

Debunking China

THE TRIBUNE

Shouting from China, by Helene Chung. Penguin \$14.99. Reviewed by Simon Bracegirdle.

My quandary is whether I should use a lot of valuable *Tribune* space to warn you not to buy *Shouting from China* because it's a lousy book.

First my qualifications: my wife and I visited China in 1977 and 1979, staying a total of over a month in Guangzhou (Canton), Shanghai, Nanjing, Xian (Entombed Warriors), Beijing (Great Wall) and Inner Mongolia. We both had out-patient treatment in hospitals, we travelled by train, internal airline and bus, visited fac-

ories, schools, museums and science institutes.

When reading Chung's nasty book I wondered occasionally if she and I were thinking of the same land. Chung, a fourth generation Tasmanian of Chinese descent (and former ABC correspondent in China) even refers to the enchanting children greeting overseas visitors with song as "screeching kids".

We stayed in 20-odd hotels. All but one were immaculately clean though not posh. Chung, there five years after us finds little but dirt, hostility, deceit, inefficiency.

No rumor is too bizarre for her to report. Lift drivers are spies and lazy; her interpreter clumsy and untidy; there was cannibalism in 1986 in Beijing; public executions of criminals; food grain of 50 million people eaten by rats.

My rather food-fastidious wife revelled in three Chinese meals a day, but Chung found it poor.

As I write, a post card from friends visiting China arrives. I quote: "Food, sights and people remarkable. We hoped for a banquet, but didn't expect one every night."

In 1958 millions (yes, millions) died of starvation, the Mao mausoleum was "ugly", the Soviet-style buildings were "hideous".

In 1984, despite terrible shortages, two thousand (!) items increased their prices (work that one out).

Chung gives us the lot: widespread torture, raping of nuns, shopkeepers beat up customers complaining of overcharging, mothers bury new-born baby girls alive.

Nowhere in 253 pages does she acknowledge any achievements of modern China - on the rare occasion there is something approaching a compliment (that's after 200 pages), be sure the next paragraph starts "But" to neutralise it backhandedly.

Do I think Chung has lied in this book? Perhaps not, but she's happy to use every innuendo, misinterpretation, rumor, gossip and lack of historical balance and analysis to condemn a land struggling to uplift its people and find a place in a world that kept it isolated for decades as the capitalist world did for generations to the Soviet Union.