to her from a different kind of home – from the Chinese village his father, Charlie Gum, had left twenty-five years earlier to come to Australia. Just inland from Hong Kong, the village of Chuk Sau Yuen (竹秀園 *Zhuxiuyuan*) was the ancestral home of the Gock (郭 *Guo*) family, and Charlie Gum was one of a number of young men who left the village in the late nineteenth century to try their luck overseas. He and Frances Allen met in Sydney in the 1890s and Charles was born in 1896. Although his parents' relationship did not last and Charles grew up in his mother's care, when he was twelve his father decided to take him to China. Leaving his mother and half-brother and half-sister behind, Charles Allen left Sydney in June 1909. He returned six years later.

Charlie Gum was not alone in wanting his Australian son to spend time in his homeland. From as early as the 1860s Chinese men resident in the colonies took their Australian-born children, many of whom were of mixed race, to China, primarily to receive a Chinese education. There is plentiful evidence of this, particularly for the early decades of the twentieth century. Australia's strict control over the entry of non-Europeans meant that careful records were kept about the movement of Chinese Australians across the nation's border. In New South Wales, these records show that at least 150 Anglo-Chinese Australians travelled from Sydney to Hong Kong between the turn of the century and the 1930s, most returning within a few months or a few years.<sup>3</sup> What is more difficult to ascertain is what

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<sup>1</sup> National Archives of Australia (NAA): SP42/1, C1922/4449.

<sup>2</sup> NAA: SP42/1, C1922/4449.

<sup>3</sup> Kate Bagnall, 'Anglo-Chinese and the politics of overseas travel from New South Wales, 1898 to 1925', in Sophie Couchman and Kate Bagnall (eds), *Chinese Australians: Politics, Engagement and Resistance*, Brill, Leiden, 2015.

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happened after they arrived in China – where they lived, who they lived with, how they were educated or employed, and how they got on with their extended families and the wider communities in which they lived. Most obscure of all, however, are the thoughts, hopes and anxieties of these young Australians as they adjusted to life in a new country.

I have explored aspects of the transnational lives of Chinese Australian families before, but in this essay I want to look closer at the experiences of a young Anglo-Chinese Australian in China by employing an approach that combines biography and microhistory.<sup>4</sup> Four letters Charles Allen wrote home from China in 1910 and 1911 provide a rare entrée into the emotional world of an Australian boy whose personal circumstances saw him travel between families, countries, cultures and languages. They are intimate family letters, between a homesick son and his heartbroken mother, yet by themselves the letters only tell us so much. Around them sit various circles of meaning – of personal identity, of family relationships, of migrant life, of cross-cultural encounters, of transnationalism, of belonging and not belonging – which only become clear when the letters are read within the wider context of the lives of Charles Allen and his mother, Frances.

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Historical writing with life as its subject – as biography, microhistory, case study, memoir, genealogy and family history – is transforming our understanding of Australia's Chinese past. For many years Robert Travers's 1981 book on merchant and philanthropist Quong Tart was the only full-length historical biography of a Chinese Australian, with few historical works besides the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* making more than passing mention of individual Chinese.<sup>5</sup> More recently, however, books, theses and research articles have appeared about men such as real estate magnate L.J. Hooker, outback cook Hung Bak Cheong, Anglican missionary Cheok Hong Cheong, community activist William Liu, police detective Fook Shing, goldfields interpreter Ho A Mei, greengrocer and unionist Fred Wong, the sporting Kong Sing brothers, and Republican revolutionary Tse Tsan Tai.<sup>6</sup> Unsurprisingly,

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<sup>4</sup> See Kate Bagnall, 'A journey of love: Agnes Breuer's sojourn in 1930s China', in Desley Deacon, Penny Russell and Angela Woolacott (eds), *Transnational Ties: Australian Lives in the World*, ANU E Press, Canberra, 2008; and 'Crossing oceans and cultures', in David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska (eds), *Australia's Asia: From Yellow Peril to Asian Century*, University of Western Australia Press, Crawley WA, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Travers, *Australian Mandarin: The Life and Times of Quong Tart*, Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst NSW, 1981.

<sup>6</sup> Natalia Hooker, *L.J. Hooker The Man: The Biography*, self-published, 2010; Kevin Wong Hoy, *Cheon of the Never Never*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2012; Ian Welch, 'Alien Son: The Life and Times of Cheok Hong Cheong, (Zhang Zhuoxiong) 1851–1928', PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2003; Charlotte Jordan Greene, "'Fantastic Drams": William Liu, and the Origins and Influence of Protest Against the White Australia Policy in the 20th Century', PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2005; Benjamin Mountford, 'In Search of Fook Shing: Detective Stories from Colonial Victoria', Honours thesis, University of Melbourne, 2007; Pauline Rule, 'The transformative effect of Australian experience on the life of Ho A Mei, 1838–1901, Hong Kong community leader and entrepreneur', *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2013, pp. 107–34;

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

these studies have mostly considered people of influence, community standing or wealth – almost always men – whose public profiles meant their business, political and community activities were comparatively well documented. A growing number of family and community histories also commemorate 'successful' Chinese Australian families – those who settled, prospered and multiplied.<sup>7</sup> Such studies of individual and family lives are valuable because they restore agency to Chinese Australians of the past, casting them as conscious actors in their histories and revealing the complexities of lived experience. Importantly too, as Richard T. Chu and Caroline S. Hau have noted with regard to the Philippines, such studies 'are not simply a way of giving voice or visibility to the Chinese' but are a way of 'writing back at dominant scholarly and popular representations of the Chinese'.<sup>8</sup>

While telling the stories of these individuals and families is important, what possibility is there for recovering the life histories of Chinese Australians who were further marginalised within both the Chinese Australian community and the wider community, such as women, the poor and those of mixed race? Only a couple of Chinese Australian women – actress Rose Quong and community political leader Lena Lee – have been the sole subject of historical studies, although shorter profiles of women have been published and further biographical work on individual women is underway.<sup>9</sup> For marginalised subjects, biographies in the usual

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Drew Cottle, 'Unbroken commitment: Fred Wong, China, Australia and a world to win', in Sophie Couchman, John Fitzgerald and Paul Macgregor (eds), *After the Rush: Regulation, Participation and Chinese Communities in Australia 1860-1940*, special edition of *Otherland*, vol. 9, December 2004, pp. 107–18; Gary Osmond and Marie-Louise McDermott, 'Mixing race: The Kong Sing brothers and Australian sport', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2008, pp. 338–55; Rodney Noonan, 'Grafton to Guangzhou: The revolutionary journey of Tse Tsan Tai', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 27, nos 1–2, February–May 2006, pp. 101–15.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Barbara Moore, *Eurasian Roots: The Story of the Life and Times of George Ah Kin and Mary Higgins and their Descendants*, self-published, Canberra, 1994; Kevin Wong Hoy, *Yip Hoy and His Family*, self-published, North Melbourne, 2002; Sophie Couchman (ed.), *Secrets, Silences and Sources: Five Chinese-Australian Family Histories*, La Trobe Asian Studies Papers Research Series, no. 11, La Trobe University, 2005; Kevin Rains, *Cedars of the West: The Ah Foo Family Story*, Chinese Heritage in Northern Australia Inc., North Melbourne, 2011; and Joanna Olsen and Keith Shang, *With His Gold in a Little Velvet Bag: The Story of a Chinaman and a Bonnie Lassie from Edinburgh*, self-published, Lindfield NSW, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Richard T. Chu and Caroline S. Hau, 'Region and microhistory: Writing the Chinese diaspora in the Philippines', *Kritika Kultura*, vol. 21/22, 2013/2014, p. 302, available online at <<http://kritikakultura.ateneo.net/issue/no-2122>>, accessed 12 October 2014.

<sup>9</sup> On Rose Quong see Angela Woollacott, 'Rose Quong becomes Chinese: An Australian in London and New York,' *Journal of Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 38, no. 129, 2007, pp. 16–31, and *Race and the Modern Exotic: Three 'Australian' Women on Global Display*, Monash University Publishing, Clayton Vic., 2011. On Lena Lee, see Julia Martínez, 'Patriotic Chinese women: Followers of Sun Yat-sen in Darwin, Australia', in L. Hock Guan & L. Lai To (eds), *Sun Yat-Sen, Nanyang and the 1911 Revolution*, ISEAS, Singapore, 2011. Other work that features women's life stories includes Morag Loh and Christine Ramsey, *Survival and Celebration: An Insight into the Lives of Chinese Immigrant Women, European Women Married to Chinese and their Female Children in Australia from 1856 to 1986*, self-published, Melbourne, 1986; Diana Giese, *Astronauts, Lost Souls and Dragons: Conversations with Chinese Australians*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia Qld, 1997; Sophie Couchman, 'Oh I would like to see Maggie Moore again: Selected women of Melbourne's Chinatown',

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

sense – as an extensive account of a person's life – may be impossible to write due to the paucity of sources. An approach like microhistory, however, provides a way to weave together scant and scattered sources about an individual's life into a story that illuminates broader historical questions.<sup>10</sup>

With its origins in European social and cultural history of the 1970s, microhistory has come to mean a style of work that explores big questions by studying small objects. Put simply, microhistories are 'stories about a single, usually very ordinary person, place or event, that seek to reveal the society's broader structures'.<sup>11</sup> Eluding a more formal definition, the genre is perhaps best understood through exemplary works such as Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Jonathan Spence's *The Question of Hu* or Patricia Cline Cohen's *The Murder of Helen Jewett*.<sup>12</sup> With its focus on obscure subjects and small lives, microhistory has been used to explore the experiences of minorities, people on the margins and those who travelled between cultures, where the lives revealed, often insignificant in themselves, nonetheless offer glimpses into other worlds.<sup>13</sup> It is here that microhistories of people differ from biographies. As Jill Lepore has noted:

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in Sophie Couchman, John Fitzgerald and Paul Macgregor (eds), *After the Rush: Regulation, Participation and Chinese Communities in Australia 1860-1940*, special edition of *Otherland*, vol. 9, December 2004, pp. 171–90; and Nikky Loong (ed.), *From Greatgrandmothers to Greatgranddaughters: The Stories of Six Chinese Australian Women*, Echo Point Press, Katoomba NSW, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> The methods of microhistory have informed, albeit mostly unstated, the work of researchers exploring the history of the Chinese in Australia. See, for example, Benjamin Mountford and Keir Reeves, 'Reworking the tailings: New gold histories and the cultural landscape', in Jane Carey and Claire McLisky (eds), *Creating White Australia*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 2006, pp. 25–43; Ken Oldis, *The Chinawoman*, Arcadia, Melbourne, 2008; and Valerie Lovejoy, 'Chinese in late nineteenth-century Bendigo: Their local and translocal lives in "this strangers' country"', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2011, pp. 45–61.

<sup>11</sup> Jill Lepore, 'Historical writing and the revival of narrative', *Nieman Reports*, vol. 56, no. 1, Spring 2002, available at <<http://niemanreports.org/articles/historical-writing-and-the-revival-of-narrative>>, accessed 12 October 2014. For a more detailed introduction to microhistory, see 'Introduction' in James Brooks, Christopher R. DeCorse and John Walton, *Small Worlds: Method, Meaning, and Narrative in Microhistory*, School for Advanced Research Press, Santa Fe NM, 2008, pp. 3–12; and 'Introduction' in Sigurður G. Magnússon and István M. Szigjártó, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1983; Jonathan Spence, *The Question of Hu*, Knopf, New York, 1988; Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Martha Hodes, 'The mercurial nature and abiding power of race: A transnational family story', *American Historical Review*, vol. 108, no. 1, 2003, pp. 84–118; Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History*, Harper Collins, London, 2007; Margaret Allen, 'The deluded white woman and the expatriation of the white child', in Jane Carey, Leigh Boucher and Katherine Ellinghaus (eds), *Re-Orienting Whiteness: A New Agenda for the Field*, Palgrave, New York, 2009, pp. 165–79; Tonio Andrade, 'A Chinese farmer, two African boys, and a warlord: Toward a global microhistory', *Journal of World History*, vol. 21, no. 4, December 2010, pp. 573–91; and Syed Muid Khairudin Aljunied, 'Micro-history and the study of minorities: Working-class Sikhs in Singapore and Malaya', *Social History*, vol. 36, no. 1, February 2011, pp. 22–35.

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

If biography is largely founded on a belief in the singularity and significance of an individual's contribution to history, microhistory is founded upon almost the opposite assumption: however singular a person's life may be, the value of examining it lies in how it serves as an allegory for the culture as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

Leading on from this, Lepore identifies a further difference. With microhistory's primary aim of illuminating broader issues, the life story becomes a means to an end, rather than the end in itself. While for biographers the purpose is to 'profile an individual and recapitulate a life story', for microhistorians stories and people are devices and telling the whole of a subject's life story is not necessary.<sup>15</sup>

I would have struggled to compile a traditional biography of Charles Allen, the subject of this essay, beyond working out a basic genealogy and stitching together a short chronology of documented events – birth, marriage, divorce, changes of address and occupation, war service, death. His was the 'small' life of a historically obscure, marginal subject – an illegitimate, mixed-race, working-class boy-turned-man – which has left only a faint trace in the archives other than the government files relating to his travel to and return from China.<sup>16</sup> The 'exploratory stance' of microhistory therefore seemed to have potential.<sup>17</sup> Constructing a narrative of his life has, however, been a work of some historical imagination. In the words of historian Martha Hodes:

I have invented nothing; instead I invoke words like 'perhaps,' 'maybe,' and 'probably' where it is impossible to know precisely what came to pass or how people felt. In place of fiction, I offer the craft of history, assisted by the art of speculation.<sup>18</sup>

There are many gaps in the story I can never hope to fill, but it is only through knowing something of Charles's life that the letters he wrote to his mother can be understood. When I came upon these letters in the National Archives some years ago I soon realised their importance, for they are the only ones I know of written by an Anglo-Chinese Australian child living with their Chinese family in China. But while they provide rare testimony of the

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<sup>14</sup> Jill Lepore, 'Historians who love too much: Reflections on microhistory and biography', *Journal of American History*, vol. 88, no. 1, June 2001, p. 141.

<sup>15</sup> Lepore, 'Historians who love too much', p. 133.

<sup>16</sup> Microhistory has been a useful approach for historians working with limited source material. See, for example, Thomas A. Lee, 'A letter from a teenage accounting clerk in 1846: A hidden voice in a micro-history of modern public accountancy', *Accounting Historians Journal*, vol. 35, no. 2, December 2008, pp. 43–69; Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, 'The life of a working-class woman: Selective modernization and microhistory in early 20th-century Iceland', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 36, no. 2, May 2011, pp. 186–205; and Kerry Ward, 'Blood ties: Exile, family, and inheritance across the Indian Ocean in the early nineteenth century', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2011, pp. 436–52.

<sup>17</sup> John Walton, James F. Brooks and Christopher R.N. DeCourse, 'Introduction', in Brooks, DeCourse and Walton, *Small Worlds*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Martha Hodes, *The Sea Captain's Wife: A True Story of Love, Race and War in the Nineteenth Century*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2006, p. 36.

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

cross-cultural, transnational childhoods experienced by many Australian children of Chinese men, they are not that easy to understand in and of themselves. Charles Allen's life may assume its significance through the letters, but at the same time his letters are opaque and meaningless without the broader context of his life story.

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Charles Albert Allen was born to Frances Allen at her home at 29 Crown Lane, Pyrmont, in the inner suburbs of Sydney on 9 November 1896. She was twenty-one and unmarried, so her son's birth was registered as 'illegitimate' and he took her surname.<sup>19</sup> Frances was the eldest child of coal miner James Allen and his wife, Georgina née Williamson. She was born and grew up at Anvil Creek at Greta near Maitland in the Hunter Valley where James would have worked at the Anvil Creek Colliery.<sup>20</sup> Frances's birth in August 1875 came only four months after her parents married at Anvil Creek according to rites of the Primitive Wesleyan Church and was followed by the births of fifteen more children over the following three decades.<sup>21</sup> The six youngest of Frances's siblings arrived after she had moved away from the family home at Maitland and become a young mother herself.

The circumstances of Frances's move to Sydney are not known, but it was there in Erskine Street in August 1893 that her first child, Frank George, was born.<sup>22</sup> Frances had just turned eighteen. Frank was followed by baby Charles three years later. A third son, Thomas Walter Roy, was born in February 1902 at her home at 19 Foster Street, Surry Hills, but he died in Prince Alfred Hospital at the age of five months from syphilitic laryngitis and bronchopneumonia. From the addresses given on Thomas's birth and death certificates it appears that Frances moved at least twice in the months after Thomas's birth, from 19 Foster Street to 292 Elizabeth Street to 7 Little Hill Street, Surry Hills. Her youngest child, Florrie, was born at a different address again, at 80 Campbell Street, in June 1903, less than a year after Thomas's death.<sup>23</sup> None of the children's fathers were listed on their birth certificates.

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<sup>19</sup> Birth registration for Charles Albert Allen, 9 November 1896, Sydney, NSW BDM 1896/27959.

<sup>20</sup> On the Anvil Creek coal mine, see Newcastle Regional Museum, 'Anvil Creek Colliery', *History of the Greta Coal Measures, 1861–1995*, Newcastle Regional Museum, Newcastle, 1998, <<http://hosting.collectionsaustralia.net/newcastle/greta/acreek.html>>, accessed 19 September 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Birth registration for Mary Frances Allen, 19 August 1875, Anvil Creek, NSW BDM 1875/13988; Marriage registration for James Allen and Georgeina Williamson, 28 April 1875, Anvil Creek, NSW BDM 1875/2998.

<sup>22</sup> Birth registration for Frank George Allen, 26 August 1893, Sydney, NSW BDM 1911/29.

<sup>23</sup> Birth registration for Florrie Allen, 21 June 1903, Sydney, NSW BDM 1903/18037.

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.



**Charles Allen as a boy, taken sometime before he went to China in 1909. NAA: SP42/1, C1922/4449.**

The neighbourhoods where Frances gave birth to and raised her children were among the poorest in Sydney, where people struggled to keep real poverty at bay. Many survived with the support of extended family and neighbours, or through relief provided by local charitable institutions such as the Benevolent Society and the Sydney City Mission, while others resorted to criminal activities.<sup>24</sup> This was the territory of the famous Kate Leigh, whose organised crime empire reaped her fabulous wealth from prostitution, sly-grog trading, gambling and illegal betting.<sup>25</sup> For other women in Surry Hills and the surrounding suburbs, however, prostitution and petty crime brought no fortune but were simply a means to bring in money to support themselves and their families. As historian Anne O'Brien has noted, a woman with children and without economic support from a husband or extended family had very limited choices in a labour market that assumed her dependence on a male breadwinner. She could struggle to keep her children with her while taking on home-based work such as washing, cleaning, child-minding or sewing, while also seeking charitable support; she could place her children in state care and take on full-time domestic or factory work; or, she could

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<sup>24</sup> Christopher Keating, *Surry Hills: The City's Backyard*, Halstead Press, Ultimo, 2008, pp. 61–71.

<sup>25</sup> Judith Allen, 'Leigh, Kathleen Mary (Kate) (1881–1964)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, Canberra, <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/leigh-kathleen-mary-kate-7164/text12375>>, published in hardcopy 1986, accessed 19 September 2014.

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

turn to prostitution, 'a potentially lucrative but dangerous and intermittent form of employment'.<sup>26</sup> Remaining records about Frances Allen suggest that prostitution was among the ways she supported her young family.

All four of Frances Allen's children were born out of wedlock and, although details of their paternity were not recorded at birth, it seems likely they had different fathers. From other records we know that Charles's father was Charlie Gum. Born in Guangdong, China, in 1867, Charlie Gum had arrived in Australia in 1884 and worked as a gardener and produce storeman at Parramatta, Kiama and then in Sydney. How Charlie Gum and Frances Allen met isn't certain, but they never married – a fact Frances stated plainly in a letter to the acting Prime Minister in 1911 saying, *I wish to explain to you that I was not married to the boy's father*.<sup>27</sup> Nothing is known of the fathers of Frank or Thomas, but it seems that Florrie also had a Chinese father – her death certificate stated that he was a cabinetmaker named Leon Doong.<sup>28</sup> Charles and Florrie were but two of the dozens of mixed-race, Anglo-Chinese children living around Surry Hills and the Haymarket at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup>

The neighbourhoods where Frances and her young children lived in the 1890s and early 1900s had large Chinese populations. In Sydney the Chinese had first settled around the Rocks near Circular Quay, but from the 1870s the southern end of the city, around the Haymarket and Surry Hills, became a significant site of Chinese business and residence. Centred on Goulburn, Brisbane, Campbell and George streets, this was a service area for Chinese living in Sydney and in the suburbs, many of whom were market gardeners who came into the city proper to sell their produce. Taking in the Belmore Markets, the area included fruit and produce stores, general stores, butchers, restaurants, cabinet-making factories, gambling shops, lodging houses and brothels, as well as family homes.<sup>30</sup> Among these businesses were several run by Charles Allen's kin. Most notable were fruit and vegetable wholesalers Wing Sang & Co. (永生 *Yongsheng*), established in 1890 and run by George Kwok Bew, and Wing

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<sup>26</sup> Anne O'Brien, *Poverty's Prison: The Poor in New South Wales*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1998, p. 92.

<sup>27</sup> NAA: A1, 1911/13854.

<sup>28</sup> Death registration for Florence Isobel Boulton, Bondi, 1965, NSW BDM 1965/1419. It is possible that Florrie's father was the Leong Doong who died in Sydney in 1939: 'Funerals' (Leong Doong), *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, 30 September 1939, p. 13. I have been unable to trace the identity of Leon Doong any further. Florrie's marriage certificate stated that her (deceased) father was a labourer named James Allen (in fact this was her maternal grandfather's name): Marriage registration for Leslie Victor Boulton and Florence Isabel Allen, 30 June 1927, Sydney, NSW BDM 1927/10240.

<sup>29</sup> Council figures for 1900 estimated there were 31 part-Chinese boys and 39 part-Chinese girls living in the southern part of the city of Sydney. Sydney City Council, *Proceedings*, 1900, cited in Janice Wood, 'Chinese Residency in the Haymarket and Surry Hills 1880 to 1902', BA Hons thesis, Department of History, University of Sydney, 1994, p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> On the Chinese in the Haymarket and Surry Hills, see Shirley Fitzgerald, *Red Tape, Gold Scissors: The Story of Sydney's Chinese*, State Library of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1996, especially pp. 88–94; and Wood, 'Chinese Residency'.



Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

On (永安 *Yong'an*), established in 1897 and run by James Gocklock and his brothers.<sup>31</sup> These men were cousins of Charles's Charlie Gum, whose real Chinese family name was Gock, and they had all been born in the village of Chuk Sau Yuen. From the same humble beginnings – like Charlie Gum, James Gocklock had worked as a market gardener when he first arrived in Australia – these men had become some of the wealthiest and most influential Chinese in the city, involved in organisations like the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the Kuomintang and the Chinese Presbyterian Church in Foster Street. Charlie Gum was employed by Wing On as a produce storeman in the years before his departure for China in 1909.

While the Haymarket and Surry Hills were home to respectable businesses and residents, both European and Chinese, to the wider community the area, particularly around Wexford Street, Exeter Place and to a lesser extent Foster Street, was a disease- and vice-ridden slum characterised by poverty, racial mixing, immorality and crime.<sup>32</sup> The gambling houses and opium shops of Wexford Street were a favourite subject of the daily press, where 'fallen' women and the Chinese were used as potent images representing the worst of slum life.<sup>33</sup> But it was not just the press who took an interest. From the early 1890s, the evangelical Woman's Crusade had a mission house at 36 Wexford Street, where two female missionaries lived, ran a Sunday school and otherwise did 'what was possible to assist lost and abandoned ones to change their mode of life'.<sup>34</sup> The police also removed young white women they found among the Chinese, often charging them with vagrancy or having no lawful means of support, while magistrates sentenced them to gaol rather than letting them go back to their Chinese lovers.<sup>35</sup> And municipal inspectors and government inquiries, most notably the Royal Commission into

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<sup>31</sup> On the Gock businesses, see Denise Austin, *'Kingdom-minded' People: Christian Identity and the Contributions of Chinese Business Christians*, Brill, Leiden, 2011, especially pp. 86–91; Yen Ching-hwang, 'Wing On and the Kwok brothers: A case study of pre-war overseas Chinese entrepreneurs', in Kerrie L. MacPherson (ed.), *Asian Department Stores*, Curzon, Richmond, Surrey, 1998; Adrian Chan and Frank Farrell, 'Kwok Bew (1868–1932)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/kwok-bew-7002/text12173>>, published in hardcopy 1983, accessed 22 October 2014.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, 'A trip through Chinatown', *Sunday Times*, 16 August 1896, p. 2; 'The Chinese slums', *Evening News*, 19 December 1896, p. 4; 'Sydney's night scenes', *Sunday Times*, 6 October 1901, p. 7; 'Why the Chinaman is cheap', *The Worker*, 22 October 1904, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> On this see Alan Mayne, *The Imagined Slum: Newspaper Representation in Three Cities 1870–1914*, Leicester University Press, Leicester, 1993.

<sup>34</sup> 'Woman's Crusade mission house', *SMH*, 3 November 1896, p. 3. See also 'A Wexford-street mission', *Evening News*, 23 March 1893, p. 3. One of the first two Woman's Crusade missionaries, Annie Fuller, married a Chinese man, Presbyterian minister James Fong Kem Yee: 'The late Mrs. Kem Yee', *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 8 July 1919, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, 'She liked Chinamen', *Evening News*, 11 March 1890, p. 5; 'Sydney Chinese opium dens', *Wagga Wagga Express*, 28 January 1896, p. 4; 'Girls in opium dens', *Sunday Times*, 25 August 1901, p. 7.

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality in 1892, used their powers to investigate the domestic arrangements of mixed-race couples.<sup>36</sup>

Frances Allen seems largely to have avoided such interference – there is no record of her having been arrested for vagrancy, drunkenness or prostitution, for example – but the stories other women told about themselves suggest what her life might have been like. Many spoke of being 'seduced' by white men at a young age, of being abandoned after finding themselves pregnant, and of leaving their family homes and employment with the shame of it. Such a scenario fits with the facts we know about Frances's early life. Other women spoke of leaving white husbands who drank and beat them. In such situations they found themselves with only two real options – working as a prostitute or becoming a 'Chinaman's woman' – and the general consensus was that Chinese men treated their women well. Rae Frances has noted that 'trading in sex took many forms, from soliciting on the streets to a form of serial monogamy in which the women received far more than financial reward from the men who supported them'.<sup>37</sup> Whatever the exact nature of the relationships between Frances Allen and her children's fathers, it seems she did what she could to provide a home and family life for Charles, his brother Frank and little sister Florrie. They may have moved often and a number of different men may have come in and out of Frances's life, but as we will see from his letters, while he was away in China Charles's thoughts were filled with his Sydney home, his mother and the family and friends he left behind there.

Charles left Australia with his father on 5 June 1909 on the S.S. *Eastern* bound for Hong Kong, where they landed three weeks later on 27 June 1909.<sup>38</sup> From there they travelled inland to Chuk Sau Yuen. Charles was twelve years old. His father had apparently gone to Frances to tell her he wanted to take Charles with him to China and, although Frances refused, he insisted. In Frances's words, 'I said I would not let him go, but, it was of no use, he took him from me'.<sup>39</sup> Charlie Gum told Frances he would bring Charles back with him when he returned to Sydney but Charlie arrived back a year later, on 13 June 1910, alone.

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For the past century Charles Allen's letters have sat in a small file, one tiny part of a massive bureaucratic record-keeping system that tracked and controlled the movements of Chinese and other non-European people across the borders of White Australia. This particular file was created by the Collector of Customs in Sydney in 1909 when Charlie Gum applied for papers that would let him and his son return to their Australian home. Under the Immigration

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<sup>36</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on Alleged Chinese Gambling and Immorality and Charges of Bribery against Members of the Police Force*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1892. See also Raelene Frances, *Selling Sex: A Hidden History of Prostitution*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2007, pp. 113–27.

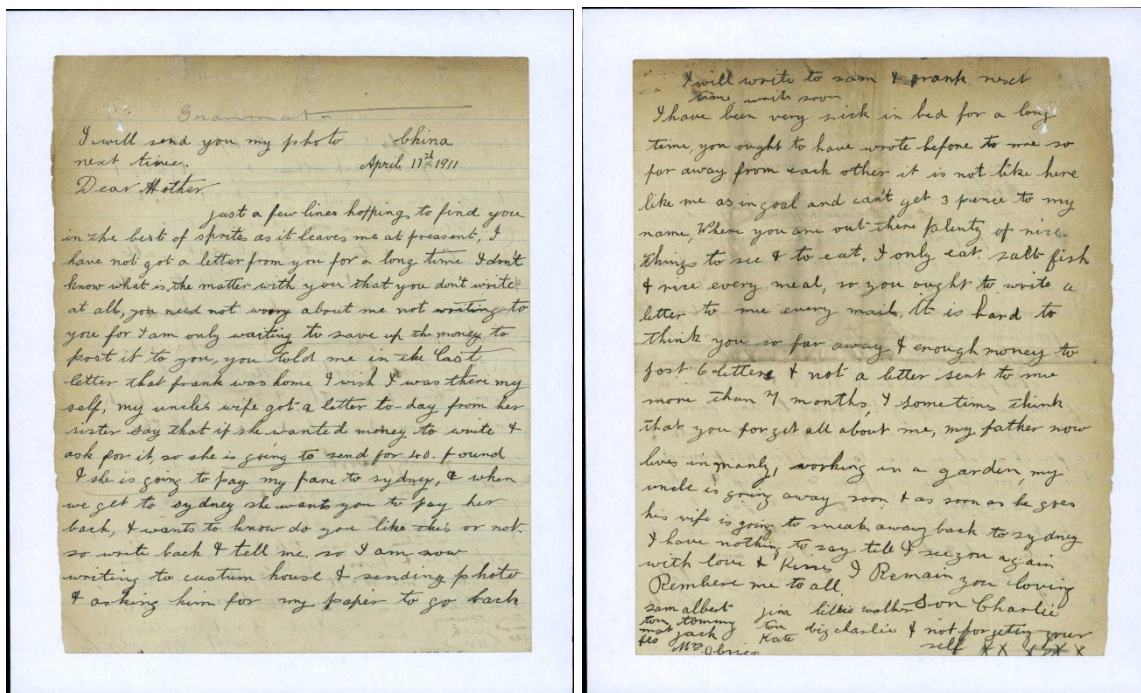
<sup>37</sup> Frances, *Selling Sex*, p. 114.

<sup>38</sup> 'Shipping', *Hong Kong Daily Press*, 5 July 1909, p. 29.

<sup>39</sup> NAA: A1, 1911/13854.

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

Restriction Act, introduced soon after Federation in 1901, Chinese Australians like Charlie and Charles – one a resident of twenty-five years, the other an Australian-born British subject – could be prevented from re-entering the country by being made to sit the Dictation Test, deliberately given in a language they could not speak. To avoid this, Chinese Australians could apply for an exemption by completing a form, providing references, photographs and handprints, and paying a fee. Such paperwork was then gathered together and carefully filed to ensure officials had a proper record for when the travelling Chinese wished to re-enter the country. The general rule was that only those who had first gone out were to be allowed in.



One of the letters Charles Allen wrote from China to his mother in Sydney, 11 April 1911. NAA: SP42/1, C1922/4449.

Charles Allen's letters are only found among this official paperwork because Frances enclosed them when writing to ask for the government's help in bringing Charles home – a fortuitous act for this historian. While the paper is yellowed, and torn and creased from being folded and unfolded, and there are holes in the top-left corners from where the pages have been stuck with a file pin, the four letters do still exist, their black ink is bright and the words Charles wrote are clear. Historian David A. Gerber has noted that children are generally under-represented among the migrant letter writers whose correspondence remains for historians to use, and Charles's letters provide a precious glimpse of the experiences of an Australian boy as temporary migrant in his own migrant father's homeland.<sup>40</sup> Only a small

<sup>40</sup> David A. Gerber, 'Acts of deceiving and withholding in immigrant letters: Personal identity and self-presentation in personal correspondence', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 39, no. 2, Winter 2005, p. 316. For a study that focuses on the letters of a temporary child migrant, see Helen Brown, 'Negotiating space, time, and

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

number of other first-hand accounts exist. New Zealander Yue Henry Jackson, son of a Scottish mother and a Cantonese father, wrote an unpublished memoir of the years that he and his four siblings spent in China in the 1890s and early 1900s, and Australian William Liu, the son of a Cantonese father and English-Australian mother, recounted experiences of his Chinese childhood in oral histories and other arenas.<sup>41</sup> These accounts are richer in many ways, particularly in revealing the detail of everyday life, but Charles Allen's writing has an immediacy and an honesty that makes his feelings achingly real even today.

The first two of Charles's letters were written around the same time, in April or May 1910, just as Charlie Gum was preparing to return to Australia. One of these letters was to Charles's mother, Frances, the other to a maternal aunt, Martha Allen. The third and fourth letters were written to Frances some time later – one is dated 11 April 1911 and in the other Charles says 'I have nearly been here 2 years now', making the date around May or June 1911.<sup>42</sup> They are not long letters, between two and four small pages of handwritten text each. Charles's handwriting is well-formed cursive, small and neat in one letter, a quick scrawl with crossings-out and ink blots in another, and while his spelling, capitalisation and punctuation are far from perfect he followed the basic conventions of letter-writing. Charles was still at school when he left for China, possibly attending the Crown Street Public School or the Brisbane Street Ragged School, a charitable school for children of the poor that provided a basic 'useful' education and religious instruction.<sup>43</sup> I do not know if he received any further education, either in English or Chinese, after he left Sydney, although a Chinese education

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identity: The Hutton–Pellet letters and a British child's wartime evacuation to Canada', in Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber and Suzanne M. Sinke (eds), *Letters Across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2006, pp. 223–47.

<sup>41</sup> Yue Henry Jackson, 'My Reminiscences, 1890–1917', Micro MSS 112, Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand (see also Nigel Murphy, 'Yue, Henry Jackson', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, available at <<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/3y3/yue-henry-jackson>>, accessed 23 October 2014); William Liu, Conversation with William Liu [sound recording], 17 February 1978, Hazel de Berg Collection, National Library of Australia, and '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, 1979 (see also Barry McGowan, 'Liu, William Joseph (1893–1983)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, available at <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/liu-william-joseph-14161/text25173>>, accessed 23 October 2014).

<sup>42</sup> All quoted passages from Charles Allen's letters are taken from NAA: SP42/1, C1922/4449.

<sup>43</sup> Charles's occupation was given as 'student' on his application for a Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test in 1909: NAA: SP42/1, C1922/4449. On the attendance of Chinese children at the ragged school, see 'Red-letter days', *SMH*, 30 November, p. 12 and 'Among the ragged children', *SMH*, 25 June 1904. See also Eureka Henrich, 'Ragged schools in Sydney', *Sydney Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2013, pp. 49–65, available online at <[http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/sydney\\_journal/article/view/28031910](http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/sydney_journal/article/view/28031910)>, accessed 24 October 2014.

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

was often the motivation for sending Australian-born children to China.<sup>44</sup> Mistakes and all, Charles's letters performed the important functions of maintaining contact with his home and family in Australia and of providing an avenue for him to express his ideas and his emotions.

The name of the village where Charles lived, Chuk Sau Yuen, means Bamboo Garden, and it could hardly have been more different from inner-city Surry Hills where Charles grew up. It was about eighty kilometres west from Hong Kong across the Pearl River estuary, located just south of Shekki (石岐 *Shiqi*), the capital of Heungshan (香山 *Xiangshan*, later 中山 *Zhongshan*) district. Today Chuk Sau Yuen has been swallowed up by the city that Shekki grew into, but when Charles lived there it would have been a rural village surrounded by fields of rice and vegetables, as yet unchanged by the later investment and development of the 1920s and 1930s which came after the successes of local sons like James Gocklock and the growing Wing On business empire. From Hong Kong, Charles would have travelled by boat to Chuk Sau Yuen, as it is situated on the Shiqi River and road construction in the area did not begin in earnest until the 1920s.<sup>45</sup>



**Chuk Sau Yuen village was located outside of the county capital of Shekki, pictured here in 1932. Agnes Breuer Papers, courtesy of Liz McNamee.**

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<sup>44</sup> There are strong parallels between the situation of Anglo-Chinese children sent 'home' to China and that of British children of the empire who were sent from India or another colonial home to Britain to be educated in a boarding school or to live in the care of extended family. On the British situation, see Elizabeth Buettner, 'Separations and the discourse of family sacrifice', in *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, pp. 110–45.

<sup>45</sup> On the history of overseas migration of people from Heungshan to Australia, see Michael Williams, 'In the Tang mountains we have a big house', *East Asian History*, no. 25/26, June/December 2003, pp. 85–112.

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

As the first of Charles's remaining letters was written more than six months after his arrival in China, the letters do not describe his journey, the village and its environs, the house where he lived or who he lived with. In fact Charles wrote very little about his day-to-day life in Chuk Sau Yuen, other than to say how little he liked it. 'I don't like been here at all', he wrote in one letter; 'I am very unhappy here I am like a bird in a cage', he said in another. 'It is ... like me as in gaol and can't get 3 pence to my name.' He told Frances how 'This country is no good at all it is hot, dirty, rainy, no where to go', and how he missed her and simple things from home. 'Every minute I think of you, and long for a piece of bread and butter this tucker is not doing me well.' With food he didn't care for – 'I only eat salt fish & rice every meal' – and few other foreigners around – 'I don't see very many english people here' – Charles was clearly homesick. The only consolation he could offer his mother, and himself, was that 'I have nearly been here 2 years now & nearly know all the china talk'.

Charles was writing at a momentous time in China's history, as Sun Yat-sen led his revolutionaries towards eventual successful revolt against the Qing dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912. Sun's birthplace was only some twenty kilometres from Chuk Sau Yuen, his revolutionary activities were based in Guangdong, and he relied on overseas Chinese for support and funds. Yet at only one time did Charles discuss events occurring around him. In the letter dated 11 April 1911, his tone changed from homesickness to excitement as he described how 'about 100 Robbers came to a certain town' (probably Shekki) and 'Killed a terrible lot of soldiers'. Because 'these robbers all had no tails' (pigtailed queues), it was announced that anyone 'caught without any tails will have their head cut off it don't matter what they are or if they have no share or not'. Soldiers then caught eighty men and cut off their heads. Charles, who it seems had not grown his hair into a queue, exclaimed 'you can think how I felt ... it frightened the life out of me, mum it is very funny'. Many revolutionaries cut off their queues as a sign of defiance against the Qing, and Charles's 'robbers' may have been such revolutionaries or bandits, common in rural Guangdong, who had been recruited to the republican cause.<sup>46</sup>

Charles penned the first two of the letters after finding out his father was leaving him alone in Chuk Sau Yuen, and the second two long after his father had left. Frances, and probably Charles too, had believed that Charlie Gum was going to take Charles back with him to Sydney whenever it was he left China. Charles's relationship with his father was strained – 'my father has belted me the other day and ever since I came here', he wrote – but Charlie Gum would at least have provided a concrete tie to Charles's Sydney home and to the possibility of returning there. Charles found companionship in the village in an unnamed Australian aunt, the wife of an uncle of Charles's, who had also returned to the village with her husband and four young children. The uncle was soon to return to Australia, and Charles

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<sup>46</sup> On the role of the queue in revolutionary China, see Michael R. Godley, 'The end of the queue: Hair as symbol in Chinese history', *China Heritage Quarterly*, no. 27, September 2011, available at <[http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=027\\_queue.inc&issue=027](http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=027_queue.inc&issue=027)>, accessed 25 October 2014.

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

and his aunt were hatching plans 'to sneak away back to Sydney'. She was also unhappy living in Chuk Sau Yuen and planned for her sister to send money that would cover the passages for herself, her children and Charles. As Charles explained to his mother: 'she has 4 children & she would have a lot of trouble with them so I ask her to pay my fare back to & I would help her with her children & luggage & when we get back for you to pay her back my fare'.

Charles understood that to return to Australia he needed his papers – his 'Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test' and his birth certificate – which his father had. In one letter he instructed Frances how to get them: 'my father has my paper go to wing on and ask him for it also my birth paper'. It is not clear if Charlie Gum was back working at Wing On in Sydney, or whether they would simply have known how to contact him.<sup>47</sup> On another occasion Charles told Frances to go to Wing On if she wanted to send him money – 'tell him that you want to send some money to Charlie in china' – so they were clearly familiar with Charles's situation. The wealthy and respectable partners of Wing On & Co. acted as agents and advocates in the immigration matters of many Gock kinsmen in Australia and the Pacific in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>48</sup> In another letter to Florence Charles had decided to take the matter of his papers into his own hands: 'I am now writing to custom house & sending photo & asking him for my paper to go back'. By 'him' Charles was likely referring to Customs officer J.T.T. Donohoe, who had overseen the immigration of Chinese through the port of Sydney from the 1890s and was said to know more about Sydney's Chinese than any other European.<sup>49</sup> Donohoe had processed the paperwork for Charles and his father before their departure in 1909 and subsequently identified Charles on his arrival home in 1915.

Writing home from China, homesick Charles's thoughts naturally turned to those he had left behind. There was his mother, of course, and his 'Dear auntie Mat' (Martha Allen), who seems to have been particularly close to Frances and her children.<sup>50</sup> There was also his brother Frank – who was 'home with you once more' – and 'Dear little sister flo', who was about seven years old and 'going to school'. Beyond his immediate family Charles referred a number of times to Sam (possibly Samuel Storey, the man his mother was later to marry) and

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<sup>47</sup> On his application form for a Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test in 1909 Charlie Gum gave his address as 24 Campbell Street, Sydney, which was the address of Wing On & Co.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, NAA: SP42/1, C1909/3116 (Gock Bart); SP42/1, C1911/1217 (Gock Gon), SP42/1, C1916/5309 (Gock Jack), SP42/1, C1920/4963 (Gock King); A1, 1925/22531 (Joseph Gock).

<sup>49</sup> On J.T.T. Donohoe, see Bagnall, 'Anglo-Chinese and the politics of overseas travel', pp. 209–10.

<sup>50</sup> Of Charles's large extended Allen family it seems that his mother was closest to two of her sisters, Martha and Florence, or as they were known in the family, Mattie and Flo (Frances herself was known as Fanny). Martha was present at the birth of Frances's first son, Frank, in Sydney in 1893 and together the three sisters inserted family notices in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, separate from other groups of their siblings: NSW BDM 1911/29; 'In memoriam' (Mary Ann Filmer), *SMH*, 17 June 1927, p. 10; 'In memoriam' (Georgina Allen), *SMH*, 2 December 1943, p. 8.

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

to Tom (possibly Matilda Allen's son or husband), and he asked Frances to 'give my best love to Lilly'. In closing one letter Charles asked Frances to 'Remember me to all sam tom mat flo albert tommy jack jim tom Kate lillie walker big charlie Mrs Obrien'. Mrs O'Brien was probably Mary Ann O'Brien, in whose house at 218 Riley Street, Surry Hills, Frances was living at the time.<sup>51</sup>

Charles's letters also reveal something of the difficulty of correspondence itself. These included a shortage of writing materials – to his aunt Martha he wrote, 'I would have wrote before only I have had a sheat of papper to write to mum' – and a shortage of funds for postage. He explained why he hadn't written to his mother sooner saying, 'I am only waiting to save up the money to post it', and after an apparent offer from Frances for help with the postage, he replied 'I don't want any stamps because they are no good over here'. Charles gave the first two of the letters to his father to take back to Sydney to post, as sending and receiving mail in Chuk Sau Yuen was also slow and irregular. He noted at one point 'I have not got the parcel yet', while to his aunt he wrote 'I Received two letters yesterday from mum and one on the 11<sup>th</sup> May makes 3'. This irregularity caused Charles to worry that he had been forgotten and he chastised his mother for it, saying things like 'I don't know what is the matter with you that you don't write at all' and 'it is hard to think you so far away & enough money to post 6 letters & not a letter sent to me more than 7 months. I sometimes think that you forget all about me'. Frances sent her letters via Way Yuen & Co. in Shekki, from where they were forwarded to Charles in Chuk Sau Yuen, and she felt that someone 'seem[ed] to stop him from writing or getting any letters from his mother'.<sup>52</sup>

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Charles's letters, each signed off with his love and a wild flurry of kisses, tugged at his mother's heart. 'Heart-broken about him', she took the courageous step of asking the government for help, perhaps keeping in mind these words of Charles's: 'I don't like been here. Get the government to send me back to you'.<sup>53</sup> On 19 June 1911, she wrote to William Morris Hughes, the acting Prime Minister, to see what could be done about bringing Charles home. Frances wrote that she would be able to cover all the costs related to Charles's return if the government was able to get him back, and she enclosed the four letters and a photograph of Charles. From the acting Prime Minister the matter was referred to the acting Minister for External Affairs, who in turn referred it to the Department of External Affairs. A handwritten note on file, dating from August 1911 and addressed to the Secretary of the department, wondered whether the government should ask the British Consul-General at Canton to make 'careful enquiries' into Charles's situation and, if he was being mistreated, to arrange to

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<sup>51</sup> *Sands' Sydney, Suburban and Country Commercial Directory for 1911*, John Sands Ltd, Sydney, 1911, p. 141.

<sup>52</sup> NAA: A1, 1911/13854.

<sup>53</sup> Frances Allen's dealings with the government about Charles's repatriation can be found in NAA: A1, 1911/13854. Quoted passage from Charles Allen's letter can be found in NAA: SP42/1, C1922/4449.



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repatriate him at the Australian government's expense, with costs to be repaid by Frances Allen.

In the meantime, the government undertook enquiries of their own. On 4 July 1911, the acting Secretary of the department asked the Collector of Customs in Sydney for further information about Charles and Frances. The Collector of Customs then asked the Inspector-General of Police in Sydney for a report 'as to the character and general standing' of Frances Allen who was at that time living at 218 Riley Street, Sydney (in Mary Ann O'Brien's house). A police report compiled by Constable Charles Montague of the No. 3 Police Station in Darlinghurst gave an overview of her situation, stating that she had recently moved to Selwyn Street, Paddington, and that nothing was known against her character from her neighbours there. He noted that she had previously been living at 172 Devonshire Street, and a further police report from Sergeant Bennett of the No. 2 Police Station in Riley Street noted that she was 'favourably spoken of by the neighbours, who are reputable business people'.

After these enquiries were made and reports presented, the Department of External Affairs asked Frances for Charles's precise address, which she provided in the form of an envelope with the address handwritten in English and Chinese. By this time it was mid-August 1911 and Frances herself had also received a visit from the police. They had told her they were going to see Charlie Gum as well, but Frances was concerned that if Charlie knew that she was trying to get Charles home that he would write over and stop him from coming back. Another month passed before Frances received a letter from Atlee Hunt, Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, saying that the government could not act directly to bring Charles home, but that she might write to the Consul-General at Canton to see if he 'may be disposed to help'. The letter, dated 19 September 1911, would also be 'sufficient assurance' that the government would raise no objection to Charles's landing. There was no further correspondence on the matter.

What happened to Charles over the next four years is not known. He remained overseas, but whether that was in Chuk Sau Yuen, or in Shekki, or perhaps even in Hong Kong, is unclear. He finally returned to Sydney on 5 June 1915 on the S.S. *Eastern* from Hong Kong. His papers were inspected by Customs officers J.T.T. Donohoe and William Bragg and he was permitted to land. He had been away from Sydney for six years and one day.

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Back in Sydney Charles found work as a greengrocer, most likely through Gock family connections at the markets. But the home he returned to had changed in six years. Frances had married in July 1910 to Samuel Storey, a carrier, and they had lived together in a series of houses in Paddington, Sydney, Newtown and Surry Hills over the following years.<sup>54</sup> At the

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<sup>54</sup> Marriage registration for Frances Mary Allen and Samuel James Storey, 27 July 1910, Surry Hills, NSW BDM 1910/7386.

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

time of her marriage Frances gave her occupation as 'domestic', but she also seems to have run small shops. Charles wrote to her from China saying 'I hope you have found a new shop & are getting on well with it' and for several months in late 1910 she ran a confectionary shop from rented premises at 172 Devonshire Street. Perhaps with her marriage Frances had hoped to turn her life around, with the promise of a stable family life for herself and young Florrie, then aged only seven, and greater respectability as a married woman in her efforts to bring Charles home from China. Frances mentioned Samuel in her correspondence with the government – 'I have got a good hard working husband to look after him [Charles]'.<sup>55</sup> And Samuel Storey was described in the 1911 police report as being respectable and hard-working and in the employ of the same firm of carriers, Hyde & Co., for more than ten years.<sup>56</sup> It was in 1911, too, that Frances finally registered the birth of her first son, Frank, which had taken place eighteen years earlier.<sup>57</sup> This domestic stability did not last. Frances and Samuel Storey's marriage fell apart not long after Charles returned from China, and by late 1916 Frances had a new partner, Victor Clarke, who moved into her home in Corben Street, Surry Hills.

Charles also came home to a country changed by war. Fifteen months after arriving back in Sydney, in September 1916, he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force. He was aged nineteen and ten months. Charles did not stay in the army for long though, as he was discharged after two months because he was medically unfit. A year later he enlisted again, not admitting to his earlier enlistment. Again after only two months he was discharged on medical grounds. Less than two months after his second discharge, at the beginning of 1918, Charles enlisted for a third time, this time admitting to the bad ankle that had caused his earlier discharges. With the pressing need to enlist more men as the war drew on, physical standards became less strict and Charles embarked for Europe with the 4th Battalion, 26th Reinforcement in March 1918. He remained in England for less than three months before he was sent home again due to medical unfitness caused by his left ankle. His third discharge came on 29 November 1918.<sup>58</sup>

Charles's 1916 enlistment papers had noted that he had a tattoo, of pierced hearts and the words 'I love Maud Gordon'. By the time of his second enlistment, Maud was not only his sweetheart but his wife.<sup>59</sup> When they married on 13 March 1917, at St David's Anglican Church in Surry Hills, twenty-year-old Charles was working as a grocer and sixteen-year-old

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<sup>55</sup> NAA: A1, 1911/13854.

<sup>56</sup> NAA: SP42/1, C1922/4449.

<sup>57</sup> NSW BDM 1911/29.

<sup>58</sup> NAA: B2455, ALLEN C A.

<sup>59</sup> Marriage registration for Charles Albert Allen and Margaret Maud Gordon, 13 March 1917, Sydney, NSW BDM 1917/560.

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

Maud as a counterhand.<sup>60</sup> Charles and Maud became parents in June 1918 to a daughter, Margaret Isabel, and then three years later, in August 1919, to another daughter, Daphne Maud.<sup>61</sup> Less than a year after Daphne was born Maud lodged an application for divorce from Charles, claiming that he had had an affair with a young woman named Nellie Louie between December 1919 and March 1920. Like Charles, Nellie Louie was of mixed Chinese and European parentage.<sup>62</sup> At the time of the divorce application in April 1920 Maud was living at 2 Weedon Avenue, Paddington, while Charles was working as a labourer at Byron Bay. The affair was said to have taken place at Bourke, where Nellie Louie lived, suggesting that Charles was finding itinerant work around the state while Maud and the children remained in Sydney.

It seems that Maud found out about Charles's relationship with sixteen-year-old Nellie Louie after Nellie left her family home in Bourke for Sydney in February 1920. Nellie became a lodger in Frances's home at 39 Campbell Street, Surry Hills, living together with Frances, Victor Clarke, and seventeen-year-old Florrie Allen and her baby. After two months Nellie went to lodge with Maud in Paddington, but did not stay there long. By the time of her baby's birth at the beginning of September, Nellie was living at 'Clavering', a hostel for unwed mothers and their babies in Junction Road, Summer Hill, which was run by the State Children's Relief Department.<sup>63</sup> It seems likely that young Nellie had been sent to Sydney because she was pregnant and that Charles was the father.<sup>64</sup> Maud and Charles's divorce in

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<sup>60</sup> Since Charles was underage Frances Allen had to give her consent to his marriage to Maud. She stated that Charles's father, a cabinetmaker also named Charles Albert Allen, was deceased. Similarly Maud Gordon's mother, Annie Gordon née Blaney, gave her consent, stating that Maud's father, a carpenter named Charles Gordon, was deceased. It appears that Maud Gordon and her younger brother Charles were born out of wedlock: Birth registration for Margaret Blaney, 1901, Sydney, NSW BDM 1901/28913; birth registration for Charles J Blaney, 1905, Sydney, NSW BDM 1905/9934.

<sup>61</sup> Birth registration for Margaret Allen, 1918, Paddington, NSW BDM 1917/37552. Details of Daphne Allen's birth are taken from State Records NSW, Divorce Case Papers (Maud Margaret Allen vs Charles Albert Allen), no. 443, 1920.

<sup>62</sup> Nellie Louie was born at Byrock, near Bourke in far western New South Wales, in December 1903 to Nancy and Ah Louie, one of at least four children born to the couple. In 1912, Nancy Louie was arrested (but subsequently acquitted) for keeping a brothel in which Nellie was found by the Brewarrina police. NAA: SP726/2; *New South Wales Police Gazette*, 28 August 1912, p. 348 and 18 September 1912, p. 377.

<sup>63</sup> State Records NSW, Divorce Case Papers (Samuel James Storey and Frances Mary Storey), no. 561, 1920; *Freeman's Journal*, 8 December 1921, p. 29.

<sup>64</sup> NSW birth records after 1913 are not yet available for public access, but basic details of the birth of Nellie Louie's baby, Nancy Edith, in September 1920 are recorded in NAA: SP726/2. Without a birth certificate I am unable to confirm who Nellie might have listed as her baby's father. In 1921, the Children's Court Bench issued Charles Allen with 'a magisterial order for the support of his child'. A report in the *Police Gazette* concerning a warrant issued against Charles because he had not complied with the order did not state who this child or its mother was, but it may have been a claim from Nellie Louie for support for her baby: *New South Wales Police Gazette*, 14 December 1921, p. 713. In October 1922, Nellie Louie, her baby and a man named Jack Yep travelled together to China, where the baby remained after her mother and Jack Yep returned to Sydney in April 1922. Nellie Louie then married Jack Yep in Sydney. NAA: SP115/1, Victoria - [Part 3] - 08/04/1922 [Box 39] and SP726/2; marriage registration for Nellie An Louie and John Yep, Sydney, 4920/1922.

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

1920 was never finalised but their relationship continued to be a troubled one. In 1929 Maud put in a second application for divorce on the grounds of desertion, saying she had not seen Charles for more than three years, but once again the divorce was never granted.<sup>65</sup>

The extended family went through the upset of other divorce proceedings in 1920 too, when Samuel Storey filed for divorce from Frances in May that year. His grounds for divorce were her relationship with Victor Clarke and the fact that she was working as a prostitute, under the name Cora Campbell, and running a brothel from her home at 39 Campbell Street, Surry Hills.<sup>66</sup> Although Frances denied it, testimony from Maud Allen and Nellie Louie backed up the facts of Samuel Storey's claim. Samuel's divorce from Frances was granted in November 1921.

The years following Charles Allen's return from China were eventful ones – with his war service, his romance with Maud, marriage, fatherhood, and the various family dramas outlined above – and it might have been that his six years in Chuk Sau Yuen were long forgotten. Yet, in 1922, Charles made a second, much shorter trip to China. He left on the S.S. *Arafura* on 17 May 1922 and arrived back in Sydney on the S.S. *Eastern* on 20 December the same year.<sup>67</sup> His reasons for making the trip are unclear but, whatever the circumstances, this later trip suggests that for a time at least Charles remained connected to the Chinese part of his life.<sup>68</sup>

Charles Allen died on 10 March 1938, at the age of forty-three. His death was due to an industrial accident at the Bunnerong Power Station where he worked as a shunter employed by Sydney Municipal Council. Charles was crushed between two railway trucks being shunted by a steam locomotive, resulting in massive internal injuries.<sup>69</sup> His funeral was held at St Francis's Catholic Church, Albion Street, Surry Hills, and he was buried at Botany Cemetery. The funeral was attended by much of his extended family, including his parents-in-law and his grandmother Georgina Allen, who was by then eighty years old.<sup>70</sup> His own

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<sup>65</sup> 'In divorce' (Allen v. Allen), *SMH*, 1 November 1930, p. 8, and State Records NSW, Divorce Case Papers (Margaret Maud Allen vs Charles Albert Allen), no. 827, 1929.

<sup>66</sup> State Records NSW, Divorce Case Papers (Samuel James Storey and Frances Mary Storey), no. 561, 1920.

<sup>67</sup> NAA: SP115/1, Eastern - [Part 3] - Date of arrival 20/12/1922 [Box 40a].

<sup>68</sup> Charles's father Charlie Gum was said to have gone to work on Gock family market gardens at Manly after he returned from China in 1910, but I have been unable to locate any further reference to him in Sydney. Several years later Frances stated that Charles's father was dead – in 1916 when granting permission for her under-age son to enlist in the AIF, and again in 1917 when giving permission for him to marry.

<sup>69</sup> Death registration for Charles Allen, 10 March 1938, Bunnerong Power House, NSW BDM 1938/6620; 'Man killed', *SMH*, 11 March 1938; 'Funerals' (Charles Allen), *SMH*, 12 March 1938, p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> 'In memoriam' notices inserted by Frances Allen in the Sydney press over the years suggested that she, and her children, had remained close to her extended family. See, for example, 'In memoriam' (James Allen), *SMH*, 2 September 1913, p. 4; 'In memoriam' (Mary Ann Filmer), *SMH*, 17 June 1927, p. 10; 'In memoriam' (Georgina Allen), *SMH*, 2 December 1943, p. 8.

Kate Bagnall, 'Writing home from China: Charles Allen's transnational childhood', in Paul Longley Arthur (ed.), *Migrant Nation: Australian Culture, Society and Identity*, Anthem Press, London, 2017.

mother, Frances Allen, outlived Charles by nearly twenty years, dying in 1955 at the age of seventy-nine.<sup>71</sup>

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The letters Charles Allen wrote home from China in 1910 and 1911 provide an insight into the life of an Australian boy far from home, longing for his mother, uncomfortable in his surroundings, and determined to find a way back to Sydney through the muddle of his family situation and of the bureaucracy of White Australia. The letters suggest Charles's agency in his eventual return home to Sydney, just as Frances Allen's correspondence shows her boldness in pursuing help for Charles from the highest reaches of the Australian government. With the letters preserved in an official file created in the administration of the White Australia policy, this essay highlights the rewards of close reading of these files, not just as a way of understanding the administrative history, but of uncovering the lives of those on the margins of White Australia.

In piecing together the story of Charles Allen, I have of course drawn on more than just the one small set of letters in one archival file. Following scattered traces through records of birth, death, marriage and divorce, through immigration files, shipping records and newspapers, I have looked for the broader meaning of the letters in the working-class, mixed-race lives of Charles Allen, Frances Allen and Charlie Gum. However sketchy a picture might finally appear, however insignificant they were in the broad sweep of history, their small lives nonetheless contribute to understanding the complexity of Australian identity at a time when most Australians thought of their country as a white nation, built by and for the white man. Charles Allen's story highlights the messy interplay between cultures, generations, places and languages that figured in the transnational childhoods of many young Chinese Australians, and shows how it was 'possible to be both Chinese and Australian before the advent of multicultural Australia'.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Death registration for Frances Mary Storey, 20 July 1955, Waverley, NSW BDM 1955/20114.

<sup>72</sup> John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia*, University of NSW Press, 2007, p. x.