

A game of hide not seek

THEY worked twice as long and twice as hard as the Preliminary Working Committee (PWC) members. They spent the evenings going from room to room, squeezing information out of the Hong Kong members. Towards midnight they withdrew into their own rooms to write their stories, calling up the members from their sleep to check up on various details.

In the early morning when the first PWC members went downstairs for breakfast, they were all there, cameras and recorders ready. They kept guard outside the conference room before and after each meeting. If there was an activity away from the hotel, they followed the members out into the cold, and when the members returned they were waiting in the hotel lobby.

They were the Hong Kong reporters covering the PWC plenary session in Beijing. The team was 50 strong, including seven television crews.

The three-day expedition must have cost the Hong Kong media at least HK\$500,000. You have to pay over \$3,000 to fly economy class from Hong Kong to Beijing and back. Hotels in Beijing are expensive, and the Swissotel-run Hong Kong Macau Centre, where the PWC held its meetings and where most of the reporters stayed, is labelled five-star.

In order not to miss any simultaneous events, each of the newspapers, radio and TV stations were represented by more than one reporter, and some sent as many as four or five. No doubt they believed they were getting good value for their money. They sent their best people. One veteran was known to turn out six articles in a day for her paper.

It was not always a pleasurable experience to be confronted by these news hunters. Many a time I would walk into the hotel lobby, pretending to be absorbed in some serious thought to notice the mikes and cameras until they were thrust right into my face.

Then, just as my ego began to grow with the flattering feeling of being the star of the evening, the limelight turned away and I was completely deserted even before I finished my sentence. They had spotted a more promising prey.

ONE evening, hotel guests in the lobby were amused by a special show in which a lady journalist chased an elderly PWC gentleman round and round the Christmas tree for several minutes, though in a not too festive mood. She wanted to know more about a speech he had made that morning, and he refused to oblige. It was a fruitless chase, but there were more ways other than direct confrontation, for details of that confidential speech appeared in the next day's papers.

Chinese officials are, as a rule, media-shy. In private they all talk about Hong Kong reporters with heartfelt admiration for their enthusiasm over their work, but very few of them would like to become victims of such enthusiasm. Reporters who kept all-day vigil at the conference room entrances and wondered why the big shots never showed up may like to know that there was another elevator behind the kitchen, used exclusively by hotel staff and, during meetings, important officials.

The first evening I arrived in Beijing I entertained 20 reporters in my room, an imprudent thing to do. My telephone rang 15 minutes after the rowdy party started. A polite but authoritative voice on the phone informed me that Director Lu Ping of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, who happened to occupy the room next door, needed a quiet rest. Besides, it said, it would be a most undesirable event if Mr Lu bumped into one of my inquisitive visitors in the corridor.

Hong Kong reporters are very understanding and cooperative by nature. After that, I had no more visitors from the media.