

HELENE CHUNG/Journalist

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China an enigma to a Chinese

When the ABC sent Helene Chung to China she was glad of the chance to see the land of her ancestors. But, born and bred in Australia, she found the country as alien and puzzling as it is to most foreigners.

Not until 1983 did the ABC appoint its first female foreign correspondent. She was Helene Chung, a long-time ABC employee who was also the first Australian Chinese posted to China. Yet as a fourth-generation Taswegian, Chung felt as alien as any westerner. Raised in pre-multiculturalism Hobart, Chung's only knowledge of Chinese culture and traditions came from studying Chinese history at Hobart University where she gained a Master of Arts.

Now back in Australia and working for Radio Australia, Chung says that she cannot remember what her expectations of China were. But she returned after three years living in Beijing and travelling extensively, aware of how little she knows and understands of the country that is home to one fifth of the world's population. China is that sort of experience.

Nevertheless, Chung tried to make sense of it by using a 12-month visiting fellowship in journalism at Victoria's Deakin University to write an account of her China years. The result: *Shouting from China*, recently published by Penguin.

The title refers to the difficulty Chung encountered while broadcasting for the ABC and freelancing for the BBC, CBS and Hong Kong radio over telephone lines that often took five hours to procure and were then barely adequate for sending a 30-second report. This was but one of the frustrations of daily life in Beijing which is a cockroach city and endures a climate combining the extremes of the Sahara Desert with those of the North Pole.

With inadequate language preparation and what little Chinese she was able to pick up, Chung was dependent on a government interpreter whose primary duty was to block her access to officials and "damaging" information. Chung's book is an account of these trials and tribulations in the context of a China struggling to change gears and modernise, viewed from the special perspective of an overseas Chinese.

Q What was your introduction to the East?

Chung: When I left Australia for the first time, in 1970/71, I went to Singapore and Malaysia and was amazed to see so many other Chinese, coming as I did from a small community in Hobart where there were hardly any. I particularly remember seeing a Malaysian rock group gyra-

ting on stage. I'd never seen non-white people on stage and it made me wonder for the first time how I'd appeared at school in the '50s and '60s and later at university, acting on stage before a white audience. I went next to work in Hong Kong in the midst of Kissinger's "ping pong" diplomacy period with China. Even though Whitlam, as Opposition leader, was making his first visit to China, I, as a member of the Hong Kong media, was not allowed in. The closest I came was the borders at Macao and in the New Territories where I stood wondering what lay ahead and never dreaming that 13 years later I'd be living behind that border.

You write that standing there you also wondered what it was like to be Chinese. That seems extraordinary. Had you no sense of it at all growing up in Hobart?

I didn't think of myself as Chinese when I was growing up. I knew I was Chinese, of course, but remember that in the '50s and '60s there would have been fewer than 100 Chinese in Hobart, and my mother's family had been in Tasmania since the 1880s so I was a fourth generation Australian. She spoke a bit of Chinese and I'm told that when my grandmother was alive I spoke a little, too, though I don't remember. At home, although we did eat Chinese food and I remember using chopsticks since childhood, our diet was predominantly European — lamb chops, mashed potatoes and green peas. The two main Chinese families in Hobart were the Henrys on my mother's side and the Chungs on my father's. They didn't get on and I didn't live with my father, so my Chinese world was even more restricted. All my friends and those of my sister and cousins were non-Chinese.

Was racial discrimination a problem and did it not create a sense of being different in that pre-multicultural era?

I was taunted as "Ching Chong Chinaman" as a small child and used to call back, "White trash", but it didn't last long. My mother, however, was strongly discriminated against at school. I think because my sister and I did our entire schooling at the one school and that we were very much part of that school, we just became the same as the other children. Even so, I do know that there were times when I sensed a snub, a feeling that I would have been more acceptable if



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my eyes were blue and my hair blonde. But it wasn't really enough for me to call it discrimination.

What about Chinese culture? Were you stimulated by that at home, did you read Chinese literature or get introduced to any of the rituals?

No, no. They were not a part of my mother's life and so not a part of ours. Remember, too, that my mother had two Caucasian men who were my step-fathers so I guess I was also influenced by them. One was a New Zealand-born radio announcer, and the other a South African-born archaeologist.

So there were none of the tensions derived from a sense of having-two cultures?

No, I felt truly Australian, with a difference. In fact, I felt so Australian that at university I remember making quite a fool of myself once. The first year, when we were all auditioning for the university revue, I auditioned for the part of the Queen and I really expected to get the part. I didn't and wondered why. Not until later did I realise that naturally I could not appear on stage acting the part of Queen Elizabeth I. I actually ended up playing Madame Butterfly in that revue and, of course, that was suitable. Later in life I gradually became more aware of being Asian. Obviously as Australia changed and adopted multiculturalism, I became more aware of my Chineseness. But, strangely enough, just at the beginning of this multicultural period I experienced publicly and for the first time a form of racial discrimination.

That was the ABC in Melbourne?

Yes, in 1978, when the ABC was planning *Nationwide*. I was told I should go off television because of my Asian appearance. Al Grassby, the then Commissioner of Community Relations, took up the issue and after 18 months of negotiating with the ABC it was resolved in my favor.

What about China? What were your reasons for wanting that posting?

My interest in Chinese history, culture and politics. China is of such enormous importance to the west, both Washington and Moscow are trying to play the China card. Australia is among the countries trying to kow-tow to China because of the vast markets it can open to the west. For all these reasons I thought it would be fascinating to try and unravel some of the puzzle that is China.

That explains the journalistic challenge. But was there any sense of trying to find yourself?

No, there wasn't because my sense of self was so deeply rooted in Tasmania that I hadn't even bothered to find out the name of the village my forbears came from in Taishan county. I did go to Taishan. Of course I wanted to go there, but



As a child in Tasmania I was 'Ching Chong Chinaman'

when I did it was a journalistic trip. In fact, my experience in China made me feel more Australian than I've ever felt because all the time, wherever I went, people asked, "What are you?"

I suppose your clothes, make-up and hairstyle would distinguish you?

Everywhere but in the most sophisticated parts of China. If I stood among most Chinese groups, I wouldn't look Chinese to them. If I walked down a street with Europeans, there would, more often than not, be more interest in me than in them. They are instantly recognisable as red-haired devils. But what am I? To the Chinese I might be the mistress of a high official, an actress or perhaps a rich overseas Chinese. All overseas Chinese are rich! Not only did I always have to identify myself as Australian but, because China is a developing country and has such good relations with Australia, everywhere I went all

things Australian were highly praised, even down to the office cockroaches. The interpreter would say, "That's not a Chinese cockroach, it's too big; it's got to be an Australian one".

Did you ever get a taste of what it might be like to be a local?

Once in the depths of winter when, because I was prone to losing my voice, I went heavily covered up in boots, hat and sun-glasses to shop at the Friendship Store, which is reserved for foreigners. A guard put out his arm to prevent me entering. I realised how absurd I must have looked, but I took advantage of his fear of making a mistake to brush past him. For all he knew, I might have been a well-connected local, and he could have been in trouble though only doing his job. China is the most hierarchical society in which I've ever lived. There's one rule for the locals, one for high officials and one for foreigners.

Was it an advantage to be an overseas Chinese in your position?

I don't think it was ever a disadvantage. In fact, China practises a policy of preferential treatment for overseas Chinese. But my position was that of a foreigner. I worked for a foreign organisation and was classified as a foreigner because, apart from anything else, they could extract more valuable foreign exchange from me that way. I remember once in Fuzhou province, however, being classified in a party of other correspondents as an overseas Chinese. Hearing that the Chinese were offering half-price domestic air fares to overseas Chinese, I tried to claim the discount only to be told I was an Australian. I asked who overseas Chinese were and was told they were Chinese citizens who were overseas! Yet when I went down to Taishan I was welcomed as an overseas Chinese with a great banquet, much ceremony and pointing to local facilities donated by other foreign-born Chinese. I was so touched and flattered by the hospitality that I almost felt moved to open my cheque book! But the two experiences

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made me realise that unfortunately China exploits the emotions of overseas Chinese and that is one of the sadnesses I have about China.

What are the particular problems of reporting from China?

It is a developing country with all the problems of a third world country combined with all the problems of a closed, communist society. There are technical difficulties in sending information, and there is the enormous problem of even getting information, though it is improving all the time. When I arrived there was a weekly press briefing at which questions were allowed once a month. By the time I left, questions were permitted once a fortnight! My official interpreter's primary role was to monitor me and keep me abreast of communist propaganda, certainly not to fill me in with any gossip or local color. China is a most secret society. You don't know where the leaders live or much about their private lives. It is improving all the time, but there are no wide open doors as many people in the west seem to think.

You saw many improvements and changes even in your time there. But the Chinese aim to match the developed countries by 2050. Do you think they can do it?

I feel a great sadness when I'm asked that question because even though the Chinese are obviously most capable I really don't think they can meet their target of trying to modernise as quickly as they would like. They have these enormous problems of backwardness, size and a vast population. It is a country in which a quarter of the people are illiterate, in which the standard of living is low. Just getting goods from one end of China to the other is a mammoth task.

There has been some talk of China and Japan eventually forging an economic bloc that will make them the dominant world power. The theory is that once Japanese technology and organisational skills are combined with China's huge market and labor force, it will change the world's economic and political balance. Can you see that happening?

I haven't heard of this. I know that China needs Japan, but I also know that there is continual antagonism between them. The Chinese will never forget the atrocities perpetrated on them by the Japanese in World War II. Almost daily there are Japanese delegations into China and the Chinese say, "Yes, give us more help, give us more aid and we might try and forget." I don't think they're going to align, there is too much animosity there.

Do you have any sense now of China being the motherland?

No, China will never be my motherland. China is the motherland of my ancestors, but Australia is my motherland. I have a great attachment to China. I have left China believ-



China's the most hierarchical society I've ever lived in

ing that I don't understand it. Perhaps it is impossible for a westerner to ever understand. But I feel that I've peered into some of the cracks and crevices of Chinese society and that it is a society that will always fascinate me. I'm interested in whatever happens in China; that has been strengthened. Most people who go there have a love/hate relationship, but they all tend to come away absolutely fascinated and it is a fascination that is enduring.

Did you make lots of friends there?

Yes, particularly among foreign correspondents because we were forced to live together in compounds and to share information. We forged very strong links. I've always enjoyed friendship with my colleagues but never as intensely as in China where we were forced together to fight the system.

What about local Chinese

friends?

Not as I would have liked to. In China, as nowhere else, I was constantly hearing words mouthed about friendship, but in China, as nowhere else, friendship between foreigners and locals was discouraged. It is against official policy. Chinese who came to my home had to register their names in a book and if they came too frequently they'd be in trouble, so I had to protect them.

Do you think China gets sufficient coverage in Australia?

No, I don't, but I guess I'm biased. There are lots of feature stories in China. The problem is getting hard news because you can't get the facts.

How do the Chinese perceive Australia?

As a middle-sized, non-threatening power. Our technology is not as developed as America's and is in many cases more suitable. Although I do think the links are genuine, Australia has a bit of a blind spot. Hawke overstates it when he says there is no country with which our relations are more important. No way are the Chinese going to buy one billion pairs of socks from us, or whatever. They want to keep their consumer market for themselves. They're more interested in local manufacture and Chinese selling to Chinese.

Do we get much coverage in the Chinese media?

A little. There is considerable coverage when a leader visits. It's interesting to see how these visits are covered on television. You see the Chinese leaders sitting and greeting one foreign leader, then the shot changes and they are still sitting and greeting. It reminds me of the old days when all the foreigners went to China and kow-towed before the emperor. That is the way it's still being portrayed. Even though China is a backward country it still sees itself as the middle kingdom. ■