This is the author’s radio script of this article.


Helene Chung was the first non-European reporter on ABC television. Her memoir, Ching Chong China Girl, recounts an unconventional childhood and a career not planned or chosen but nevertheless thoroughly enjoyed.

The granddaughter of one of the Chinese miners who travelled to Tasmania in 1901 to work in the tin mines, Chung grew up in Hobart speaking only English. She and her sister attended a catholic school, where, apart from a cousin, they were the only Chinese students. Routine schoolyard taunts of ‘ching chong chinaman’ aside, she encountered surprisingly little racism, so little in fact that she was surprised and hurt to be rejected for the role of Queen Elizabeth in a university revue. She was threatened with the sack by the ABC in 1973 because of her Asian face, but a complaint to the union and intervention by Al Grassby soon reversed that decision. She went on to become the ABC’s Beijing correspondent in the 1980s, though she still hadn’t learned Chinese and needed an interpreter. It was her sister Lehene who encountered life-wrecking racism, prevented from marrying the father of her child by his parents, and giving up her baby for adoption. Helene herself seems to have lived a fairly charmed life.

Ching Chong China Girl has a strangely disjointed air about it. The story isn’t told chronologically, but in short chapters which jump about the years in a rather confusing way. Even within these short chapters continuity is often a problem, with isolated anecdotes of obscure significance and lengthy digressions interrupting
flow of the narrative. Chung often makes a dramatic foreshadowing statement like, ‘I could never have guessed the repercussions that school bus would have on my life,’ without ever explaining exactly what those consequences were. And given this is a personal, rather than professional, memoir, she’s strangely coy about some aspects of her private life. She knew the war correspondent Neil Davis, and says she ‘felt the buzz of mutual attraction’ with him. But when she visited Singapore at his invitation she says he vacated the master bedroom for her: in 1970 this seems unlikely for two liberated, young, unattached people. There’s a strong feeling that much is being left unsaid, which is reinforced when she finally relates Lehene’s tragic story, three decades late. Other incidents are related in an oddly flippant and disjointed manner, too. Chung admired and liked her mother’s lover, Rex, an ABC radio presenter. He telephoned once ‘at midnight sounding desperate: “I’m going to kill myself.” Up we raced in the MG to find him charming and perfectly contented.’ And that’s it, with no explanation or context.

So despite Chung’s obvious grief at the early deaths of her husband and sister, she has little interesting hardship to report: if anything, she was rather spoiled as a child. Although her mother was divorced and not well off, there was a strong family network and she was able to go to university. Her views are not profound: she has a tendency to judge by appearances and often spends more time describing food and clothes than characters, and though she might hint at marital troubles and family secrets, she shies away from a candid account of anything unpleasant in her past. Too much is left out, and as a result Ching Chong China Girl is a superficial and uninspiring memoir.