



The Betty Letters

My Dear Grandchild,

The baggage of Hongkong's history is slowly being cleared away as the Motherland imposes its will on the human inhabitants of the four hundred and sixteen square miles that constitute the territory. Hongkong is the home, today, of some seven million-plus, nearly all, ethnically Chinese inhabitants. Aside from political changes that have taken place in this once, British colony of Asia, there have been other, very subtle, changes, also, changes which the ordinary tourist, perhaps, does not see or realise. The Chinese cuisine of Hongkong is as good as it ever has been (perhaps, even better), but there has been a rather rapid deterioration in the quality of European cuisine. The reason: Most of the European cuisine is prepared by Chinese cooks, with not a European in sight, during its preparation or presentation. Dressed up to look like Italian, German, French, Greek, Russian cuisine, etc. the innocent tourist tastes the offering and may exclaim: 'Hey! This is very good!' However, what that tourist is tasting is a poor Chinese counterfeit of the original. Without question, the Chinese are among the best cooks in the world. After all, they have had more than five thousand years in mastering the art of food preparation and its presentation. And, anybody, who uses two sticks to pick up one little pea with ease and alacrity, and, at the same time, has the ability to carry hundreds of pounds of weight, balanced on just one stick, is somebody to be admired. Even the old lady of Hongkong hotels, The Peninsula Hotel, which first saw life in 1929 and still languishes in the fame of yesteryear, openly admits that it cannot guarantee that a European chef can be available to prepare a meal for a discerning connoisseur. In a conversation with the Manager of Gaddi's, I was told that I could not have that which I wanted, but only that which the restaurant was willing to offer me. This is so different from days of yore! In the old days, during the time that Gaddi's had an international reputation of being one of the best food outlets in any hotel in the world, there was nothing that one could not request: If Gaddi's kitchen did not have it, it would be found. In most, if not all, of the five-star hotels of Hongkong, European chefs are not to be found in the kitchen: That is left to their Chinese assistants (assuming that the hotel has employed a European chef, of course), who are very able in their own right, mind you. But, when one pays a premium price for a meal, a meal, supposedly prepared by a European chef and supposedly a European chef of many years of experience and, perhaps, one who is said to be world renowned, it may seem that one is being cheated when the food, masquerading as that of European origin, has been wokked, or steamed, or stewed in a clay pot by a very able Chinese gentleman, who has his own ideas as to what should constitute European cuisine. In one, five-star hotel, which is owned by a Chinese multi-millionaire, there is not one working European cook/chef in the entire hotel complex, which sports four food outlets, one said to be serving only Italian cuisine, one said to be catering for those who are lovers of French food, and one coffee shop, which has an assortment of dishes, ranging from Japanese sushi to Spaghetti Bolognese to coq au vin, and a fine-dining, Chinese restaurant. Unfortunately for the outlets at this hotel, it has lost a great deal of European custom over the past eight years due to the poor quality of its cuisine, which caters more for the Chinese owner of the establishment – the actual hotel operation is managed by a very reputable international chain – than any incoming guest. It appears that, for the most part, the requirement for superb European cuisine is almost non-existent now. Pity those incoming tourists, who are accustomed to eating the best European food in Hongkong!

If that gripe is to be considered negative, then, I am happy to tell you of the many positive aspects of Hongkong, following the assumption of sovereignty by the government of my country. To begin with, I note how much more polite, generally, are members of the service industry. Taxi drivers rarely cheat, as they used to do, prior to 1997, and they go out of their way, in most cases, to be polite. The taxis, themselves, are much cleaner, too, than ever before. Minibuses, whose origins were 'pak pais' – illegal forms of transportation, operated by triads and

individuals, many of whom were of questionable character – are, today, a very good and efficient form of public transportation, all of the vehicles, having been air-conditioned, with a standard charge for a ride. They augment other forms of public transportation and the drivers are most accommodating. Then, I note that the general demeanor of workers in various other industries is different, also, compared to the time when the British ran the government. They seem to be happy in their work, generally, and happy just to have their jobs; and, they no longer watch the clock very closely, although they, still, expect to leave at a reasonable time, close to the contracted end of the work day. Even the construction and finish of large, new property developments of today are far superior to those of yesteryear. It is, indeed, rare to hear of windows, falling out of new buildings, or leaking walls, or outer doors, made of such flimsy materials that they fall apart within the first five years of the completion of a new construction. The interior furnishings of new property developments are far ahead of their counterparts when Great Britain ruled the roost. I note, also, that the members of uniformed branches of the Hongkong Government appear to be more polite than ever before: Gone is the pomposity of old.

In conclusion, it is my opinion that, on balance, things in Hongkong are as good, if not better than when the English ruled the territory, with the exception, of course, that there is, today, little chance of getting a really great meal, prepared by a first-class European chef. Perhaps, there is little call for the finest European cuisine in the territory in spite of the fact that two million tourists pass through Hongkong on a monthly basis. But, one must remember that the lion's share of two million, monthly incoming tourists are from the Motherland, which is only forty five minutes away from Hongkong by train. They, of course, would not care to eat European food, at all, and, generally, hang out in Causeway Bay, North Point, Wanchai, Mongkok, Shamshuipo, and other cheaper areas of the territory where prices for food and clothing are cheaper than the places, frequented by the European tourist. Times change and, in Hongkong, times are changing quite rapidly. Talk to you next week.

Chief Lady

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