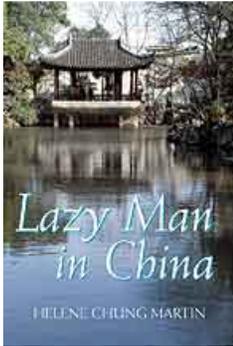


**Lazy Man in China** by Helene Chung Martin. Canberra: Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, the Australian National University, 2004, pp. 231; A\$ 34.96, paperback, ISBN 1740761286.



Helene Chung Martin is well known in the world of Australian journalism having worked with ABC and being the first woman overseas correspondent (to Beijing) to be contracted by them in 1983. This book, however, centres on the letters written by her partner, and later husband, John Martin to various members of the family, friends and colleagues while in China with Helene in the 1980s. The letters have been edited by Helene in such a way as to include various parts of letters concerning the same subject matter, but with additional content, into one 'letter'.

This might sound like editorial tampering, but it is done in such a way so as to give the reader a fuller picture of the multifaceted impressions gathered as John Martin moved around China with or without Helene. Each letter thus constructed is carefully end-noted so that the reader is fully aware of the different sources that have been distilled into one 'letter'. It is a very effective way of incorporating John Martin's different swings of mood, interpretations, and gradual engagement with China into one text. It is not, however, the way in which most of the letters are dealt with. The letters are appropriately punctuated by Helene's own comments, on occasions correcting some political or historical detail her partner had got askew. Her comments are also enlightening in offering views of her own journalistic commitments while in Beijing offset against John Martin's views of what she was doing. We learn of the huge toll taken on her by an almost inhuman work load as she traipsed all over China to cover stories, often with him as the offside onlooker commenting on the often comic, but frustrating red-tape of a country changing yet still tied down under communist hard-line rule. The letters also document the depths of the most unusual relationship that Helene and John shared, at once wistful and powerful.

John Martin, a lecturer, joined Helene when she was appointed to Beijing, taking up a job at the Australian embassy for some time. The letters are brilliantly witty, laconic and critical, with a superb ability to report a scene or impression of an individual in compact language which immediately visualises the moment for the reader. The letters reveal his first impressions of this new and politically gagged country into which he had been thrown and with which he ultimately became totally fascinated. The reader gets a vivid impressions in short snap monologue of a China which is at the critical stage of trying to mix and match old communist ideology to a country beginning to move into the world of free trade. John Martin's relationship with China was a complex one, as the author herself reveals:

*Lazy Man in China* is John's book. It begins with his abhorrence at the idea of going there, reveals his fascination with the place, and ends with his being absorbed – indeed transformed – by it (p. xiv).

Following her husband's death Helene Chung Martin returns to China to find a country very changed from the one that she and John had experienced. This is the new China, forging ahead, though cautiously, in an era of capitalism. While there is still much to remind Chung Martin of the country that she and John shared, it has changed as dramatically as her own life now without John. For anybody who is interested not only in China but in tracing the close bonding between John Martin and Helene Chung Martin this book is an admirable read.

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