

## *The Betty Letters*

*My Dear Grandchild,*

*I have noted, of late, that the composition of most, English-language newspapers, published daily in South China, has become less and less objective and more and more subjective. I, always, was led to believe that the concept of newspapers was, exactly, that: News + Paper. But, today, newspaper articles have become more and more Opinions + Paper. It is fact that many so-called reporters, employed on English-language newspapers in Hongkong, are not reporters, at all. These people have taken their job descriptions to mean that they should be able to voice their opinions about the events of the day whenever the spirit moves them. And the editors of these newspapers allow this to happen! Recently, I read a report that it was such a pity that a pristine stretch of the Hongkong coastline was being developed by a private individual who had purchased the property, quite properly. That was the lead story – which was, completely, opinionated in its entirety. The second story on the front page was about a tour guide, berating some tourists from the Mainland for not spending enough money in buying jewellery in a shop to which the guide had taken them. It, like the lead story, was completely opinionated. Buried within the opinions of the 2 stories – if one could call them such – were the very simple facts: A businessman had bought some land for \$HK16 million in order to build himself a house in Sai Wan, Hongkong Island, and that a tourist guide had acted improperly to her charges and her actions had been shown on television in the Mainland. Both reports could have been written objectively and both of them required no opinion from the ‘reporters’ whose only job was to inform readers not to express personal opinions. This is not the first time that this English-language newspaper, published daily in South China, has published opinions instead of news. I am getting fed up with it, actually. This is what happens when there is a deficit of competition in an industry.*

*I complained to Bo-Bo, my froglike husband, who sneered rudely at me: ‘You are always complaining about something. English-language newspapers can write whatever they like ... provided they write it in Hongkong and not in the Mainland. Who cares, anyway?’ I quickly responded: ‘I care, for one. And all of my friends care, too. They telephone me with their complaints about the standard of the English language, used in this English-language newspaper, and the quality of the so-called reporting standards. What we want is news, not opinions. Who cares what some stupid little Chinese/European employee of an English-language newspaper thinks? We want to be informed. We are not stupid; we can make up our own minds. We don’t need some kid to tell us how to think.’ The Frog looked up at me with a smile on his face: ‘That is, just about, what I said the last time that I was in Beijing and talked to senior members of the Politbureau. I agree with you – for a change. And I can, now, divulge something secret to you: We are going to come down hard on journalists in China, who visit China for whatever reason, journalists who, without express approval, pen opinions instead of facts.’*

*I went away, leaving The Frog to view his half-naked, luscious lovelies on the television set. Over a cup of tea, I thought to myself: ‘What is opinion and what is fact? Opinion is, clearly, an interpretation of facts or fantasy; a judgement, if you will. But, for a madman, his interpretation of certain facts might well be distorted. For the madman, his opinion would be a corruption of the real. In short, the facts would be totally unreal although, to him, they would be the real. Facts, on the other hand, have to be reality, devoid of*

*opinion of any kind.' I rushed back to The Frog, who was, still, lapping it up, peering at his luscious lovelies. 'I want to talk to you about the poor state of journalism in Hongkong,' I re-opened the conversation ... while unplugging the television set from its power source. The Frog was not, at all, happy, but he had no choice: He was being forced to respond. After explaining my interpretation of the words, fact and opinion, he said: 'Yes, I cannot say that you are wrong. Now, let me go back to the television programme because it is important to me and I shall have to make a report about it.' 'No!' I yelled. 'I want to know what is fact and what is opinion, as far as China is concerned. You are supposed to be a kind of diplomat. So instruct me.' The Frog obeyed (all good frogs should obey their wives, you know): 'Fact is that which the Government of China deems to be such. Opinion is that which the Government of China tells the world is correct and proper with regard to certain matters that have been cleared by the highest authority in the country. Facts, when released officially by the Government of China, are not to be misused, but may be reported as long as there is no distortion. Opinion is only allowed to be expressed by those in China, who are sufficiently erudite to be able to voice a clear and unambiguous judgement that is in accordance with the Government's mandate of the day in that regard. OK?' 'Then, what is the difference?' The Frog again: 'Facts are that which the Government of China claims are in accordance with the real. Opinions are those judgments, uttered only by persons of the highest rank that the Government of China has cleared as being correct and proper and containing all of the attributes that are considered necessary to assist the State.' I asked: 'But are not facts supposed to be objective, while opinions are subjective?' 'Facts,' began The Frog once again, 'are images of the real, as interpreted by China. That is called, "Objective Facts." They differ from opinions because no attribution is required for the publication of facts whereas, in the case of opinions, one must state whose opinion it is. That distinguishes fact from opinions.'*

*I was very confused, at this point, and went away to try to understand what The Frog had stated. I decided, after some time, that The Frog and people of his ilk should be the interpreter of what is fact and what is opinion. On telling him of my decision, he said: 'Now you understand: China will take care of everybody in the country and will tell everybody what is fact and what is valid opinion.'*

*I guess that I have learned something. Do you agree, My Dear Grandchild?*

*Talk to you, next week.*

*Chief Lady*

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