

# They're all watching one another

COMPILED BY SIMON PATTON

It is no surprise that Helene Chung's return to China in May 1989 prompted the revision of *Shouting From China*, originally published in 1988. The initial horror of the event now known as the 'June Massacre' may have receded, but it is vital that the event remain vivid in the Western mind. As Chung points out, 1989 signalled the end of Western naivety with respect to China; any reversion to former romantic notions would amount to self-deception. Chung, however, does not pretend to 'understand' China and she is contemptuous of simplistic explanations.

This is not to say that *Shouting From China* makes no attempts to come to grips with the complex reality gleaned from the experience of three years spent in the Middle Kingdom. The book expresses enthusiasm for much of the everyday experience that accompanies the life of a foreign correspondent. Nevertheless, there is a paradox at work here—one too enormous to be neatly resolved yet engrossing in its lumbering enormity.

For Chung, China was 'the most exotic yet the most dreary, the most stimulating yet the most depressing experience'. It is a love/hate relationship, and as a result the picture of China given to the reader is not a detached, scholarly analysis of events but a life-story in which daily life in China intersects with the personal history of the author.

Professional challenge, ancestral discovery, cultural alienation—these are just some of the themes encountered. As the ABC Radio's first woman correspondent to Beijing, she was determined to make a success of the appointment despite the immense difficulties in obtaining information.

Throughout her stay she was forced to rely on the services of an interpreter, Lao Fan who was both assistant and minder. The relationship was complex because he had neither been trained nor dared to think for himself.

'Lao Fan is a wonderful person', says Chung. 'He has one of the most

difficult jobs of any bureaucrat in China because he is put in that position by the Chinese authorities and his role is not so much to help us as to keep an eye on us and to make sure that we toe the right line. He is in turn watched by a driver and a cleaner and they all have to go to these political study sessions. They're all watching one another as well as watching us and then they have to report on each other.'

Life was rigorous for a foreign correspondent in Beijing, and with the isolation experienced by all 'foreign devils' Chung found herself drawn closely to the small circle whose task it is to draw news out of mere official information. She tells of having to rely on the 'rumour-mill, contacts, diplomats within foreign embassies, other correspondents...and then the Chinese who, for obvious reasons, must not be named'. Interviews could take up to ten months to organise and then, when the meeting finally took place, it was often in unsuitable circumstances.

Helene Chung tells how a television interview with Hu Qili, who in 1985 was believed to be the likely successor to Hu Yaobang as General Secretary, eventually took place, after ten months of negotiations, in a room with glass all round and flagstones on the floor. 'It was just so noisy. The lighting for the camera was impossible and Hu Qili read out all his answers and crackled his papers all the way through the interview—totally destroying it!'

Although originally of Chinese descent, Chung tells how difficult it was to be in the position of looking Chinese yet being unable to speak the language.

She recounts with bemusement her thwarted efforts to learn Mandarin at the Foreign Language Institute. She tells of a visit to Taishan in Southern China undertaken in search of her ancestral Dragon Field village. After a taste of dog meat and a meeting with the oldest man in the world (112 year old Lee Lee Chong) she is finally taken to the rubble of a deserted

## HELENE CHUNG *Shouting from China*

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village, all that remains of a possible ancestral home.

The highlight of the expanded edition is the final section dealing with the democracy movement and the June Massacre. Chung gives a very balanced account of the lead up to the massacre as well as its aftermath, including a detailed record of events in Hong Kong. Central to this overview is her analysis of the role of Deng Xiaoping whom she describes as 'undoubtedly the one person that all visitors to China want to see and that all visitors to China regard as the paramount leader'. The West's change in attitude to Deng Xiaoping, she says, is logical but incorrect because opinion before the massacre was incorrect.

'My impression of Deng Xiaoping is that while he is an economic reformer he is definitely a conservative politically and anyone who knows the slightest bit about his background can see that the massacre is unfortunately the logical though extremely brutal culmination of his past.'

When this brutal logic took its toll in the final week of the Tiananmen Square protests, Helene Chung was shocked, but not surprised.

She also links the refusal to give any concessions to the humiliation of Deng Xiaoping during Gorbachev's visit which was to have been 'the culmination of Deng's reign of power'.

The unruly students on hunger strikes, asking for freedom and democracy at a time when Gorbachev was talking about glasnost and perestroika was, she says, a huge loss of face for the Chinese leader. While he held off the troops because of the presence of so many television crews, 'he sure made up for that later!'