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The great challenges of reporting China

Margaret Jones on a kindred spirit

Shouting from China

By Helene Chung
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266 pages, paperback, B & W illus

THE TITLE of Helene Chung's book about her three years as an ABC correspondent in Beijing is meant to be taken quite literally. The inadequate Chinese telephone system is one of the hazards of daily life in the People's Republic, and foreigners don't seem to have the ability to produce the stentorian bellows with which Chinese themselves cope with the problem.

Chung, filing over the phone from Beijing, had the additional difficulty of trying to transmit voice pieces of broadcast quality, and paid the penalty with frequent



Chung: Caught in China's spell.

bouts of laryngitis.

Her title, however, also symbolises the difficulties Western correspondents still experience in China. They must break through the double barrier of restrictions imposed on them by a closed and traditionally secretive society and the lack of understanding of Asian subtleties in their home countries.

At first glance, Chung might have seemed better placed than most to crash through all the obstacles towards some kind of better understanding of the enigma China remains. When she went to Beijing for the ABC in 1983, she was the first Chinese-Australian correspondent to the PRC, and one of a tiny number of overseas Chinese of any nationality reporting on their ancestral motherland.

But as a fourth-generation Australian, she found herself as much, if not more alien, than other foreigners. She did not speak Mandarin, she had not done her homework on her family's ancestral villages, her clothes made her look

foreign, and the Chinese did not know what to make of her.

As one who did a fair bit of shouting from China, though 10 years earlier, I was fascinated to see that some things had changed not at all. The foreigners' ghetto still suffers cockroach plagues on horror-movie scale and the Chinese still insist these are a foreign import, not locally bred.

It is still forbidden for interpreters and drivers who work in the foreign compounds to invite their employers home, or even tell them where they live, and making real friends in China remains a near-impossibility.

Obviously, other things have changed for the better. Correspondents can now travel with far fewer restrictions and have at least some access to middle-level officials.

Helene Chung even managed after 10 months of difficult negotiations to set up an interview inside the Forbidden City with a Politburo member and rising Party star, Hu Qili. It was the first television interview given by a Chinese leader, and, on the Chinese side, a delicate and risky manoeuvre of enormous significance for the future.

The ABC, however, found it a bit of a yawn, and the interview never went to air. "It wasn't riveting television," a Sydney producer told Chung. "I'm not even sure where the tapes are." Such are the hazards of reporting China.

Shouting From China is the latest in a series of useful books now emerging from correspondents' experiences, and it is a satisfying read, combining solid analysis of political and economic changes with more homely details of everyday living.

Like everybody who has lived in China for any length of time, Chung came away fascinated but baffled:

China had been the most secure yet the most hostile, the most exotic but the most dreary, the most stimulating yet the most depressing experience of my life. I loved and hated it. I had been frustrated in my efforts to report news, infuriated by the bureaucracy, and driven almost to despair by the inefficiency, but I had become fascinated by the country and its people. China's majesty and squalor, virtue and injustice, beauty and horror, had caught me in its spell.

● Margaret Jones was one of the first three Australian correspondents accredited to China in 1973.