

LAZY MAN IN CHINA

by Helene Chung Martin

Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004. xv, 229 pp.;
ills; maps; pbk. \$34.95

Reviewer Nigel Sinnott

This book reinforces the popular adage that truth is stranger than fiction; it is often funnier too!

In 1983 the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (known, like its British equivalent, as 'Aunty'), decided to 'get with it' and appoint a woman (or 'girl') as an overseas correspondent: so Helene Chung Martin was posted to Peking to 'see how she tackled the game'.

The appointment was greeted with less than enthusiasm by Helene's partner, and later husband, John Winton Martin: 'I no more want to live in China than in Afghanistan!' But, being of a curious, kind and tolerant disposition, he decided, 'All right then, I'll join you.'

John was also a great letter writer, and in one of them he wrote, self-deprecatingly, 'I will continue these adventures of a lazy man when I return to Melbourne.' He is the 'lazy' man who gives this book its title.

The book falls into two distinct parts. The first and larger part describes Helene and John's adventures in China from 1983 to 1986. The shorter second part describes how, after John Martin's untimely death from cancer in 1993, Helene returned to China in 2002 to see what had changed.

In the 1980s foreigners in China were kept well away from the Chinese people and, as John observed, 'This is not so much socialism as a Chinese preoccupation with secrecy.' China was also 'one of the most repressive societies on earth'. John got a job in the Australian Embassy's technical co-operation (i.e. aid) department, where he found himself 'both the token Australian and the token man'.

If the A.B.C. chose Helene for China on the assumption that her Tasmanian convent school background had made her demure and not given to awkward questions, well, her broadcasting masters were mistaken. For as John wryly remarked: 'I suspect sometimes that faced with a grilling by Helene or the State Security Police, our people would prefer to face the latter.'

Both Helene and John had the ability to see through or behind official propaganda, whether Chinese or Western, and their shrewdness was tempered with a nimble sense of humour.

Helene had the interesting fortune to cover one of the most unlikely assignments since Ribbentrop and Molotov smiled slyly at one another in August 1939: God's right-wing mouthpiece in Queensland, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, paid an official visit to Red China in 1984, accompanied by the loyal Senator Flo. Helene, who was on the aircraft when it reached Canton, observed: 'Our landing with a thud in thick fog caused Flo to flutter and think of God.' 'Qantas would never have landed in weather like that,' admonished her husband, a pilot.

Sir Joh found his hosts more to his taste than his Labor opponents: 'These Reds are different. Not disruptive like the Reds all going on strike back home.'

John spotted a curious but official New China News Agency story about a human testicle transplant. He

concluded it was 'a metaphor for the lessons Chinese leaders wished to teach their people': medical researchers — 'bourgeois experts' — were shown as 'achieving a feat for a member of the proletariat.'

I can also recommend the story (p. 56) of Helene and John visiting the Catholic cathedral in Tianjin (Tientsin to old fogies like me).

During their stay, Helene and John saw the aspirations of the Chinese change from a bicycle, a watch, an electric fan and a sewing machine ('the four things that go round') to a cassette recorder, a television, a refrigerator and a washing machine ('the four big things').

When Helene went back to China in 2002, quite a lot had changed. The name Peking was now romanised in the Pinyin form of Beijing: vast amounts of building had taken place: there were smog, expensive cars and traffic jams; Chinese citizens were allowed to associate with foreigners; and dull Sun Yat-sen jackets ('Mao suits') had often been replaced with dull Western business suits. Mao's communal 'iron rice-bowl' had been cast aside for private enterprise, profits and unemployment. There were new freedoms, at least for the new rich: to make money, and to aspire to the 'four luxuries': a private flat, a private car, private education (for their children), and holidays in China or overseas. Nevertheless, 'western sources, using the international standard of US\$1 a day, estimate 200 million or more Chinese struggle below the poverty line.'

This book is funny, serious and perceptive. It covers a wide canvas, from the aspirations of the largest national population on earth to the private feelings and experiences of two interesting individuals. It is a labour of record and of love, and is well worth reading.

Available for Review

God & Philosophy

by Antony Flew

A scholarly investigation into the philosophy of religion.

Reprint with new introduction by author.

Prometheus Books 2005

Fighting Words:

The Origins of Religious Violence

by Hector Avalos

A serious philosophical examination which looks at violence in religious and non-religious contexts.

Prometheus Books 2005.

Contact AH editor, Rosslyn Ives,
e-mail <rosslyn@netspace.net.au> or
tel (03) 9857 9717.



A ship-wrecked planet.