

Anything but a 'lazy man' in perceptive letters

BIOGRAPHY/TRAVEL

LAZY MAN IN CHINA. By Helene Chung Martin. Pandanus Books. 232pp. \$34.95.

Reviewer: **RALPH ELLIOTT**

JOHN MARTIN may have thought of himself as a "lazy man", but he was certainly a very observant man and an inveterate letter-writer to boot. And his partner for many years, and his wife for just one year, Helene Chung, has proved herself a percipient reporter, interviewer, writer and, in the present book, compiler and editor of letters.

John's letters to family and friends, which make up the greater part of the narrative of *Lazy Man in China*, are in many cases augmented by relevant material from letters to other recipients, all sedulously recorded in Helene Chung's notes. There is a helpful list of all these correspondents, as well as a map of China and a sketch of central Beijing to assist such readers as your reviewer whose familiarity with China before, during, and since the reign of Mao Zedong does not equal that of John Martin and Helene Chung.

Not the least attraction of this book is the numerous small coloured photographs scattered among John's letters and Helene's accompanying narrative, pictures as familiar as Tiananmen Square in May 1989, as recondite as railway fast food in Zhejiang in April 1984, and as up-to-date as KFC in Shanghai today.

The substance of the book is best summed up in the opening heading "Old Peking, New Beijing", and in the contrasting aspirations of average Chinese folk in the early 1980s ("a bicycle, a watch, a fan and a sewing machine") and the emerging middle-class aspirations today ("their own apartment, a car, private education of their children, at home or abroad, and holidays throughout China or overseas").

John Martin worked at the Australian Embassy in Peking in the 1980s before



resigning to work freelance, while Helene Chung was the ABC correspondent in China, the first woman to be posted abroad for such a position. The two had met as students in Tasmania, where Helene's Chinese ancestors had settled in the 19th century. Apart from numerous perceptive observations from both about China, its places, people and customs, there are many personal comments which help to make this such an enjoyable book, like John's "China is so bloody interesting" and "Living in China is fabulous", his early impressions of the communist capital in the 1980s.

Particularly interesting are their accounts of Western politicians visiting China in the "Old Peking" days, like President Ronald Reagan, who was taken to a market which had not existed until just before his arrival and where the customers and stallholders "were all police". Among Australian visitors guided or interviewed by John and Helene were Bob and Hazel Hawke, whose arrival at the Great Hall of the People was greeted by a well-drilled squad of "poor little buggers" who had been waiting in



CHINA CORRESPONDENTS: *Helene Chung Martin, top, reporting in China. Above, KFC in Shanghai. Left, John Martin, the "lazy man".*

below-freezing temperatures for the official car to arrive. Another visiting couple were Joh and Flo Bjelke-Petersen, whose CAAC Ilyushin landed with a thud in thick fog, making poor Flo "flutter and think of God". But distinguished visitors and tourists did not see the real China in those relatively early days; they were just raced around, like Reagan from one cooked-up situation to another.

Not so John Martin, however, who travelled to Shanghai and Canton as well as popping across the border to Hong Kong. And he went to Zhejiang in the east and Sichuan in the west and to Hunan between the two. When presented with extortionate bills he had willy-nilly to pay them in order to retrieve his confiscated plane ticket. Yet, when the pair finally left China in July 1986, it was nonetheless with a curious sense of loss. As John wrote, it had been "the most secure yet the most hostile, the most exotic

yet the most dreary, the most stimulating yet the most depressing experience of my life". China's majesty and squalor, its virtue and injustice, its beauty and horror, had caught them both in its spell.

Back in Melbourne, Martin fell seriously ill with a cancer that finally killed him, aged 59, in September 1993. Helene Chung Martin, as she now was, continues the story under the new heading "Old Communism, New Capitalism", describing the changes which ranged from mahjong-playing now no longer banned to the 6000 foreign companies now represented in Beijing, and to the Western-style supermarkets offering countless European and Australian products to their customers in 2002. Shanghai, moreover, with its glamour of gangsters and glitz, its skyscrapers and neon lights, visibly embodies the new China which now rivals the West in its inescapable "frenzy of consumerism", with which we in Australia are all too familiar.

As Helene returns to China to revisit places associated with John, she notes embryonic forms of democracy in village elections, but she is also aware of massive unemployment, of environmental degradation as the famous Yellow River is drying up and the desert keeps encroaching due to deforestation, and of the widening gap between the new rich and the new poor, some 90 million of the latter, many of them disabled or living in the inhospitable hinterland.

Others have written about China today, but *Lazy Man in China* records the experiences and impressions of two discerning and talented observers during the past 20 years in a manner that is both memorable and thoroughly diverting, not least with the help of its many apt illustrations. This is, as Australia's first ambassador to the People's Republic of China has pithily remarked, "a book you read through in one go", a fascinating, beautifully produced book.

Ralph Elliott is a professor of English.