

SUN Weekend

● RIGHT: Australian-born Helene Chung, the first female posted abroad by the ABC, was brought up on *Snugglepole and Cuddlepie* and didn't speak a word of Chinese before her Beijing posting. But she had worked overseas in Europe, Asia and Egypt and her insights into Chinese politics are astute and shrewd.



It's a story to shout about

SHOUTING from China was a title Helene Chung couldn't resist for her book about her three years in Beijing as the ABC's foreign correspondent.

Helene, a fourth-generation, Tasmanian Chinese, believes she was the first woman posted abroad by the ABC and the first Australian Chinese appointed by an agency in China.

Chinese phone technology has improved, she says, but only by shouting could she be heard during 1983-86 if the connection was made.

Her male interpreter had a loud voice but it could take five hours to get 90 seconds on air.

"There's the climate, too. 'Beijing throat' is the most common ailment among newcomers," Helene says.

Winter temperatures plunge to minus 15 deg C.

As gritty dust from the Gobi Desert in Mongolia seeps through every window crack, and heavy white dust storms blanket the city in April, the dry climate hardens and cracks skins.

By the time Helene left Beijing, the three-month-long winter diet of Chinese cabbage had yielded to lettuces, green broccoli and firm red tomatoes.

Rude and sullen service in the Friendship Store smartened up when the People's Daily ran a letter of complaint from Anna Chennault, widow of a US general who was a volunteer Flying Tiger in World War 2. Anna said store hands treated customers as the enemy.

Helene had doubts about the

BOOKS



CAROLINE ROSS

tin-mines, made his money and went home in the 1880s.

Around 1900, her grandfather came to work in the mines, stayed, set up a business and brought out his wife.

Helene's mother was born in Hobart and married a young Chinese immigrant.

"So I was brought up on *Snugglepole and Cuddlepie*. I didn't speak a word of the language," Helene says.

She had just done a crash course in Japanese to take up a two-month journalism scholarship in Japan, when she was posted to Beijing.

To people who don't speak Chinese, Helene sounds impressive.

Chinese leaders, she says, want foreign investment in technology and Western expertise, but not the "spiritual pollution" of Western ideas.

"China doesn't want pornography, Western democracy or freedom of religion. All are contaminants," Helene said.

Growing numbers of overseas Chinese from south-east Asia, the

"Yes, there were restrictions," Helene said.

"We had to live in a walled compound that Chinese were not allowed to enter without signing books.

"Chinese who had what authorities considered too much contact with foreigners are now in prison."

She was not allowed into homes of Chinese friends.

China, Helene says, is going through its third revolution: the first, in 1911, overthrew the last emperor; in the second, in 1949, Mao Tse Tung defeated the Nationalists and set up the People's Republic.

In the third, in December 1978, Deng Xiao Ping, the new leader, started to modernise China.

"But the 'open door' policy has led to corruption at the highest level," Helene says.

"Thousands of people were executed in my first few months, by a single bullet in the back of the head, for 'spiritual pollution'.

"Law enforcement officers can't enforce the law against people above them."

In 1986, Helene says, there was a campaign against "tigers" — corrupt top officials.

It did not last, she says. "All they did was shoot some 'tiger cubs', sons of high officials, accused of crimes."

Helene also spoke of the problem of "black babies", children outside the quota permitted for births, who have no identification, no papers for rations, schools, living.

And AIDS. Foreign residents must have an AIDS test. "AIDS is

enemy.

Helene had doubts about the Chinese sense of humor: "It's different." But some of her book is very funny.

"A Westerner working in China needs patience and a sense of humor," she warns.

Before joining the ABC in 1971 Helene got her master's degree after six years of European, Asian and American history.

She worked overseas in Europe, Asia and Egypt and her insights into Chinese politics are astute and shrewd.

Her book has three aspects: current events in China, working conditions for foreign news correspondents and China's attitude to overseas-born Chinese.

She visited the country of her ancestors in the south, Tai Shan county in Guangdong province, from where most early Victorian Chinese came.

Helene's great-grandfather went to Tasmania to work in the

Growing numbers of overseas Chinese from south-east Asia, the US, Hong Kong, even Australia, want to invest in China, in joint ventures like hotels and manufacturing.

schools, living.
And AIDS. Foreign residents must have an AIDS test. "AIDS is one of the great fears of China," she says

● *Shouting from China*, by Helene Chung (Penguin), \$14.99.



● Gritty dust and heavy white dust storms from the Gobi Desert in Mongolia make life difficult for Beijing's citizens.