

The Betty Letters

My Dear Grandchild,

I went to Xian over the Easter holidays – and I took Bo-Bo, your Grandfather, with me in order to educate him: There are, after all, many parts of China other than Shanghai and Hongkong. I wanted to prove to my froglike husband that there is more to the Motherland than just Shanghainese food. The short, 4-day holiday was packed with adventures and excitement so I shall have to write to you, during the next fortnight, an account of all that transpired in order that you may be able to digest the many interesting (and disgusting) things that happened to me as well as my discerning observations.

Day One

We left Hongkong on (Good) Friday, March 21, aboard Dragonair, Flight KA 940, scheduled to take off at 15:55 hours. Bo-Bo, because of his age, he has trouble when people try to take his fingerprints because, due to his signing of tens of thousands of cheques, over the years, his fingerprints are almost worn completely away. He has trouble, also, with his fat, smooth fingers, and cannot easily withdraw his Hongkong Identity Card from his wallet. I went straight through the Hongkong Immigration checkpoint like a hot knife, cutting soft butter because my fingerprints are clear and easily identifiable. Not so for The Frog, however. He threw his wallet to me from behind the first, chest-high, glass automatic gate area in order for me to extract his Identity Card for him to use in order to pass through this electronic barrier. I did so but, when I tried to throw back the Identity Card to him, my aim was not perfect and so the Identity Card landed in between the 2, glass Immigration gates. Bo-Bo could not reach the Identity Card and called to a female Immigration Officer for help. Well! What a bitch this lady turned out to be! After Bo-Bo was able to get out of this woman's rude clutches, I went straight to the Chief Immigration Officer in charge and registered a verbal complaint. This man said that perhaps, because Bo-Bo was speaking in Shanghainese and English, the (rude female) Immigration Officer did not understand his requests. Now, I was furious: 'Is this an international airport or a domestic airport?' I asked. 'Every one of your staff members should be able to speak English otherwise they should not be here.' I spoke with my best authoritative voice in order for this young man to realise that he was talking to Betty, wife of Bo-Bo, not just a tai-tai from the sticks. This (very handsome, Chinese man!), of course, agreed with me and said that he would talk to the rude, female Immigration Officer, immediately. I was happy with his patience and his understanding attitude and, with that, I went through Hongkong Customs with the warm satisfaction that I had done my good deed for the century. However, the Dragonair flight, actually, left the ground 45 minutes late. I was getting a little irritated again and you and I know how an irritated lady can be when she is not, completely, happy with her lot, physical and/or mental. However, The Frog was quick to fall asleep and the rest of the trip to Xi'an Xianyang International Airport was uneventful.

Day Two

(Good) Saturday started off with Bo-Bo, watching the television news on the BBC at about 7 o'clock in the morning. The BBC report was about Tibet and the riots in the country. From time to time, the television went black. I mean, black – completely black! And, then, the BBC report resumed, obviously with a large segment, having been lost. After about 15 minutes of irritating, television blackouts, and after checking with Management of Golden Flower Hotel (by Shangri-La) that there was nothing wrong with the television set, it was clear that the hand of the Chinese Government's censors had been hard at work. The Chinese Government was censoring news broadcasts over the television about anything that could be considered

negative of the Motherland. But what about the right to know? Turning to other television channels, other than BBC, in order to compare the situation on those channels, the same things happened. I asked Bo-Bo – who is a member of the ... (I am not permitted to tell you of the exact position of his chair in The Great Hall of The People) ... for what reason there is censorship in my country. He said: ‘This is not censorship! Our Government does not want to have people unduly worried about little problems in the provinces, especially a province with a population of just 3 million people. Xian City has a population of 7 million people, you know. This is not censorship, by any stretch of the imagination, but it is a father, protecting his family. It is a sign of the love that Beijing has for the people of the Middle Kingdom. This is, after all, the People’s Republic of China, is it not?’ Men! What can I say?

After taking breakfast, we went to see the famous terracotta warriors of the first Emperor China, Qin Shi Huang Di, who reigned from 247 BC to 221 BC. It is said that Emperor Qin Shi Huang Di unified China for the first time in history. There are more than 8,000, lifelike terracotta figures of rank-and-file soldiers and their officers, horses and other animals in Mount Li. It is truly a remarkable site to behold. Even Bo-Bo was impressed. What a treasure has my Motherland discovered in the clays of Xi’an! After spending many hours, viewing the terracotta soldiers and reading about the way in which the discovery was unearthed (literally) in 1974, and how the site is, today, considered the eighth wonder of the world, we went to lunch. While at lunch, I asked our guide, Ms Lilly Wang, about the terracotta warriors and was told that they had been constructed in order for Emperor Qin Shi Huang Di to have his army with him in the afterlife. I think that this may not be the true story, however, because one is told that more than 700,000 people slaved to construct the clay figures over a period of 38 years. So, for those 700,000 worker slaves, they would have had little time for anything else other than the construction of the mausoleum of Emperor Qin Shi Huang Di and his (toy) clay soldiers and other things. Well, that is one way to keep one’s people poor and too tired to complain, isn’t it?

Then, it was off to Hua Qing Hot Springs. Hua Qing Hot Springs is the site of the love story of Emperor Xuan Zong of the Tang Dynasty (618 AD – 907 AD) and his favourite concubine, Lady Yang Gui Fei. Lady Yang Gui Fei is reputed to have been the most beautiful woman who ever lived in China – even to this day. I looked at her statue and had to admit that her anatomical proportions were, in fact, slightly better than mine – only just, mind you. Anyway, she is dead and I am still, very much alive. Mount Li is the location of the Hua Qing Hot Springs, located about 19 miles from Xian City. The Hua Qing Hot Springs is considered one of the 100, most beautiful gardens of China. Emperor Xuan Zong loved his concubine so much that it is said that he sent messengers, riding day and night, to the south of China in order to get lychees for his lover. What a man! Nice to have lover of this calibre. And I am married to The Frog! The Hua Qing Hot Springs is full of, can you guess, hot springs. It seems that Emperor Xuan Zong liked to take baths and so he had a number of them built for himself and for his favourite concubine. Meanwhile, all of his retinue stank, no doubt about that – because they were not permitted to take baths in the Emperor’s hot springs. As I wandered from one outdoor bathtub to another, I noted that many other people from other parts of China were, also, following me around as Lilly explained the various settings. I heard and witnessed, from time to time, people spitting onto the flagstones and into the wooden areas. It was disgusting! The Frog tried to defend the spitters: ‘What can they do? Keep the yellow phlegm in their mouths and throats? Do you expect them to swallow their phlegm?’ The Frog comes from Shanghai so what can one expect? What these people need is reprogramming in the same manner that I reprogrammed The Frog to do my bidding. I am sure that Western tourists do not appreciate, having to avoid walking on yellow, disgusting-looking, Chinese phlegm, having been excreted by people onto the ground of national treasures, such as The Hua Qing Hot Springs. I know that this observation must make you feel sick, My Dear Grandchild, but I purposely want you to understand how I felt on this occasion as I nimbly walked round this treasure of China. I have reprogrammed The Frog, at least to some extent, and now it is the time for my government to do the same for its peoples.

Day Three and Day Four will follow, next week.

Chief Lady

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