Warning: this article is not to be read by convent girls not wearing their gloves.

I wish to thank my parents, my mother, Dorothy, and my father, Charles, not for my birth but for their divorce that catapulted me at sixteen months into the challenging childhood that made me what I am. The first Chinese divorce splashed over Tasmania's muck-raking 'Abloid Truth. Women whispered as Dorothy approached. With bosoms puffed, they gaped at her from under the brims of their hats. Even those she had thought of as friends disappeared into shops, or scurried across the street, bringing Hillman cars screeching to a halt. She was beyond the pale. This was Hobart, not Hollywood.

Six decades later the Western world's first Mandarin-speaking leader, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, would govern Australia. When he assumed office in 2007 the country included some 750,000 Chinese-Australians. Australians of Chinese ancestry make up 3.4 per cent of the resident population, and Chinese (in the form of Mandarin, Cantonese or a dialect) is the most spoken language after English in Australian homes, according to the 2006 census. However, over the years I've described myself as an Australian Chinese rather than a Chinese Australian. Like all my generation of Australian-born Chinese (ABC's), I grew up known as an Australian Chinese, a term that stresses my Chinese ethnic background over my Australian birth. I support the new term, Chinese Australian, for Chinese Australian recognises that I, like other Asian Australians, am equally Australian as are white, Anglo-Celtic Australians. Some of them – complete strangers to me – now stop me in the street, just to practise their Chinese, 'Ni hao'. I can step from my house in inner Melbourne onto the front verandah and see and hear passers-by, mostly speaking English but sometimes Mandarin or Cantonese or my ancestral dialect of Tonishanese. That hasn't always been so.

The question I've been asked most often is 'Where do you come from?'. So let me take you back to where I come from: the Tasmanian capital, Hobart, in the 1950s about the size of Ballarat today. At my school, St Mary's College, our history lessons began with William the Conqueror and the Battle of Hastings in 1066. We saw Tasmania as a little part of England, salted with white skins of Anglo-Celtic origin and lightly peppered with New Australians from continental Europe. The island's Aborigines had been exterminated, we learnt from our teachers and our textbooks (never imagining that half a century later the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery would note in its display of indigenous Tasmanians that thousands claim to be of Aboriginal heritage). At every event and every film during my school days we all rose from our seats for the national anthem, 'God Save the Queen'.

When my mother broke into Chinese in front of my friends, I wanted to die. I withered with embarrassment. Anyone heard speaking a language other than English aroused suspicion; people stared as though watching freaks on show under the circus tent. So, although I'm told I was fluent in Chinese up until the age of three when my Chinese-born grandmother died, the language became a hindrance when I began school. After another five-year-old told me 'My mummy says I can't play with you because you're Chinese', I came to realise that being Chinese wasn't the best thing to be. Unlike my mother, who was daily tormented with 'Ching Chong Chinaman' in 1930s Hobart, the taunting I received at St Mary's College didn't last all that long. The nuns kept things under control and my sister, Lehene, and I were made to feel part of the school.

In retrospect I realise that subconsciously and consciously I rejected my Chineseness. I never looked at myself in the mirror and saw a Chinese looking at me. I never felt Chinese, however that may feel. Yet I felt different – an outsider, way outside the norm. I don't remember speaking Chinese as a child, and though I understood what was said in Chinese, as time passed I understood less and less. When I was about to leave school and wondered what to do, my mother's partner made a suggestion. Then, the term 'partner' didn't exist for what was condemned as 'living in sin'. Anyway, Rex Walden, a foreign devil New Zealand-born radio announcer with a rich golden voice, suggested: 'You're Chinese. You should be able to speak Chinese. You could go to Canberra to learn Chinese, and maybe join foreign affairs or the Chinese service of Radio Australia'.

I was horrified. I couldn't help my Chinese face. Everyone asked, 'Where do you come from?'. At least I could forestall the slowly enunciated, 'Do you speak English?' by opening my mouth. I had to assimilate. Being Chinese made me peculiar enough. Why learn to speak Chinese? 'That's crazy,' I retorted. 'Learning Chinese is the last thing I want to do'.

So, even as Rudd wowed the world with his Mandarin, I couldn't advance much beyond 'Wo bu hui shuo Zhongguo hua' – 'I can't speak Chinese'.

My mother's occupation also put me outside the norm. The nuns knew she went to Hobart Technica College because one day when I was nine, and Sister Lawrence was organising Christmas celebrations, she pointed her chalk at me, 'Your mother's at tech; she can paint the Nativity scene'.

Mortified, I felt fifty pairs of eyes from row upon row of girls in green peering at me. A wave of heat rolled down from under my black fringe. My mind whirled. I glanced up at the blackboard. Sister Lawrence had added to the list of words which now read: Cards, Cards, Citi, Enactment, Nativity Painting. My mother was at Hobart Technical College. She went there each Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. But she could no more paint than I could. I loved squeezing the oils and watching them ooze with their smell from the tubes onto the page, or onto my glass palette where I mixed them before dabbing on colours with a knife or a brush. It was fun playing around at home à la Jackson Pollock long before I knew his name. But a picture of the Virgin Mary clad modestly in her long flowing blue veil and Joseph in his dark brownish tones with the
infant Jesus being born in a stable at Bethlehem? I could never paint that. Mama could never paint that. She was no draughtsman; she couldn’t draw. She was drawn. She was an artist’s model. That’s what she was at tech. How could I explain that to Sister Lawrence? ‘Full figure’ it was called. Without any clothes. She modelled nude. As if it wasn’t enough for Lehene and me to be the only Chinese, the only ones with divorced parents, our mother had to be a nude model.

What’s more, she rejected her married name, Mrs. Chung, and insisted on using her maiden name, Miss Henry. The only others called Miss were either young unmarried ladies or spinsters. From my Enid Blyton books, I knew spinsters were shrivelled old women who lived with cats. They carried baskets, wore bonnets, and acted queer. Miss Henry carried no basket. At a time when few women drove, and then usually a Holden car, Miss Henry delivered our lunch while seated behind the wheel of an open-top sports car, a red MG, which she drove right up into the school grounds.

Not until 1993 did I dare speak of my idiosyncratic childhood for the first time in public, at the 126th anniversary dinner of St Mary’s College at Wrest Point Convention Centre. Even then, my sister, approaching 50, relived the pang of the past. As I stepped down from the stage to laughter and applause, and compliments from nuns, Mama, and John, Lehene had accusation in her eyes: ‘Did you have to mention the artist’s model? And the red MG?’

Lehene had joined me in London in 1972, stayed on and married a rather formal English businessman and was on only her third return visit Down Under. She wasn’t abreast of the changes that had transformed Australia in the two decades of her absence. By 1993 not even Catholics were shocked by divorce.

For my part, I dealt with being different by developing an independent streak, an outer shield to protect myself from racial taunt and the stain of my family. I not only taught spoken English when I left school, despite my uncle’s warning, ‘Australians won’t want to learn English from a Chinese’ – which proved wrong. But at school and university I took refuge on stage to act out roles more acceptable than my Chinese self. In my first uni revue I was typocast as a Japanese car, a Datsun Bluebird, like Madame Butterfly in a blue kimono; fluttering a fan, I flitted across the stage and away into the wings. I auditioned fairly confident of the role of Queen Elizabeth on royal tour in Tasmania and was hurt when rejected; it made me realise the limitations of my Chinese face. Just as no female in the sixties could perform as Julius Caesar, no Oriental could pass as one of the merry wives of Windsor. (I didn’t mention this setback when, at Buckingham Palace in 1971, the queen’s daughter, HRH The Princess Anne, granted me her first radio interview.)

My uncle Gordon Henry, Tasmania’s honorary Chinese consul (for the Republic of China, Taiwan) added to the conflict between my inner and outer selves when he took me to task: ‘The Asian students complain you don’t mix with them’.

That astonished me.

Australian universities as well as some schools are today subsidised by 374,000 fee-paying overseas students, especially from China (114,000 in early 2011) and India (46,000), who are enrolled in a range of disciplines. New visa regulations, the high Australian dollar and a series of vicious – and sometimes fatal and in part racially motivated – assaults against Indians from 2007 are among factors that reduced Australia’s appeal to the lucrative international education sector. Yet despite the dramatic 30 per cent decline in Indian enrolments in the year to February 2011, the increase in Chinese, Malaysian, Vietnamese, and other students from abroad left the overall decrease at 2.5 per cent. Crowded inner cities like Melbourne still waft with Asian student apartments, dumpling inns, satay bars, and curry corners.

By contrast, in the 1960s the University of Tasmania’s small campus had very few non-Westerners and they were mostly on Colombo Plan scholarships; these students were selected from South East Asian countries and concentrated on economics and commerce. I saw them as Asian and different from me. If we chanced on each other, naturally I said hello, but it never occurred to me to seek out someone on the basis of race. I associated with those who shared my interests in the arts, mainly members of the Old Nick [Theatre] Company. Had there been another Asian in Old Nick, we may have grown close, drawn together not by our ethnic origins but by the stage. Like a banana, I deceived: my Asian body masked my Western soul. My yellow skin had to be peeled back before anyone could taste my white flesh.

Unlike me, my shy and supersensitive sister retreated into herself and never fully overcame the embarrassment of childhood. In the bitter-sweet winter before she died in London in New Year’s Day 2001, Lehene surprised me. ‘Miss Henry!’ she mimicked softly through a gently mocking smile. ‘Miss Henry! You know, now when I think about that, I realise the other girls must have thought we were illegitimate!’

‘Illegitimacy’ and ‘Ching Chong Chinaman’ are expressions not heard so much today – a sign of how society has changed its attitudes to sex, race, religion, and gender. Now that Australia has experienced the multicultural Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) it’s almost surreal to recall my experience as the first non-white reporter on the Australian box. There are numerous Asian faces and names as academics, scientists, reporters, commentators or advertising models; and federal governments that have included the Malaysian-born daughter of a Chinese father and Australian mother, Climate Change and then Finance Minister Penny Wong, who has been open about her lesbian partner.

When in October 1974 the then Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC and now a corporation) appointed me as a television reporter on the current affairs show, This Day Tonight (TDT), now 7.30, the ABC acted ahead of its time. SBS didn’t exist and wouldn’t begin for another six years; Indonesian-born Singaporean Chinese Lee Lin Chin wouldn’t present its weekend news until 1988; while Queensland-born ethnic Chinese Annette Shun Wah wouldn’t gain prominence as presenter of the ABC’s Big Picture until 1993.

My transfer from ABC radio Sydney (as a reporter on AM and PM and compere of Correspondents Report) to ABC TV Hobart gave rise to a handful of racist mail but I saw none of it. My executive producer Brian Taylor referred to the mail but not once suggested he show me a letter. Nor did it occur to me to ask. I thrived in my job and had learned from childhood to roll with racist punches. Similarly, after I switched in 1977 to TDT Melbourne, where one of the reporting team routinely took telephone calls while the programme aired, I didn’t argue against any disparagement of me on racial grounds when I happened to be noting the audience response.
Although the ABC supported me against external vilification, its top brass proved slow to defend me against internal attack. In 1978 ABC current affairs underwent one of its periodic programme changes, this one under a new chief, Derek White, who had inherited me along with the TDT theme and logo. He flew from Sydney to Melbourne and I went into my executive producer Damien Ryan’s office for a private meeting with them both. I was curious to learn about my role in the replacement program, Nationwide.

I came out of that office stunned. So humiliated was I by what I’d heard that I could tell no one. Only at home that night did I unburden myself to my partner, John Martin (a Tasmanian foreign devil). ‘That’s outrageous. You’ve got to contact the union.’ Apart from that, I told no one.

A week later, on Friday 28 July I slipped down the stairs of our block of flats on Queens Road for the milk and morning papers, only to be horrified: on the counter of the milk bar a picture of my own face stared up at me from the front page of the muckraking Truth. ‘GIRL REPORTER COMPLAINS. RACE ROW AT ABC – PAGE 3.’

Under the page 3 banner of that Melbourne, Saturday 29 July edition – ‘THERE’S ALWAYS MORE NEWS IN YOUR TRUTH … THERE’S ALWAYS’ – a beautiful, well-upholstered brunette, nude except for make-up and nail polish and a revealing cloth tied around her loins and knotted to draw the eye down to her pubic folds – ‘The loveliest girls are in your Truth, GORGEOUS DENISE!’ – was the story: ‘TDT GIRL CLAIMS ABC RACE SLUR. Television reporter complains to union. EXCLUSIVE REPORT BY ADRIAN TAME’.

A reporter on the ABC’s This Day Tonight show claims an ABC official told her she has no future in television because of her Asian appearance.

Helene Chung, 33, also claims that a high-ranking official told her to stop wearing make-up because it accentuated her narrow eyes.

Miss Chung has complained to the Australian Journalists’ Association about the racial nature of the statements ...

And so on. The ABC took six months to settle the case before the White plan to banish me disappeared, largely due to the sabre-rattling of the flamboyant Commissioner for Community Relations, Al Grassby. On 7 August, in a letter to Talbot Duckmanton, ABC general manager, I asked a question suggested by John: ‘whether or not the views expressed by Mr White are endorsed by Management and/or the Commission?’

After trying to dodge, on 1 February 1979 in a brief letter to Grassby (which Grassby photocopied for me) Duckmanton finally declared:

It is acknowledged that Miss Chung had cause to be concerned by the comments made to her by Mr Derek White on 21 July 1978 and that in making these comments Mr White was not adhering to the Commission’s policy.

Ironically, in the enlightened 1990s I came under White’s charge again, as one of the multitude of so-called ethnics, especially Asians, at Radio Australia. Here staff not only regarded White as fair but applauded his valiant attempt to save the overseas service when the Howard government’s axe hovered in 1997. Alas, the axe fall.

Meanwhile, back in 1978 I continued as a reporter on TV – for another five years – until I applied for the position of ABC correspondent, Tokyo. To ready myself I soaked in Japanese politics, society and trade statistics and was interviewed over the phone during an oppressive Canberra summer while in the midst of an intensive Japanese language course.

‘What are the four main islands of Japan?’ one of four commanders (all male) in Sydney fired the first question.

How silly. How could anyone apply for Tokyo and not know that? I reeled off ‘Honshu, Hokkaido, Shikoku and Kyushu.’

When rejected, I was disappointed, naturally, but not surprised: as I’d been rejected for every other position for which I’d formally applied ever since being rejected as a current affairs trainee in 1969.

On that occasion, bigwig mainlander Murray Gordon, on his round of hopefuls in every state, told me in Tasmania: ‘You’re as good as some of the best boys. But of course, you have to understand that, all things being equal, if we have to make a choice between a boy and a girl, we’d have to give preference to the boy because you’re going to go and get married and all the training would be wasted’.

I sat nodding in agreement.

Although rejected – with no girl appointed – I had luck on my side. There happened to be a vacancy for a reporter in Hobart – talks officer grade 1 – and departmental head David Wilson, who had already guided me through some freelance reporting, suggested that I act in the position. So, as a trainee reject I suddenly found myself on a rung above a trainee.

Five years later I had the temerity to apply for a position overseas, as one of several correspondents in the ABC London bureau, which then also covered the Middle East. By 1974 I
had freelanced for three years abroad – in Hong Kong, London and Cairo – and had returned to Sydney as one of the juniors to be intimidated by radio current affairs kingpin Russell Warner.

As chair of the assessment panel flanking him, he towered from behind his desk, a billowing cloud of smoke rising from his pipe, and threw me a curly one: ‘How would you, as a woman, manage if stranded in the desert in a ten-ton truck?’

Images of sand stretching evermore into the distance flashed through my mind, as did the gallantry I’d encountered in Egypt. ‘I’d have a better chance than a man because I could ask men to shift the truck.’

That didn’t land me London.

Nine years on, just after being rejected for the role of Tokyo correspondent, I was suddenly plucked and plummeted to Peking – with neither interview nor preparation. As Peking correspondent, as I was called in 1983, I became the first female posted abroad by the ABC.

Fortunately, I’d overcome my abhorrence of the idea of learning to speak Chinese, so during a hectic week in Sydney with administrative, financial, technical and programme boffins, I won approval for what I considered essential: a six-week intensive language course at the University of Hong Kong, with its modern language laboratory and prized reputation for teaching Mandarin to people whose first language is English. Experts had warned me against learning in Peking because, unlike Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the West, the then woefully backward China had no language laboratory or systematic training method for beginners.

As QF1 soared into the sky, I nestled myself in business class for the first time, took a deep breath and closed my eyes. In my ears rang the warning of a nervous news chief: ‘There’s a lot riding on your appointment.’ I knew that if I failed or proved difficult, it would be a long time before the ABC risked another girl on the boys’ playing field.

While winging my way up in those clouds more than a generation ago, I didn’t foresee a world with thirteen ABC overseas bureaux in which half of the correspondents would be women: Emma Alberici and Rachel Brown in London, Helen Brown in Jakarta, Anne Barker in Jerusalem, Zoe Daniel in Bangkok, Huay Fern Tay in Beijing, Lisa Miller and Jane Cowan in Washington, Sally Sara in Kabul, Ginny Stein in Johannesburg, and Dominic Schwartz in Auckland.

I faced the first test of my appointment during a Singapore stopover to meet Asia manager Peter Hollinshead. I would later be indebted to him for his support of my total refurbishment of the dilapidated decade-old Peking bureau (opened by Paul Raffaele in 1973) for ‘the last shoot out at the OK Corral’. By telex he justified all our expenditure to the Sydney clerks whom he colourfully called ‘the most gutless pack of ABC administrators it has been my misfortune to encounter’. My misfortune was to have been so gutless at our first encounter.

Surprised to learn of my full-time Mandarin course in Hong Kong, he picked up the phone, not to Sydney, but to Peking. ‘So, Richard, what do you reckon?’

My heart sank as I sat listening to Hollinshead’s side of his conversation with the outgoing correspondent.

‘Peking Language Institute? … Recommended by the ambassador’s wife? … Yeah, makes much more sense. Then you wouldn’t have to stick around for another six weeks.’

It transpired that Richard Thwaites, fluent in Mandarin as a Melbourne University honours graduate in Chinese, after five years in Peking understandably had no desire to endure another sweltering summer, especially with only clapped-out air-conditioners at his disposal.

‘So, you heard that.’ My new boss turned to me. ‘Better to study in Peking, not Hong Kong. But you can still study full time. No need to report unless JC reappears.’

Although little comforted by the knowledge that I need report only a major story – such as the death of China’s strongman Deng Xiaoping – I was mindful of what was riding on my appointment. I had little choice but to be carried along.

‘Let’s get to that fish-head curry.’ He led me out into Singapore’s sultry air.

The Peking language course proved to be as intense as a limp rag. It taught me much about China’s socialist inefficiency but minimal Mandarin. Foreign diplomats laughed it off as a joke, the most fluent of them having studied full time in Hong Kong, Taiwan or elsewhere abroad for years. The course added flair to Mandarin already acquired systematically outside China and helped beginners with oodles of spare time to learn slowly in a Mandarin environment but, compared with my intensive Japanese language course in Canberra, it was as a donkey to a jet plane. Marney Dunn, the ambassador’s wife, afterwards agreed it was unsuited to my purpose: to learn the maximum spoken Chinese in minimum time. My account of the course so appalled Ken Myer, the new ABC chairman on a visit to Peking,
he shot off a telex to Sydney: ‘The same mistake must never be made again’.

Even though the saviour Jesus Christ didn’t materialise, I had no full-time Mandarin and news priorities ensured that I would never reach the stage I had in Japanese before I abandoned it to rush to China. Still, the bullet train to Beijing, with all the motherland’s splendid horrors, cruel injustices and squalid beauty, set John and me on the adventure of our lives. To the foreign-devil mandarins who installed the Tasmanian tigress on the Dragon Throne, arigsto gozaimasu.

I landed in China not feeling Chinese but conscious of my Chinese heritage. Yet my role as ABC correspondent almost obliterated any identity I may have felt with the motherland of my ancestors. In China I never felt more Australian and less Chinese. I was treated as a foreigner, housed behind walls in a foreign diplomatic compound and, in that era of apartheid when fraternisation between foreigners – especially foreign correspondents – and locals was discouraged and locals weren’t admitted into the top hotels and other foreign enclaves, I was kept apart from ordinary Chinese. My government-assigned interpreter, Old Fan, was forbidden to tell me where he lived or to divulge the telephone number of his apartment block. Before the advent of mobile phones – let alone those made in China – telephone numbers were ‘state secrets’ while only the ruling elite had private phones. And I was charged high foreigners’ prices. Just as I’d been out of place as a child in Hobart, I was out of place as an adult when I lived in China. I was an alien in the motherland.

My foreign appearance caused trouble on my first visit to the Great Wall of China. At the residence of the Australian ambassador HE Hugh Dunn, I met a young local Chinese named Xiaoli, who owed her presence at the function to her foreign husband, a Ghanaian Chinese. The couple not only gave me a rare glimpse into ordinary Chinese life and the tiny two-roomed home they shared with Xiaoli’s parents but escorted me on my first outing beyond Beijing.

‘You should sit on the camel and have your photograph taken against the wall,’ Xiaoli enthused, while Trevor handed over the usual one yuan (A$0.50).

As hordes of local Chinese paced the ramps in their dark blue baggy pants and jackets – Mao suits – amid People’s Liberation Army soldiers in their olive green uniforms, the camel controller sized me up in my tailored brown velvet pantsuit and white shirt under shoulder-length blow-waved hair and makeup. With red painted nails, my hands gripped the reins as I heard him ask, ‘What’s your nationality?’

‘She’s Chinese, from Australia,’ Xiaoli jumped to answer.

‘She’s a foreigner. So she should pay four yuan.’

I was happy to pay but my friends were outraged. So erupted a great row at the Great Wall, much to the amusement of sightseers who leaned over the wall to watch. My friends eventually compromised by paying two yuan – the overseas Chinese price – for me to be photographed sitting on the camel at the Great Wall of China. This was the only time during my three-year posting when I evaded the top foreigners’ price. Now, the triple-tier price system has gone.

In December 1984 John and I joined a Foreign Affairs-sponsored journalists’ tour of south-eastern Fujian Province, Tasmania’s sister state, which occupies a narrow coastal strip along the Taiwan Strait that separates the People’s Republic of China from the rival Republic of China on the island of Taiwan. In an effort to promote investment and tourism, billboards proclaimed: FUJIAN AND TAIWAN ARE BROTHERS and WELCOME OVERSEAS CHINESE TO TAKE PART IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MOTHERLAND.

In a meeting with the city fathers, Deputy Mayor Peng revealed a new policy towards overseas Chinese: ‘Fujian is implementing the policy of preferential half-price air tickets for overseas Chinese’.

‘Who are overseas Chinese?’ We clamoured to know.

‘They are ethnic Chinese born overseas, including in South-East Asia, Australia and America.’

I took note. I’d always paid the top foreigners’ rate and completed forms classifying me as a foreigner – until Fuzhou, where, like my ethnic Chinese colleague, Singaporean-born Mary Lee of the Times, I was given a form different from those distributed to John and the others.

‘Because you and Miss Lee are overseas Chinese,’ an official explained.

At our final destination, the fascinating port city of Amoy (Xiamen), opened to the West during the Opium Wars and developed largely through overseas Chinese funds, we booked into the Overseas Chinese Hotel. When time came to fly back to Peking, Mary and I put the new policy to the test and tried to buy the special half-price fares for overseas Chinese.

‘Your passport shows you’re Australian,’ barked the travel officer.

‘And you’re Singaporean,’ he glared at Mary.
Who are overseas Chinese? I asked.

Chinese citizens who are overseas, came the surprise answer. Almost no Chinese could afford or was allowed to travel abroad except on a government-sponsored scheme. The rush of Chinese students abroad was yet to come while Chinese tourists didn’t exist.

Well, who are the twenty million overseas Chinese you want to invest in the motherland?

The cadre invented an entirely new category. 'They are foreign overseas Chinese.

I was furious, and bemused by the verbal gymnastics.

Just after Mary and I forked out the full foreigners’ price, one of our Chinese hosts asked Mary, whose parents had been born in Fujian, 'Have you been to your home village like the other overseas Chinese?'

But I’m not an overseas Chinese.'

Chinese officials, including Communist Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang, weren't surprised I didn’t speak Mandarin, because even if overseas Chinese did speak Chinese, it was usually Cantonese, which is only spoken in the south, the traditional home of overseas Chinese, not in the north, including the national capital, Beijing. Like most early Victorian and Tasmanian Chinese, my forebears on both sides were born in the Four Counties District – two-to-three days (but now only an hour on the freeway) from Canton (Guangzhou), capital of Guangdong Province.

On assignment to the Four Counties to cover continuing links between Australian Chinese and their families in China, I was accompanied by Lu Jian, a Cantonese and Mandarin-speaking official from Canton, and ABC cameraman Willi Phua, who was fluent in Mandarin, Cantonese, Hainanese, Hokkien and Teochiu. Yet neither Guangdong native could speak my ancestral dialect, Toishanese. I needed a local interpreter. And as soon as I heard Toishanese I was swept back to childhood. Phrases like gnit, gnee, thim, thlee (one, two, three, four), Gnum m gnum? (Will it do or won’t it?) and the exclamation Aivy! (Wow! or Watch out! or Well, I never!) sounded familiar to me. I’d not heard them elsewhere in China.

To ease my way through the labyrinth of negotiations by telex, long-delayed post and shouting over the chronic hiss and crackle of China’s telephone lines, I’d mentioned to Lu Jian (who arranged my trip) that my family came from Toishan County’s Dragon Field Village – Loong Hen Lee. I had no idea what trouble the name of that village would cause.

After hours of bumping from Canton in a hot minibus and twice crossing by ferry over tributaries of the Pearl River, we reached our destination where the tall, swarthy Toishan interpreter, Chen, bubbled with excitement: 'We’ve found forty Dragon Field Villages and fourteen that include the clan name Chung, but none with any links overseas, let alone Australia'.

'Chung?' I queried. 'Oh, I'm sorry. When I said my family comes from Toishan, I meant my mother's family, the Henrys, whose original name was Gin, not my father's family, the Chungs. I didn't know you were looking for my family links.'

'Never mind,' he shrugged. 'I suppose we should have checked. We wanted to surprise you.'

That he did. Chen had organised a family of Chungs in a Dragon Field Village in the remote south of Toishan to expect the visit of a very distant relative from Aozhou. I had to play the part.

As we jogged in suffocating heat in a minivan, the varied nineteenth and twentieth-century stone architecture and paved roads of Toishan City gave way to crude ramshackle structures and mud tracks. Rice paddies stretched into the distance and labourers wearing conical hats and harnessed to buffaloes ploughed the soil. Cyclists bore loads of bok choy, piled to the sky. They balanced cages of birds, whose feathers fluttered behind bamboo bars. Slaughtered pigs slumped over rear wheels. We stopped at various points as we continued on to the impecunious south until, finally, at Sam Ging (Deep Well District), our van skidded to a halt in the dirt.

In front of a row of grimy brick dwellings, the entire village of 400 men, women, and children stood waiting to welcome me. None had ever dared venture beyond a mile or so from the village or ever been in a motorcar. They had no television and had never seen a cameraman with his tripod, lights and other equipment, or anyone as exotic as me: not of the East or of the West. As I stepped from the van, I felt a wave of awe sweep from the crowd.

Surrounded by gawking locals, I shook hands with the oldest member of the village, Mrs Chung, a dignified 84-year-old woman. Wearing loose-fitting black trousers and a top with a Mandarin collar, she shuffled with the aid of a walking stick as high as her bosom. Her face was crumpled and dark, her hair limp and grey. Pushed by the crowd, we were both swept up the lane and into her home, a hovel begrimed by the years. We were seated on plastic chairs and served steaming hot tea. As beads of perspiration spread over my face, a teenage girl with a wide smile stood fanning me with a large palm frond. The absenso of an electric fan – the most basic electrical appliance

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Figure 4 Map of Tasmanian-Chinese Homeland, Four Counties, Guangdong, China (Source: author).
- underlined the family's lack of overseas links. Long before China became the world's manufacturing centre when 'Made in China' labels would dominate Western homes, the country's airport luggage conveyor belts groaned with the television sets and other luxuries of visiting overseas Chinese who arrived laden with gifts for their deprived and demanding relatives.

While Chen translated the words of the matriarch, the others crushed through the door, edging as close to me as they could. 'Long before I was born,' Mrs Chung recalled, her speech hissing through gaps in her teeth, 'my father went off to the red-haired devil land. After he left, my mother gave birth to my brother. After my father returned I was born. Then he went back and settled in the red-haired devil land.'

'But which foreign land?' I asked. 'Aozhou, Yinghuo, Meigu [Australia, England, America] or somewhere else?'

'I don't know,' she shook her head. Then, pointing in the direction of the South China Sea, 'All I know is he went off to the red-haired devil land.'

![Figure 5 Helene Chung with a Chung family all unrelated to her. Toishan, 1984 (Source: Will Phua).](image)

Outside again, I stood for a group photograph, my right arm intertwined with that of Mrs Chung senior, supported by her stick, and my left arm intertwined with that of Mrs Chung junior, a babe in her other arm and a toddler at her feet, and with all the other Chungs, not one of whom was related to me, though neither they nor I were so impolite as to mention this. And why would they? I'd broken the daily monotony in this Dragon Field Village.

As light faded, we bounced from one Dragon Field Village to another. Intent on finding a family named Gin, the uncoordinated Chen took us to the soggy south of Toishan to Man Churn (Man Family District), over 50 miles from the centre, a rundown pigsty of a village where we were not expected. No synthetic table, no set of plastic chairs and no steaming pot of tea awaited us. Amid the grunting of pigs and their droppings in the rice straw, I no more than they knew where sty ended and homes began. Anchored in slush, I stood surrounded by open-mouthed villagers, while Chen rushed about in search of an elder.

Suddenly, with elder in tow and full of enthusiasm, Chen reappeared. 'He's heard of some Gins in an adjoining Dragon Field Village.'

With trepidation and a gaggle of village youngsters, Willi Phua, Lu Jian, other officials, Chen and I tagged the Pied Piper, as he led us down a squalid track and across a bridge. In near darkness, the elder halted to point to a stone inscribed, Dragon Field. We trailed him through the remains of an abandoned village while he recalled: 'An elaborate house was built here. A house built on remnants from overseas. But this is a low-lying area, close to the South China Sea. From time to time it's flooded.' He stopped, searching with his eyes as we searched him. 'The house has been destroyed. I think it was owned by a family called Gin'.

The elder knew of no specific overseas or Australian link. Defeated, disappointed and tired, we drove off, without lights, a practice designed to preserve the weak batteries of Chinese-made vehicles, but blasting our horn into the blackness of night.

Only after my return to Australia did I learn that my mother's Dragon Field Village is in San Fou (Three Unidos District), close to Toishan City. In the 1880s my great-grandfather Gin jog-trotted out of Toishan with other villagers set for the arduous journey via Canton to the Tasmanian tin fields. In 1901, the year of Australia's birth as a nation and the year the White Australia policy was born, his 16-year old son, Gin Chung, followed in his father's footsteps. There, in Tasmania's northeast mining district of Weldonborough, he discovered why his mother had struggled over the years without any remittances from abroad. Like many miners in the harsh loneliness of the camp, his father had become an opium addict. His son shunned the pipe and worked tirelessly, saving enough from his meagre wages to send his father home to die in Toishan. Only in the motherland can a Chinese spirit rest in peace.

When mining declined, the enterprising Gin Chung – my grandfather – took to market gardening in Launcastor, then ventured south to Hobart, opened a laundry, branched into
OBITUARY

Mr. Gen Chung Henry

Mr. Gen Chung Henry, a leading member of the Chinese community in Hobart, died at the age of 68 years at Hobart on Monday, Mr. Henry came to Tasmania when he was 14 years old, and began work as a market gardener. Subsequently he was a shop assistant, and eventually set up his own business in Elizabeth St, where he engaged in the tobaco and fancy goods trade. He opened a branch store in 1907 and in 1927 entered the fruit trade. On returning from China in 1934 he eventually conducted a fruit business in Liverpool St.

A keen, energetic business man, Mr. Henry was well-known for his kindliness and charity. He was president of the Tasmanian branch of the Kuo Min Tang (Chinese Nationalist Party), and gained complete mastery of the English language by diligence and perseverance. He leaves a wife and family of two sons and four daughters.

The funeral will take place at 2.30 p.m. today.

Figure 7 Gen Chung Henry Obituary, The Mercury, February 1941 (Source: Mercury 5 February 1941).

Wholesale Merchants and Provedores into the early twenty-first century, when they too sold their business but allowed the new owners to operate under the name of Chung Fruit Market.

Twenty years after my adventures in Toishan, when researching my memoir Ching Chong China Girl I learnt from my Chinese-born half-brother, Christopher, that he grew up knowing about Lehene and me. He surprised me by producing photographs of us as infants that had made their way to the Chung household in Sunwei Lehene, at twelve months, is at the piano in Hobart and I, at six months, am in Brisbane in my mother's lap with

Figure 8 Ching Chong China Girl (2008) by Helene Chung (Source: ABC Books).

My Chung family village, Ping Kong (Undulating Land), lies in Toishan’s neighbouring county of Sunwei, which my paternal grandfather left in the 1880s, aged 23, to make his fortune in Tasmania and New Zealand. Over six decades as a market gardener and fruiterer, Willi Chung Sing voyaged to and from the motherland and built a two-storey brick home in Sunwei City, where his youngest son – my father, Pak Koon – was born. As a lad of 12 he enrolled at St Virgil’s College, Hobart, and became known simply as Charles Chung. He had joined his brothers in the family firm, Ah Ham & Co., when, as a handsome Brylcreemed young man, he courted Dorothy Henry, who appeared as Miss China of 1942 in the Hobart Mercury. On their marriage Willi Chung Sing sat them up in a new shop, W Chung Sing & Co., a block down Liverpool Street from Henry & Co. Although the Henrys relinquished their role in trade for various professions in the last quarter of the twentieth century, my Chung cousins continued as Chung Sing

Figure 9 Chung House, Sunwei City (Source: Phillip Chung).
cousin Anne, five days younger and half my size. No wonder my aunt Joyce laughed when she told me, ‘Oh, I was so proud of you. So plump. I had to take you to the butcher. I had to show you off. I walked along the road and almost collapsed with the weight.’

‘Now, look at this.’ Chris had the air of a conjurer.

I stared at my mother and father, young and radiant with love, photographed on a wintry day at the Botanical Gardens in Hobart. Both are wearing the fashionable coats with wide lapels of the forties: ho jaunty in his check wool scarf and narrow-brimmed triby, she fresh-faced with her hair styled in a Victory Roll.

‘And this.’ From the envelope slipped a bombshell. Their wedding day: my mother with a flower in her hair and my father next to Grandfather Chung, seated behind a three-tier cake, an image I had never seen.

I could hardly believe that while I passed through Sunwei in 1984, bound for neighbouring Toishan - to be photographed with a family of Chungs totally unrelated to me – these relics were sitting in the Chung home. Having been brought up as a Henry, and with hardly any contact with my father and the Chungs, how could I have guessed that, within close range to me in Toishan, a collection of photos showed three generations of my family in Hobart?

Over a quarter century on, it seems absurd that I didn’t use the opportunity to visit both my mother’s ancestral village and my father’s ancestral city. My objective was to film families with strong Australian links and, in my mind, my family were the Hennys or Gins and I knew that we, the Henrys, had no close association with relatives in China. Also, apart from the professional need to keep myself out of the story (as was the prevailing practice), and the ethical need not to use ABC funds for private research, perhaps, at a very deep level, I felt ambivalent after all those childhood years trying to assimilate to escape my Ching Chong roots.

I’ll close back in Australia with Bruce Ruxton, then president of the Returned Servicemen’s League and foe of Asian immigrants. When I interviewed him on his tirade against Asians who ‘should go back to where they came from’, he laid on the charm. As the cameraman adjusted the lights, Ruxton leaned over to reassure me, ‘I don’ mean you, dear. You’re one of us.’

Now, like a good Ching Chong convent girl, I’ll step aside and put on my gloves.

Maps and illustrations from Chung Martin collection and Helene Chung copyright publications.

References

Guthrie, B. 2011, ‘Chill goodbye to our Indian summers’, Age, 17 April.