

WEEKEND BOOKS

BOOKS:

AS an overseas Chinese working in China Helene Chung felt foreign. As a non-Mandarin speaker, she was left out, and as a journalist she was frustrated by that country's secrecy. MARGARETTA POS reports.

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Chung on China: tale of two lands

JIN Gee Chin left China in the 1880s, lured by the rich alluvial tin mines in Tasmania. One hundred years later, in 1983, his great granddaughter, Helene Chung, went to China as an ABC correspondent.

She was the first woman posted abroad by the ABC, the first Australian Chinese appointed to China, and one of a small number of overseas Chinese who have worked in Beijing as foreign correspondents. It was also her first visit to the land of her forebears.

But China proved to be a country in which she felt as alien as Jin Gee Chin undoubtedly felt here. In fact, she never felt more foreign.

Growing up in Hobart, she never thought of herself as Chinese. Both parents were Chinese, but they separated when she was small and she grew up with her mother and two Caucasian step-fathers, the second being the Egyptologist and writer, Leslie Greener.

Recalling her schooldays, she says that for most of the 12 years she was at St Mary's College in Hobart, she and her sister were the only children in the school of Chinese descent, and it never occurred to her that she was different.

in Victoria, where she wrote *Shouting from China*. She now works for Radio Australia.

Shouting from China is a personal account of frustration in dealing with inefficiency, inertia, fear, ignorance, and terrible secrecy; of the Chinese view of overseas Chinese as a source of revenue to be milked; of coping without speaking Mandarin; of the difficulties besetting China in its attempt to modernise; of the lethargy in China which is so different from the industry and efficiency of overseas Chinese; the effect of economic reform in creating wealth and in polarising the rich and poor; and of her despair over the lack of human rights in China.

Chung writes of the thousands of people who were publicly executed during the 1983 anti-crime campaign, of the withering of the 1986 "100 flowers campaign".

and hated the place, Chung writes of the spell cast by China. But she is as critical of "romantic" interpretations from fleeting visitors as she is of Western politicians who value diplomatic alignment and future trade above human rights.

Despite her fascination with China, it is the frustration that comes through most strongly in *Shouting from China*.

She describes the problems radio journalists face trying to be heard shouting from China over inadequate telephone lines and poor connections, trying to report from a closed communist country, from a position of segregation and cultural isolation.

Even dealing with non-Chinese was impossibly difficult. Meeting Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister, Leonid Ilyichev, on his arrival in October 1983, she asked him what

The land of Helene Chung's ancestors, isolated her, frustrated her, frightened her. As an overseas Chinese, she felt foreign, as a non-Mandarin speaker, she was left out, and as a journalist she was frustrated by its secrecy.



◀ Helene with General Secretary Hu Yaobang in April 1985. He was dismissed last year.



◀ Interviewing Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Leonid Ilyichev in

occurred to her that she was different.

The worst she can remember was the taunt "ching chong Chinaman" when she started school. She retaliated with "white trash", and that ended it. Later, at the University of Tasmania, she remembers losing the part of Queen Elizabeth in a revue because of her face.

There were few Chinese in Hobart during her schooldays, and the two main families were the Henrys on her mother's side, and the Chungs on her father's side. Her father was born in China. Her mother was Jin Gee Chin's granddaughter.

Jin Gee Chin prospered in the alluvial tin mines at Weldborough, and his son, Jin Jiang, converted to Catholicism, changed his name to Henry, and established a thriving fruit and vegetable business in Hobart.

Three years in Beijing was proof that while China was the land of her forebears, it was not the motherland.

Chung returned home in 1986 to take up a visiting fellowship in journalism at Deakin University

was left out, and as a journalist she was frustrated by its secrecy. Even more frustrating was the Western world's willingness to accept that secrecy. MARGARETTA POS reports.

Chung writes that she only peered into a few cracks and crevices of Chinese society, but those cracks and crevices show a picture that Australian political leaders choose to ignore.

Leading dissident, astrophysicist Prof Fang Lizhi, was expelled from the party and dismissed from his university post for championing free speech and a free press during the "100 flowers campaign".

He survived, however. And in an interview with Chung two weeks ago, he accused Governor General designate and former Foreign Minister, Bill Hayden, of double standards for his soft comments on the violation of human rights in Tibet compared with his condemnation of the lack of human rights in other parts of the world.

Admitting that she both loved

he expected to be the outcome of talks aimed at normalising relations between the Soviet Union and China.

"He placed a heavy paw on either side of my head, looked me in the eyes and while stroking my hair, growled, 'You are beautiful! You are beautiful! You know everything! What can I tell you?' He then proceeded to talk at considerable length about the weather."

On the point of departure, she was flooded with relief: "I no longer had to worry that in all the secrecy surrounding China I was missing the big scoop. I no longer had to wake up each morning and switch on the short-wave radio, afraid that I may have missed reporting the death of Deng Xiaoping."



Minister
Ilyichev in
Beijing,
October
1983.



At the
Great Wall
with John
Martin,
1986.