



The Betty Letters

My Dear Grandchild,

I went to the opening of the first, stand-alone Brioni boutique in Central, last Thursday-week, and there I saw something, really extraordinary: One of the invited guests was a kook! Here was an elderly European, wearing a cotton, kung fu jacket, a pair of cheap-looking shoes, and a pair of trousers that I would call 'Lo Wu Originals'. Brioni, in case you are not aware, is the height of fashion for gentlemen; and, a Brioni suit, either off the rack or made-to-measure, costs upwards of \$HK30,000. And here was this European, not even wearing a suit, but a Made-In-China, cotton kung fu jacket! The strange thing about this kook was that people were crowding round him and even Mr Brioni, himself, spent time, talking to him and his wife, a real knock-em dead Chinese lady of exceptional beauty. While all of the other, 80-odd guests were dressed to kill, the star of the opening, other than Mr Brioni, was the kook and his wife. At home, following the cocktail party to commemorate the opening of this boutique, I talked to Bo-Bo, my froglike husband, about the kook and the events that took place at the cocktail party, in that order, and what it all meant. Bo-Bo claimed that one cannot tell the taste of a lap cheung by the looks of its skin. More important, however, Bo-Bo made some rather intelligent remarks – something that is very rare for The Frog. He said that only recently has Hongkong graduated, internationally, to the extent that Italian fashion houses, such as Brioni, have determined to spend tens of millions of dollars in establishing their names in Asia. While other French and Italian fashion houses have had established shops in the territory for many years, the aims of these fashion houses has been, for the most part, catering for the needs of rich tai-tais. Men were never, seriously, considered as important, potential customers for these shops. This is fair enough because, after all, what do men have to worry about when it comes to clothes? All of men's clothing is predictable, having changed only slightly since the Year Dot. With high-class, Italian fashion houses, such as Brioni, entering the Hongkong fashion scene, it means that enterprising, European fashion houses see Hongkong as a first step in a long trek into the Middle Kingdom, with investments of many tens of millions of dollars. Other fashion houses will follow in the wake of Brioni, according to The Frog's prognostications. The end result will be that the frauds of the fashion industry – and there are many such frauds in Hongkong, take it from me – will die a quick death because they will be unable to compete with the likes of the well-established, international fashion giants. The Frog had been in the habit, over the years, of buying his new clothes from a long-established, Hongkong tailor shop, which is located in the shopping mall of a 5-star hotel in the Central Business District of Hongkong Island. However, The Frog refuses to go to this tailor shop any more because it has been proved that the clothes, supposedly produced at this shop, are, actually, made in Lo Wu. Worst of all, the clothes do not last long, with buttons, falling off the jackets, metal attachments, becoming rusty in short order, seams, coming undone within the first 6 months of buying the clothes, and so on. In short, the traditional Shanghai tailors, who used to take painstaking care when producing a suit in Hongkong, or a pair of trousers, or a shirt, etc, have been replaced by near idiots, stationed in Lo Wu, whose only interest is to bang out as many clothes as possible within the shortest possible period of time. Meanwhile, the Hongkong tailor shops, for which they perform this work, charge more and more money for their shabby clothes.

The fashion face of Hongkong is set to change as never before. This is a guarantee, My Dear Grandchild. Hongkong people want luxury items, from clothes, to fashionable accessories, to wrist watches, to jewellery. Hongkong people are quite willing to pay top dollar for their goods, but they are no longer willing to be ripped off by legal 'crooks', dressed up to resemble respectable business people. Those days are about to be relegated to history. 'You can fool some of the people all the time and all the people some of the time; but you can't fool all the people all the time', to quote Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States

of America. The pace will be set by fashion houses, such as Brioni, and other fashion houses will have to fall into line ... or be left in the dust.

Case in point: I used to buy a great deal of my clothes and shoes from one fashion outlet at Pacific Place, you know, but that was a few years ago. Today, I would not even bother entering that boutique. What happened was that the clothes, which used to be produced in Italy, France and Germany, were being made in Eastern Europe – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Rumania, etc – and others were being made in India. These clothes were, for the most part, shoddy. After the first dry clean, the clothes started to shrink and, then, to fall apart. One dress in particular had a number of sequins, all of which, supposedly, had been hand-sewn into the bodice of the dress. Within the first day of wearing the dress, the sequins started to fall off so that, as I walked, I left behind a trail of sequins on the floor. Embarrassing? You said it! Then, there was the matter of a pair of shoes, which were supposed to have been made in Italy, but turned out to have been manufactured in Eastern Europe. The shoe straps started to fray on the first day that I wore the shoes. The shop manager tried to blame me for the damage. I stopped her short, saying: ‘Just tell me whether or not you will repair the shoes. Yes or no?’ I was furious and the noise that I made in the shop frightened the manager who reluctantly agreed, eventually, to repair the shoes, free of charge. But that was the end of my purchases from that boutique. My friends have had similar experiences and, today, they, too, refuse to enter that boutique. People, such as I, will not tolerate inferior merchandise, wrapped up to resemble quality merchandise from which top dollar is the price tag. Also, it is not good for Hongkong’s image to have boutiques, bearing internationally renowned names, cheat customers. Motor cars, such as Rolls-Royce, Bentley, Porsche, Mercedes Benz, BMW, etc, will, always, be in high demand in any and every part of the world because people have grown to trust the Marques, which represent among the highest levels of automotive engineering. As long as careful attention is paid to detail, motor-car companies of these calibres will, always, be successful.

In closing, I must tell you that when The Frog asked me to buy him a Brioni suit, I just told him that when frogs can fly, he may have his suit. What cheek! Pay more than \$HK30,000 for a suit for a man?

Talk to you, next week.

Chief Lady

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