Among the Chinese

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Jane Hutcheon
FROM RICE TO RICHES: A PERSONAL JOURNEY
THROUGH A CHANGING CHINA
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THE OPENING SCENE of From Rice to Riches has the
author travelling in a taxi with a camera crew through
the city of Bengbu in China’s central Anhui province.
A furtive glance in the mirror of her powder compact
convinces Jane Hutcheon that they are being followed by
Chinese officials. Determined to escape their pursuers in
order to obtain the interviews needed for an investigative
report on the pollution of the nearby Huai River, the crew
twice changes taxi before diving into a crowded street market.

It is a fitting introduction to a book that is largely about
journalism and the means by which journalists — in this case,
foreign correspondents — get their stories. That the setting is
China, where Hutcheon was the ABC’s correspondent from
1995 to 2000, serves to enhance the journalistic dimension,
since much of the book is concerned with the subterfuge
needed to evade or outwit official-
dom and to record the views of ordinary Chinese people.
The book deals with Hutcheon’s
impressions of the major events
and issues preoccupying China
during her posting, including
the handover of Hong Kong from
Britain to China in 1997, the tenth
anniversary of the Tiananmen
Square massacre and the prepara-
tion for the Beijing Olympic
Games in 2008. But a persistent
theme is the resourcefulness and tenacity needed by
Hutcheon, her cameraman, the late Sebastian Phua, and the
rest of the ABC crew to get perspectives on these develop-
ments at variance from the official Chinese version.

Journalists often turn to writing books — occasionally
fiction, biography or history, but more often memoir and
autobiography based on material gathered during their
assignments. The urge to create something more ‘permanent’
than journalism drives many of its practitioners. Hutcheon, it
seems, is no exception. She comes from a family of journalists:
her father, Robin, is a former editor-in-chief of the South
China Morning Post, and her brother Stephen was the
Sydney Morning Herald’s Beijing correspondent in the
mid-1990s. Hutcheon’s decision to join the ‘family trade’ was
a happy one: ‘I could indulge my insatiable curiosity
about the way people live, fight, survive, die, create and
destroy.’ That curiosity was evident in the doggedness with
which Hutcheon pursued her subjects in China, often ventur-
ing out alone to a location with a hand-held camera rather than
risking the safety of the rest of the crew, and using disguises
such as the black wig and spectacles she donned for an
interview with members of the Falun Gong spiritual group.

As the book’s subtitle suggests, however, Hutcheon’s
journey through China is not only journalistic but personal.
Born in Hong Kong to a Eurasian mother and Anglo-Celtic
father, Hutcheon’s links with China date back to 1851 when
a distant uncle, Phineas Ryrie, a Scottish tea-merchant,
arrived there. Hutcheon and her siblings had a comfortable,
middle-class upbringing in The Peak area of Hong Kong.
Her childhood, she readily acknowledges, was both sheltered
and privileged. After studying journalism in Australia, she
returned to Hong Kong and began her career as a reporter on
local television. She began to see how the underprivi-
leged lived, and also covered the negotiations over Hong
Kong’s return to China, then the major issue preoccupying
the colony. After five years, however, Hong Kong felt too
small, and Hutcheon sought new challenges elsewhere.
But she was determined to return to Hong Kong and to
report on the handover for a foreign media outlet. In 1997
she achieved that goal.

Other features of the posting proved less satisfying. When
she returned to China in 1995, Hutcheon hoped to understand
what had drawn her ancestors to its shores and to discover
the essence of ‘being Chinese’. These hopes were only partly
fulfilled. Despite her Chinese
background, Hutcheon was
an outsider, subject to the same
restrictions and constraints
as other Western journalists.
When she tried to eat a dish
of slippery braised pig’s face
(food is a recurring metaphor
throughout the book), she found
the experience frustrating and
disillusioning, but ultimately
rewarding. One of the most refreshing aspects of Hutcheon’s
memoir is the candour with which it charts the evolution in
her attitude from nostalgia for a colonial past to an acceptance
of modern China on its own terms. She begins by trying
to relive her ancestors’ adventures, but comes to love the
country for less deep-rooted reasons.

Not surprisingly, her favourite city is Shanghai:
her parents grew up there, and Hutcheon’s admiration for
the progressive, entrepreneurial and Westernised spirit of
the modern city is unmistakable. Yet she appears as much
at home among the human and animal inhabitants of Xiao
Cun, a small rural village she visits for a story on the mass
internal migration from the country to the city; or slurping
noodles in the dingy Beijing home of Pang Meiqing, a crip-
pled survivor of the Tiananmen Square massacre. As
China races towards capitalism and greater engagement with
the West, insights such as Hutcheon’s are sorely needed.