

China

The History of ABC Foreign Reporting

The ABC has had correspondents and a bureau in China for more than 30 years.

In the mid 1960s at the start of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, access to China for the foreign media was restricted.

The ABC covered China and Hong Kong through a local correspondent in Hong Kong, Patricia Penn, and through the ABC Tokyo correspondent.

In July 1971, the Australian Labor Party leader and leader of the Federal Opposition, Gough Whitlam, visited China - accompanied by an ABC news team.



The ABC news team that visited China in 1971 with then Australian Opposition leader, Gough Whitlam. From left to right: Soundman Willie Phua; Cameraman Derek McKendry; Correspondent Philip Koch.

Among the many restrictions imposed on the visiting ABC news team was the requirement that their news film be sealed in a wooden box and despatched through the Chinese Post Office. Nevertheless there were hopes the ABC might soon be able to open a bureau in China.

If the A.L.P. gains office at the next Federal elections, then the opening of the first Australian news bureau in Peking by the ABC will boil down to simply whether or not the Commission wants it. Letter from correspondent Philip Koch to ABC following visit to China with Gough Whitlam, August 1971.

However, in view of the growing importance of China coverage and the continuing restrictions on access, correspondent John Penlington opened a full ABC bureau in Hong Kong in 1972.

In December that year Gough Whitlam became Prime Minister and Canberra established diplomatic relations with Peking (later Beijing).

Within a year, an ABC bureau was opened in China and the first correspondent was Paul Raffaele.

On the day I crossed the border from Hong Kong just five other foreigners, diplomats from a developing country, joined me in entering what the Chinese call the Middle Kingdom.

So began a Kafkaesque twenty months living and working in a shadowy communist world where we correspondents were allowed almost no contact with locals and were regarded, with exquisite politeness, by our foreign ministry minders as a peculiar variety of Western spy. Our phones were bugged, we were watched almost everywhere we went and our reports were scrutinised word for word.

Nowadays, there are hundreds of Western correspondents based in China, but then

there were just a dozen of us, from Europe, Canada and Australia.



The ABC's first China correspondent based in Beijing (then Peking), Paul Raffaele, reports from Tiananmen Square, 1974.

From 1973 until I departed in 1975 China was opening to the world and I witnessed dozens of world leaders, including Gough Whitlam, make the pilgrimage to Peking for a state visit and the obligatory call on a doddering Chairman Mao. During each state visit we correspondents were invited to welcoming and farewell banquets at the Great Hall of the People. The most bizarre was when the band of the People's Liberation Army attempted a stentorian version of, 'Click Go The Shears' during Whitlam's official visit.

Paul Raffaele - ABC China correspondent 1973 to 1975

Correspondent Warren Duncan arrived in China in 1975 and covered events including, the death of the respected founding Premier, Chou En Lai, the scramble for political power that followed, the earthquake in Tangshan, the death of Mao Tse Tung and the fall of the Gang of Four.

I was a fortunate observer of these things. I saw them unfold in the streets in massive demonstrations, in wall posters, in public displays of unrestrained grief and joy, and in the physical dislocation of a nation ...all this I tried to report in my words and their voices, and in the sound of the din and clamour in the streets, in my despatches for Australian radio and television audiences. Warren Duncan - China: A Three year Assignment



A child in the remote oil-producing Taching region in north east China - late 1970s. **The children of Taching oil workers in this remote place know of no other life and thus in their kindergarten they sing songs like 'I am a little drop of oil' and 'I will grow up to be a good oil worker for Chairman Mao'.** Warren Duncan, ABC China correspondent 1975 to 1978. Photo: Warren Duncan

The notion that the work of the foreign correspondent was a man's profession was deeply ingrained across the media.

The ABC had employed very few women as correspondents overseas: K.S. Poole in Honiara from the late 1940s; Patricia Penn in Hong Kong from the 1960s; and Diane Willman from the Middle East in the 1970s

- yet all were freelance correspondents.

In 1983, Helene Chung was posted to Beijing - becoming the first woman sent overseas by the ABC as a foreign correspondent.

During a whirlwind briefing in Sydney, a worried news chief warned, 'There's a lot riding on your appointment.' It was clear that if I failed, it would be a long time before another woman would be given a chance overseas. Helene Chung-Martin

In the following 20 years, there were five other women correspondents in Beijing.

Chung also broke new ground - a correspondent of Chinese background, being sent to report on the land of her ancestors.

To me as a five year-old, China meant black hair, rice and chopsticks, acute embarrassment if my mother broke into Chinese in front of my friends, and jeers of 'Ching Chong Chinaman'. But I didn't feel Chinese. My inability to speak Mandarin was unremarkable. In 1983 most overseas Chinese with Chinese language spoke Cantonese - not understood by northerners. And at an official level I was a 'foreigner' - representing a foreign organization, admitted into 'foreigners only' enclaves, and obliged to pay top foreigner prices. Helene Chung-Martin

Working in China remained difficult - the running of the bureau and liaison with local authorities was a demanding job as shown by one telex message from the ABC Manager Asia in Singapore, Peter Hollinshead, to the ABC Controller of News.



Helene Chung, in Zhongnanhai - the Communist Party compound, in 1985, interviewing General Secretary Hu Yaobang, whose death in 1989 would precipitate massive demonstrations culminating in the Tiananmen massacre.

Because of administrative difficulties Peking office I have given an official direction to Representative Peking to clean up these matters as a matter of priority over all news and other matters with the exception of the return of Jesus Christ, the death of Deng (Xiaoping) or a Russian invasion.

In later years the ABC also appointed a cameraman to the Beijing bureau - Sebastian Phua, a talented Singaporean cameraman who'd worked for the ABC throughout Asia for many years, was Beijing cameraman from 1995 to 2003 until his illness and subsequent death from cancer.

In 1995, Jane Hutcheon was appointed Beijing correspondent - born and raised in Hong Kong she speaks Cantonese and Mandarin.

As a correspondent I had to learn that there were various ways of going about my work. I could concentrate on non-controversial cultural stories or I could attempt to tell the wider account of a country struggling to modernise and regain its place in the world in the short space of half a century. To do this I had to be resourceful and vigilant, and often had to check to see whether the crew and I were being followed. As well as being viewed with suspicion because I was a foreign journalist, I also learned that rules made

in Beijing were ignored or side-stepped in the provinces, and the views of ordinary citizens were usually drowned in the pursuit of the government's 'greater good'. Jane Hutcheon, *From Rice to Riches - A Personal Journey Through a Changing China*. 2003



Jane Hutcheon, China correspondent from 1995 to 2001. Hutcheon was born in the then British colony of Hong Kong. **"China was always in the distance during my childhood and upbringing, but never far away"**

During her time as correspondent, from 1995 to 2001, Jane Hutcheon was detained by Chinese authorities on four occasions while in pursuit of a story.

ABC Correspondents and Camera Crew in China & Hong Kong

- Richard Andrews
- Eric Campbell
- Michael Cavanagh
- Chang Chun Yuen
- Helene Chung
- Warren Duncan
- Tony Eastley
- Cammile Funnell
- Jane Hutcheon
- Terry McDonald
- Ali Moore
- Sally Neighbour
- Tom O'Byrne
- Richard Palfreyman
- John Penlington
- Patricia Penn
- Joe Phua
- Sebastian Phua
- Willie Phua
- Paul Raffaele
- John Shovelan
- John Taylor
- Richard Thwaites
- Trevor Watson
- Kate Wall