lacking in balance and discrimination: luckily, this is not true of the vital central three-quarters of the book. But readers should beware of the lack of balance in these two sections.

There are a few other minor flaws as well. Thus, while, of the two main Hong Kong Chinese-language newspapers, one is spoken of as the Wah Kiu Yat Po, the other is spoken of as the Xing Dao Ribao (Star Isle Daily), thus disguising (very effectively) the Sing Tao. It is difficult to discern any pattern here. There are also a few errors of fact, particularly in the first and last chapters. Thus, inter alia, nowhere near 20,000 villagers were displaced for the Japanese extension of the Airport - there were no more than a tenth of that number living in Po Kong, Sha Tei Yuen, and Kak Hang. The demolished tenements in the Kowloon City area in the 1930s were not inside the Walled City, but outside, in the Kowloon Market area. Sir Thomas Jackson was not the founder of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank (1864): he was its General Manager from 1876-1902.

These flaws, however, are minor, in comparison with the immense value and interest of the bulk of the book. It is, despite the flaws, confidently and wholeheartedly recommended to anyone interested in the history of Hong Kong.

PATRICK H. HASE


This book delivers. Its coverage is broad but deep, it has the right mix of passion and detachment, with impish but biting humour, and is quietly but cleverly constructed by the author who, for five years from 1995, was the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s correspondent in China.

The author is well-suited to her task. A “China-coast” back-ground on both sides of her family over several generations, her Hong Kong birth and upbringing, her family’s devotion to journalism, plus a genuine interest in China and its people, combine with her own independent and questing spirit to make this a memorable account of their recent and current history. It is, indeed, a tale of ‘China’s wrestle with
modernity' (p.10) and is a very good read: in places, simply riveting.

The Introduction sets the style and the content (and quality) one can expect (and get), from the whole book of 371 pages. The chapters are devoted to different aspects of China’s modernisation, as seen through the eyes of persons from many levels of society. We see them benefiting, or in many cases suffering, from rapid urban and economic change, in Beijing (especially fast-tracked owing to the coming 2008 Olympics), Shanghai, and in the countryside. We visit West China, and listen to those affected by the immense scale of the Three Gorges Dam. Tibet and Taiwan are also on the menu. There is a chilling and most compelling chapter on “subversion,” including an enlightening account of Falun Gong. Interspersed, are fascinating chapters on the writer’s family background in Shanghai and Hong Kong, and on her own life in the Colony, from birth until she left to study journalism in Australia in 1981. There are final chapters on the social upheavals caused by the ongoing shift away from state capitalism, and on the new-style problems affecting China’s progress towards becoming a developed nation.

Many topics come alive through the wide range of personal stories resulting from the author’s oft demonstrated ability to create and utilise opportunities for meaningful discourse in a country where this is, quite clearly, far from being an easy task; whilst her frank and engaging descriptions of how she circumvented difficulties that would have stymied less determined mortals, is itself a valuable commentary on China’s bureaucracy and the relationship of government and people.

The book’s popular style is deceptive, because a relentlessly probing approach makes this essentially a serious book, in which the author describes, graphically and convincingly, how China finds herself at present, with all her attendant problems and difficulties. Despite being able to reveal much that is still wrong, and harmful to the nation’s progress, she is essentially optimistic in her Epilogue, emphasizing how far China has come in the last decade, and advising her readers that ‘China isn’t going to collapse’ though in need of greater transparency, especially in the financial sector.

We are left pondering how China’s rulers are going to cope with a runaway situation. For this reviewer, the author’s experiences whether
direct or through the lives of those to whom she spoke, seem to indicate that part of the solution must lie in improving the quality and ethics of the bureaucracy at all levels. In a country where the officials and the Party still call all the shots, attempts to educate the people at large in “good conduct” will be abortive, as well as meaningless, without it. Paradoxically, there is the long Confucian (and quintessentially Chinese) tradition of good government and right behaviour to sustain the dual effort - still meaningful and understood, but not, in every age, or everywhere, attainable.

Have I any criticisms? Not really. The photographs (mostly colour) illuminate the text, and there are next to no typos, but as a historian, I noted an oversight (p.78) in which Xiamen (formerly Amoy) and Guangzhou (Canton) are located together, and a paragraph in which (p.145) the essential legislation ending the Chinese institution of mui tsai (servant girls) in Hong Kong is given as the 1950s instead of the 1930s.

To conclude, we are much in Jane Hutcheon’s debt for such a useful and pertinent survey of a great people and nation at this crucial stage of their transition to modernity. There is much to learn and ponder upon in this attractive book, which will serve as a handy benchmark for checking on ‘New China’s’ course in the years immediately ahead. Its leaders, too, could benefit from the dedicated efforts of a skilled observer who, though critical, is always balanced, and is ever a true friend of their land and its people.

JAMES HAYES,
SYDNEY,
2003