

The Women's Pages

Australian Women Journalists Since 1850

Helene Chung

Helene Chung is an Australian Chinese, fourth generation Tasmanian who, in 1974, became the first non-white reporter on Australian television. A former Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Beijing correspondent, she was also the first female posted abroad by the ABC. The product of a less than conventional childhood (except, perhaps, the bit where she attended St Mary's Catholic School for girls in Hobart) Helene's career



More information about Helene Chung can be found in the AWAP register.

in journalism began when she covered what it might be said is the quintessentially Tasmanian story, the alleged sighting of a Tasmanian Tiger. A post graduate student in history at the time, luck and family contacts led to her October 1968 appointment to interview a Sandy Bay butcher, taxi vouchers and tape reorder in hand. The following morning, the interview was broadcast on ABC radio's national program, *AM*. 'A new world opened up,' she said. 'Like a stray pup, I'd been tossed a ball by a stranger, caught it in my jaw and now, with tail wagging, I wanted to run with it.' She ran with it for thirty years, retiring formally from the ABC in 1998. In between times she worked in radio and television; she freelanced and did bureau work in Australia and abroad; for the BBC, CBS, Hong Kong radio, NPR and NZBC; in Europe, Asia and Egypt. She has been witness to, and part of, some of the major changes that have transformed Australian culture and society, from the age of assimilation to the era of multiculturalism.

Helene Chung's childhood, for better or worse, has made her what she is today. It was hard enough growing up Chinese in Hobart in the 1950s, let alone growing up the child of the first Chinese divorce in Tasmania (according to *Truth Magazine*). Compound that with the embarrassment of having a mother who earned a living through nude modelling for art students at the local technical college and who also lived with a partner who she was not married to, and one can begin to appreciate the challenges. She developed a relatively thick outer skin and dealt with her difference through

performance - life at the University of Tasmania for her was as much about acting and directing for the Old Nick Theatre group as it was about her studies, a BA (Hons) in history. She was rarely confronted by the 'limitations' created by her Asian face whilst on the stage; although they were rather rudely rammed home one year when she wasn't cast as Queen Elizabeth in the revue *Vote No*. And her Chinese identity created troubles for her as well, at times. Relatives warned her that other Asian students complained because she didn't mix with them. University days were a time when the conflict between her inner and outer selves was, perhaps, at its most pronounced.

Upon completing her undergraduate degree, Helene began an MA in history, because she was not quite sure what else it was that she wanted to do. She had a beautiful speaking voice and the capacity to teach, but was told by someone that Australian's don't want to be taught English by a Chinese person. The suggestion that she should learn Chinese in order to enhance her career opportunities was regarded as a sign of madness in the family friend who offered it. So dusty volumes of *Punch* and *Hansard* dominated her life until the Sandy Bay butcher emerged on the scene. The rest, as they say, is history.

Once she metaphorically picked up that journalists ball, she worked as a freelancer for the ABC, three mornings a week, while she completed her MA. She then worked freelance for three years overseas, in Singapore, Hong Kong, London and Cairo, and thus commenced a career characterised by a lot of firsts. In 1971 she made headlines with the first radio interview granted by Her Royal Highness The Princess Anne. (The Melbourne *Herald* account of the interview entitled it 'She Put Anne on Tape'.) Back with the ABC, she made them again in 1974 when she switched from radio to television (much to the annoyance of her then manager) and joined *This Day Tonight*, so becoming the first non-white reporter on Australian television. In 1978, she appeared on the cover of truth when a story broke about the ABC's intention to remove her from her television post, because she looked too Chinese. The plan to remove her (dubbed the 'White' plan, after Derek White, the ABC executive responsible) proved unsuccessful, as the Australian Journalists' Association and the Commissioner for Community Relations, Al Grassby, 'rattled their sabres'.

She weathered that storm and then went on to be the first woman posted abroad by the ABC, as Beijing correspondent 1983-1986. The ABC had employed women overseas before as freelancers, but they had never actually appointed someone to perform the task and the significance of this was never lost on Helene. 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.' Clearly she did a good enough job for them risk

sending other women overseas in later years.

The China posting, as well as throwing up extraordinary work opportunities, required Helene to once again confront the identity issues that had troubled her in the past, in an entirely new context. 'I arrived in China not feeling Chinese but conscious of my Chinese heritage,' she wrote some years later:

However, my role as ABC correspondent almost obliterated any identity I may have felt with the motherland of my ancestors. I never felt more Australia - and less Chinese - than when living in China: I was an alien in the motherland.

She was a foreigner, she and her husband lived as foreigners, and they were treated as foreigners. She didn't even make the category of 'overseas Chinese'. The experience made her conscious of how little she knew about her ancestry; this in turn made her realise how little she really knew about the land of her birth, and how her ancestry fitted into its history. When she returned to Australia, she and her husband spent much time tracing these roots, and the family members she had never met. She also published *Shouting From China*, which tells of her adventures and tribulations as a foreign correspondent. A 1989 edition includes her coverage of the democracy demonstrations.

In 1993, the love of her life, John Martin, died after a battle with cancer. Helene published *Gentle John My Love My Loss* in 1995 as a private memoir to help her deal with her loss. In 2004 she published an edited collection of his letters home from China, written while she was foreign correspondent, entitled, *Lazy man in China*. Since losing John and leaving journalism formally, Helene Chung has continued to write and engage with ideas and, very importantly, family. Her most recent publication, *Ching Chong China Girl: From fruitshop to foreign correspondent* is her most recent, public expression of this engagement. But be careful if you choose to read it. As Helene Chung Martin says, the book should not be read by convent girls not wearing their gloves!

NIKKI HENNINGHAM

Image

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.

Image Courtesy of the ABC radio website. 'History of ABC Foreign Correspondents'.

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/cal/chung.html>

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