

Sydney Festival

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LEAVING SHANGHAI

The former ABC journalist has spent two years reconstructing her mother's turbulent childhood.

My mother Beatrice never dwelt on the past. Nor did she give away too many details about her unhappy childhood.

She said just enough for me to know that her family had lost its way. And that, as the youngest of four children, she bore the brunt of a calamity that unfolded over the first two decades of her life, first in Shanghai and later in Hong Kong.

As a broadcaster and author I've told elements of her story before. But as I watched my mum, now 99, become increasingly frail, I realised that some pieces of her account were missing.

Her story kept niggling away at me, desperate to reach the light.

With COVID-19 clipping my wings, I've spent much of the last two years reconnecting with and reconstructing her story. The result is a theatrical narrative I have written called *Lost in Shanghai*.

Both my parents, as it happens, were born in Shanghai in the roaring '20s.

Bea was from a mixed-race or Eurasian family. My father, Robin, was from Anglo-Scottish stock. And while they came from vastly different backgrounds, for three years in their childhood, they actually lived within walking distance of each other – although it would be another two decades before they crossed paths in another city.

But *Lost in Shanghai* focuses on Bea's story because at this time and place, Chinese and Eurasian women in my family were consigned to become members of what was an invisible branch of "respectable society".

I felt it was time to bring them out of the shadows.

Beatrice was born during Shanghai's heyday. It was a time when the city's status as a self-governing international enclave flourished in the economic boom following the end of the Great War. By 1928, Shanghai was the fifth biggest city in the world with a population of 3 million Chinese. There were



also 50,000 foreign residents, about a tenth of whom were Brits.

Most of the expatriates lived in either the International Settlement or the adjacent French Concession. The enclaves were surrounded by the much larger Old City, where most of the Chinese lived.

The Shanghai of my mother's early childhood was flash and cosmopolitan, but also known for its squalid corners and seedy underbelly. It was a city where you could find your fortune or just as easily lose one.

Bea was the youngest of four children born to Elsie Mackenzie and Cecil Keat Greaves, though everyone knew him by his middle name. Both Elsie and Keat were Eurasian, the offspring of European-Chinese relationships.

Keat's father, Alexander Greaves, was from Liverpool but he didn't remain in China long enough to see his children grow up. In

those times, "hybrid" children weren't exactly viewed as an exotic blend of East and West. They were, as author Vicky Lee described them, a kind of "unwanted by-product of a colonial encounter".

Other commentaries described the growing number of Eurasians as a social problem that needed special attention. In Shanghai, Eurasians like mum's family attended different schools to the British children and went to separate hospitals. In her early life, the stigma of being Eurasian persisted.

The expatriates called themselves Shanghailanders. They didn't have to follow Chinese law, they obeyed the laws of their own countries. Shanghailanders lived comfortably in precincts that looked as if they had been transplanted from a fashionable Parisian arrondissement.

Rich Chinese and Eurasians could enjoy some of these trappings of entitlement, but

the Greaves were not in this league – though they were brought into the orbit of another Eurasian family who did manage to break through this bamboo ceiling.

Bea's father, Keat, was a bookkeeper for the dispensary A.S. Watson & Company – a respectable enough white-collar job, but one that was never going to take him far.

But his friend and later, brother-in-law, was another Eurasian called Henry Monsul Cumine who, despite coming from a similar background, was able to build the dream in prewar Shanghai. Bea's Uncle Henry became a real estate magnate, snapping up parcels of land within the French Concession. He designed and built properties that he sold or leased to foreigners and rich Chinese.

For his wife Winifred and their seven children Henry built a 16-room mansion that he named Ferryhill House. It was hidden at the end of a street formerly known as Route de Grouchy. Today it's called Yanqing Road. Despite Shanghai's construction craze, Uncle Henry's house still stands, though it's now divided into apartments and is home to about 10 Chinese families.

Lost in Shanghai is built around an amazing collection of family photographs, some of which I have only recently unearthed.

One of those dates from 1923 and shows Bea's extended Eurasian clan: the Greaves and the Cumines together. Beatrice is the baby in the photograph. She's sitting in her mother's lap.

This image is special for me because it's the only photo we have of Bea and her mother together. Four years later, Elsie was dead, having contracted dysentery from her youngest son, who survived.

Elsie's death was a major blow from which the family would never recover. It left Keat heartbroken and with four children aged between five and 14.

Bea was sent to live at the Cumine mansion and while she was surrounded by



Far left: The Cumine and Greaves families in Shanghai, October 1923, with Beatrice as a baby on her mother's lap; and the 16-room Shanghai mansion named Ferryhill House where Bea grew up.

Bea's parents, Elsie Mackenzie and Cecil Keat Greaves (left); Bea (below left) and her siblings (from left) Stanley, Hilda and John in Shanghai; (below right) Jane Hutcheon with her mother.



many cousins, she remembers this as a miserable time when she was frequently ill. She pined for her family, although they lived in the same city.

Four years later, Bea's father made another life-altering decision. One day, he bundled his then nine-year-old daughter into one of the Cumine's chauffeur-driven cars and took her to the passenger wharf at Shanghai's waterfront.

Keat gave his daughter a gift: a miniature teddy bear with a perfume bottle concealed in the bear's chest cavity. Then he left his distraught child in the arms of relatives who were waiting onboard the passenger ship *Empress of Canada*.

The *Empress* was bound for Hong Kong. It had been decided that Bea would move to the British colony to live with Keat's brother Alfred and his family.

Bea never knew why her father made the

decision to send her away, twice. She still bears the scars of that forced separation and she doesn't like to speak about it.

The story doesn't end there. As my mother approaches her 100th birthday, I marvel at the life she has lived and the setbacks she has overcome. I wanted to tell her story because she is no longer able to do that herself.

I wanted to give a voice to my ancestors and especially the women in my family who overcame so much and whose legacy has helped make me who I am today.

Lost in Shanghai premieres at the Seymour Centre from January 12-16. The performance was developed by Contemporary Asian Australian Performance under the direction of William Yang and Tasnim Hossain. The original score was written by Dr Terumi Narushima.