



The Betty Letters

My Dear Grandchild,

While the manners of the majority of our visitors from China leave a lot to be desired, in our terms, that is, I seriously doubt that most of these visitors realise how really unpleasant and offensive it is for us to view their lack of social graces. I was taking tea with my friend in the coffee shop of a 5-star hotel in Pacific Place, just the other day, and a man was sitting at the opposite table from us ... with the legs of his trousers, pulled up to his thighs: He was hot and determined that this was a way for him to cool down. Probably, that type of behaviour is common, back home in some hamlet in China. In order to be able to sit comfortably in this state of partial undress, with his trousers' legs, pulled up to his thighs, his boney and hairy legs, being visible for all to see, he had to stretch out his legs, partially, so that they blocked a goodly part of the aisle between his table and ours. Nobody said a word about this man's skinny legs, protruding from beneath a pair of black trousers which, by this time, resembled a pair of shorts. The hotel's serving staff, to their credit, merely deftly walked either around the protruding legs of this man, or nimbly hop over the unwanted lower appendages of this middle-aged man. As a guest of the hotel, none of the servicing staff cared (or dared) to comment to this man from China about his manners, or the distinct lack of them. He spoke Cantonese and so I surmised that he lived just across the border with Hongkong. When we left the coffee shop and started to do our midweek shopping for new clothes at Pacific Place on the third floor, there we came across a Chinese lady with 2 young infants, the ages of the infants, probably being about 3 years old and 5 years old. This trio was sitting in the corridor, just outside the Versace Boutique, up against the glass safety wall. The lady, obviously the mother of the 2 children, was feeding her infants with some cakes and offering them soft drinks, which she took out of a brown paper bag. Crumbs of the cakes had started to litter the area as the youngsters accidentally allowed part of the delicacies to fall on to the granite walkway. We passed quickly, pondering this situation and wondering as to the reason that the security people of Pacific Place did not do something about this situation. After all, this is supposed to be a premier shopping mall. Did the security people have the right to say or do anything because there is no sign that states that one may not sit on the floor of the shopping centre in order to eat and to drink? However, I have noted, in the past, that when Filipinas are found, eating their chicken legs and wings and fried rice, near the area of the plants of Pacific Place, security personnel quickly put a stop to it.

At the Cartier Boutique, I saw a lovely diamond ring in the window and went in to enquire as to the price. The interior of the shop was packed with tourists from China and there was a funny whirring noise, which was somewhere in between a susurrations and an egg-beater. The noise, I identified, was that of an electric counter of paper money. What this clever shop had done was to install this electric money counter because the tourists from China pay for expensive purchases in cash – millions of dollars in cash! According to one of the staff members of this shop, it takes a long time to count millions of dollars and the chance is, always, likely that mistakes could be made. Finally, today, the last little clip from my collage of the habits of many of the China tourists to Hongkong is the fact that they enjoy squatting whenever they feel a little tired and, invariably, the squatting men will take the opportunity to spit out their yellowish phlegm around the area in which they are squatting. That is when they are not sneezing into their hands and, then, wiping their snotty hands on their trouser legs.

All of the above, I am fully aware that you have witnessed, in one form or another: There is little that is new about my observations, I realise that. But do not mistake my observations as being disparaging of these tourists from China. Far from it! What I am pointing out, however, is that they have yet to appreciate how we, in Hongkong, expect civilised people to act in the company of others. Although very few people would admit to it, openly, everybody picks his/her nose, at one time or another. One does not do it in public, for the most part, however, because it is considered socially unacceptable behaviour. Not so for our China tourists because it is common for them to pick their noses wherever the spirit moves them, no matter where they may be in Hongkong or elsewhere. While we may find these habits as disgusting, the tourists from China do not find them objectionable because that is what they are used to doing in their home town. For them, it is commonplace, you understand. Through the influence of example, the habits of these tourists will change in due course, no doubt, but it will take another 2 decades, I suppose, before they come to learn of the many advantages and benefits of being sensitive to the feelings of others and take appropriate steps to correct the errors of their ways. These people are not bad, in any way. Do not look down upon them as being lower in stature to us because that would be very unfair. The problem is that, since 1947, when China was liberated by the forces of Chairman Mao Tse Tung, they have lived in a certain manner and, without thinking, they bring with them, when they travel, these habits which we determine are ugly and/or revolting. I recall, some months back, I was in another boutique in Pacific Place, the Salvatore Ferragamo Boutique, as I recall, and I could not find a place in which to sit down in order to try on a pair of new shoes. The problem was that a mother and her husband and their 3 young children, all of whom were tourists from Shanghai – I could tell by their accents – were taking a rest in the boutique, having been shopping, obviously for a long period of time. When the shop assistant asked the wife for a little room for me to try on a pair of shoes, the mother of the children was very apologetic and quickly told the children to move. She turned to me and said that she was sorry for her lack of etiquette. What a lovely thing to say! She meant nothing evil in allowing her children to take a rest in this boutique: She, just, was not thinking.

As this charming lady from Shanghai was not thinking while resting with her little family in the Salvatore Ferragamo Boutique, I questioned to myself: Are we, all, not guilty of similar shortcomings due to our narrowness of mind? Are we, in Hongkong, not fully appreciative and understanding of the habits of our countrymen and countrywomen of China, who have not had the benefits of the virtues of a civilisation such as ours? For the young mother, feeding cakes and soft drinks to her little children, outside the Versace Boutique, she meant no harm because she just wanted to give her children a little treat, one, no doubt, which she could not obtain in her city/town/hamlet in China. For the squatters, they just want to take a little rest. For the spitters from China, in the fields, no doubt, this is a common practice and, without thinking, they do it out of habit. As for the ladies of China, yelling at each other in shops of Pacific Place, this is just a way in which they, excitedly, relay their feelings to their fellows. Instead of chastising and/or criticising our guests from China, perhaps a little understanding would go a long way in getting them to adjust their habits in order that they cease to be irritating and obnoxious to us. The influence of example is the way to go, in my opinion, because we should all work together for the common good and, in that way, live together in peace and harmony.

Talk to you, next week.

Chief Lady

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