

The Betty Letters

My Dear Grandchild,

I went to Shanghai and, after spending nearly a week in this city of 20 million people, I shall never again complain about the driving habits of the people in Hongkong. On the highways of Shanghai, which is the largest city in the country, by the way, one takes one's life into one's hands. Talk about Russian roulette! What a situation! The roads are filled with earth-moving vehicles, laden with rocks, dirt, concrete blocks, wood, you name it, and it is there. None of vehicles are covered so that the dust and dirt flies everywhere. And the din is unbelievable. It is hardly any wonder that the majority of the people of Shanghai have a propensity to yell instead of having a normal conversation as do most of the people from the south of China where Cantonese is spoken. I talked this over with Bo-Bo, my froglike husband, on my return from Shanghai. Wow! What a response! 'I am Shanghainese by birth! Have you forgotten?' he retorted. 'I don't yell, do I?' Of course, I shook my head although, in truth, he often yells at me. But, when I looked at his face, which had turned almost a purplish colour at this point of the conversation, I determined that it was best to play it safe. The Frog continued: 'You go to any Hongkong open market and listen to the hawkers, yelling and screaming. Then, you can criticise. The din is deafening, there, too.' I just nodded and cowed as would a subservient duck on having strayed onto a river bank where a drake had laid claim to that part of the river. But The Frog was wrong, I assure you. In Shanghai, infrastructural works are everywhere and the work never ceases, 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. Under nearly every underpass, there are the jackhammers, cutting into rock and earth with banging sounds that would deafen anybody in the space of a single day. The workers do not wear any protection for their ears so that, when they need to communicate among themselves, of course they have to yell at the top of their lungs. On the major roads and highways, leading out of the commercial areas of this sprawling city of 2,400 square miles, there are no police or cameras, monitoring the traffic conditions or watching violations of any road traffic ordinance, and drivers do not appear to abide by the rules of the road, but seem to take it that it is optional on which side of the road to drive and in which lane. As for the speed limit, there appears to be none, at least, none that I could determine. According to my host, a charming man who owns a 5-star hotel in one of the major commercial sectors of the city, the motorcycle police that patrol the business centres of the city, do not dare go on the highways because it is just too dangerous for them. Mr Zhou (I can't tell you his full name because that would be a violation of trust, you understand) said that when a construction lorry, loaded down with some 50 tonnes of rock, is travelling at 80 kilometres per hour on a highway, no motorcycle policeman is going to try to stop it. Further, no motorcycle policeman would dare to drive on such a highway since the pollution is as thick as a sandstorm. Further, the concrete roads are potholed everywhere due to the weight of the construction vehicles that make use of it every hour of the day and every day of the year. Hence, with no law enforcement, drivers follow no law but their own: The most-aggressive drivers win the day. I don't know how many deaths are recorded, daily, on Shanghai roads, but the numbers must be high.

However, there is no question in my mind that, in the coming decade, after most of the infrastructural works are completed, along with the many, multi-storied overpasses and the tens of thousands of flats, Shanghai will be ready to compete with Hongkong as another commercial hub of China. Even now, it is poised to give Hongkong a run for its money in some areas. However, for international conglomerates, engaged in

finance, insurance, banking, shipping and so on, I suspect that Hongkong will continue to be the preferred base of operations although Shanghai could well be a branch for many multinationals. The reason that Hongkong will continue to be a financial hub, as well as a shopping Mecca for foreign visitors, is that this territory has a well-rooted system of laws. In China, the country's laws are still evolving and, to a great extent, it is a matter of drafting new laws after the need is confirmed. In other words, China is more reactive than proactive with regard to the requirement for new laws. One sees this just about everywhere one goes. For a man to hit a waitress for one reason or another, it is of no great shakes. In Hongkong, this would be considered assault and battery. In China, it is viewed a little differently, along the lines of a domestic dispute – unless the waitress is killed, of course. Assaults are commonplace in Shanghai, as with many other parts of China, but the police view them along the lines of the De Minimis Doctrine (De Minimis Non Curat Lex). The Government of China, today, is so busy in tackling the global recession as it affects the Middle Kingdom, the struggle to maintain its economic expansion, approaching double-digit figures, meeting the needs of its 1.30 billion human inhabitants, and, at the same time, encouraging a market economy, that it tends to forget certain considerations that are sacrosanct by the Western World. But, in due course, the laws will be put in place in China and the rights of the little man will be respected. Human rights advocates may criticise the leaders of China, but just look at what the country has achieved in just 61 years. China, today, is the second-largest economy of the world, having upstaged Japan at the end of 2008. To criticise is easy; criticism captures the headlines of the Popular Press. In the case of China, I am certain that the leaders of the country would dearly like to draft laws to protect this and that and to prevent acts that are contrary to the rights of man, but the country is vast, the human population is the largest in the world of any single country, and the multitude of uncompleted tasks is monumental. That is not to say that I do not criticise the inadequacies and shortcomings of my motherland, but, at the same time, one must be reasonable about time frames.

I recall that, when I had some political power in Hongkong, I took it upon myself to try to promote cleanliness in the Central Business Area of Hongkong Island on the weekend and public holidays. The Filipinas and Filipinos line certain roads in Central Hongkong on their holidays, leaving behind all of their garbage for the Hongkong Government to clear away. It is heartbreaking to note how these mainly uneducated servants and drivers of The Philippines leave their chicken bones, tins of soft drinks, as well as unmentionables in the roads and on the pavements, expecting the taxpayers of the Hongkong Government – the Filipinas and Filipinos do not pay tax in Hongkong – to pay the cost for clearing away the garbage of these people. I took it upon myself to try to do something, but I was told that there were many other things that were much more important than the horrible that are created by the imported maids, cleaners, drivers, etc. I was persuaded that my puny efforts, at the end of the day, would come to nothing. My advisers were proved to be correct. In due course, I am sure that the Hongkong Government will come to grips with the smaller problems that have festered in these 416 square miles.

Well, I must go now. Talk to you, next week.

Chief Lady

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