

02 CHINA!

This was, of course, our trip to China and Tibet, and it was just before China became the big economic power it is today, and before all the mandated social correctness that now puts a bit of a damper on things, truth to tell. The trip did not start auspiciously, unfortunately. In fact, I think if a Chinese astrologer had been with us, he would have advised immediately aborting the trip because the numbers were wrong and the planetary alignment was not favorable.

While on the runway, our plane was told to taxi back to the gate for a suspected security problem. There we sat for an hour and a half while two policemen came on board, escorted two men off the plane, searched the cabin, and eventually brought the men back onboard. Everyone peeked and gawked, which is a challenge when you are trying to keep your head down and be invisible. No one said anything. The policemen left, the heavy door was closed, and the captain gave the order to prepare for departure.

Myrtle was frantically digging around in that huge purse that we already talked about, and she took out a packet of incense and two cleverly concealed matches. I hissed, "Myrtle, you cannot light a fire in here or burn anything. They will throw you off the plane!" She looked at me a little glassy-eyed, probably from whatever she had imbibed in the airport lounge to help her "relax," and she mumbled something about needing to cleanse the air and restore good Jee.

I wanted to yell, "Who the hell is Jee?" but then I noticed that the man in the seat in front of us had jabbed his hand into the air. In a heartbeat his emergency light was blinking resolutely, and, in another heartbeat, he was telling the flight attendant something and pointing behind him.

Myrtle wisely shoved the incense and matches inside her purse and pulled out her book. When the flight attendant asked her if she were planning to light a match, she batted her baby blues and smiled most engagingly, "Light a match? Oh my goodness! Isn't that against the rules, my dear? We simply must NOT light a match on a plane. I was just telling that to my seat mate here, wasn't I, JoJo?" I swallowed my "oww" from her shoe connecting with my anklebone and muttered, "Oh yes, that is so true."

Sometimes I just want to throttle Myrtle or bop her, whatever would be more effective.

As we taxied down the runway for the second time, she brought out the incense and proceeded to blow on it. I watched silently. After we were airborne, she returned the incense to her purse with a sigh. I whispered to her, "So Jee is happy now?" I hoped so, because we were in a completely full jumbo jet 3800 feet above the earth, and we would be flying for 12 ½ hours, a distance of 6490 miles to Beijing.

"It is not Jee, JoJo, it is Chi, the vital energy that animates us. We must keep the pathways for this energy open and unpolluted by negative energies, or bad things will happen." Then she promptly reclined her seat and closed her eyes. I sighed and tried to do the same, but for a long time my mind kept chasing after all those bad things that might happen if our Chi got polluted. Sometimes I just want to tell Myrtle to shut up.

And that was easier said than done on our China trip. Myrtle being Myrtle, she fell instantly in love with the strange languages called Mandarin and Cantonese, and she latched onto that handy page of Chinese words and phrases that our well-meaning guide gave us. For the first few days after we got our guide sheets, Myrtle greeted *everyone* we passed, *everywhere* - on the street, on the stairs, in restaurants, simply everywhere - dipping her head in a bow and saying sweetly "Nihow" with that perfect question

mark inflection at the end. Everyone smiled back at her delightedly and replied in kind. But honestly, I thought she just looked like a bobbing duck. But it could be that I am just jealous because every time I tried to say “Nihow,” it sounded exactly like a hungry cat crying piteously for something to eat.

Also, everyone was paying attention to Myrtle and nobody even noticed I was along for the ride. Hmph.

Another favorite word of hers was “Buyao” for “I don’t want it.” And boy! Did she use that! I thought it was a little rude to say that because I knew all these street vendors who pestered us to buy something were just trying to make a living, but when I responded politely to them, “No, thank you,” that seemed to be an invitation for three more of them to join the crowd around me until I had to be rescued by little Myrtle with her strong “Buyao!” So embarrassing! I never did get the hang of firmly saying “Buyao.”

Another phrase Myrtle loved was “Ma ma who who” meaning “so so.” Long after we returned to the States she would answer someone’s polite query, “How are you today?” with her rousing “Ma ma who who.” I will let you guess how many of our friends cornered me privately and said with concern, “Don’t you think you should get some help for her?”

But Myrtle’s favorite word phrase was “Gum Bey!” - “Bottoms up!” Oh, my! She loved that phrase with such a passion I even heard her muttering that a few times in her sleep. The one time I decided to best her in her language superiority I did not fare too well. We were staying with a home host in Xian and sitting at the evening meal with our host family, having been told in advance that we were supposed to try to converse with our host family in their language. I consulted my trusty little guide sheet and asked our host, “How long does it take you to milk your six cows?” At least, that is what I thought I asked. He answered, “Eight years.”

There were a few minutes of stunned silence, which was suddenly broken by a quite unprofessional hoot from our guide, who proceeded to explain, in between giggle eruptions, that what I had asked was how long the farmer had had his cows. Then she explained the situation in Chinese to our hosts, who erupted in high-pitched giggles and cackling, quite to my embarrassment of course. After we all stopped laughing, finally, the meal resumed in cheerful camaraderie, but I knew that Myrtle would make hay out of this gaffe for at least two weeks.

Our guide attempted to help me save face by explaining to everyone that in China, while there are two main languages Mandarin and Cantonese, there are many Chinese dialects, and the Chinese people from different areas of their vast country often have a hard time understanding each other. Mandarin is primarily spoken in Beijing and the north of China, while Cantonese is spoken in southern China along the Pearl River Delta including Central Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macau. There are several Cantonese dialects including the Guangzhou, the Hong Kong, the Xiquan, the Wuxhou, and the Tanka, but typically only the dialects of Guangzhou and Hong Kong are referred to as Cantonese. The question I had asked, said our guide, would be perfectly intelligible in Wuxhou.

“So there, Myrtle,” I thought. I was gratified to see that she did not know any of this, and that it might be said that I bested her in language because I had spoken a dialect she did not know! I looked over at her with a quiet little smirk and held up my head again. All was well.

Now, China is an absolutely amazing country! SO MUCH of everything – so many people, so much activity and industriousness, so much youthful energy, so much astounding history, so much natural beauty, so much so much so much! I felt like I was on a huge anthill on another planet, one where I

found myself stumbling over my feet trying to take everything in and remember it all, like it was a universe unto itself. I wondered idly if the good old U.S. of A. would be like that in another 4000 years. China may be older than that, but its recorded history only goes back that far.

Then when I learned how many of the things we take for granted today were actually Chinese inventions from centuries ago and brought to the west on the Silk Road - well, I wondered how any western nation could think it was hot stuff on the Advancement of Civilization highway. The year we were there, Beijing, or Peking if you speak Cantonese, was celebrating its 3048th birthday. Wow! I wonder how many cities get to celebrate THAT! Even Myrtle, bless her little heart, did not know the answer to that question.

One of the first “mosts” that bedazzled us was the traffic. It was Myrtle’s turn to sit by the bus window. By this time, we had decided on a firm protocol of taking turns, but of course clever Myrtle tried to manipulate that to her advantage. Nevertheless, on that first day around Beijing it really was her turn. So, there we sat, watching the insane number of vehicles around us and the way all the drivers seemed to be blind to lane markers. Unfortunately, as we traveled toward a toll booth plaza with 14 collection gates, the lanes of traffic converged and drivers jostled for position, as though it were a race to see who could get through the gates first. Myrtle was watching the mad pushing and shoving and mumbling, “Chinese drivers do NOT know how to drive. They do NOT know how to drive!”



Our guide had warned us that traffic is extremely heavy and there are very few traffic signals in Beijing. “The mirrors on the bus are angled to the front of the bus instead of on each side,” she said, “so that they won’t get hit by other buses on the narrow streets. That used to happen a lot.”

“Well, I should think so!” hmped Myrtle. She was using her library voice, so I did not need to clap my hand over her mouth and risk a bite. Sometimes I wish her mouth filter didn’t have so many leaks.



Suddenly a small sedan edged between our bus and a truck, coming within an inch of us, and a scooter came out of nowhere and shot in front of us. Myrtle screamed. While this startled the driver, he did not flinch, and he kept our bus firmly to its position in the queue. I heard our guide whisper to somebody, “Don’t worry, he is a very good driver, otherwise he wouldn’t be driving for our company. China is full of very bad drivers, and we choose only the best.”

“That’s very comforting,” mumbled Myrtle, “He may be the best driver on the planet but everyone else is the worst. They think they are on a racetrack with free license to cross lanes, push other cars out of position, and squeal around corners on two wheels. Traffic lanes are incomprehensible to them. Maybe all these drivers think they can force other drivers into heart attacks and then they will have the road to themselves?”

I wanted to tell her to shut up because she would make us lose face, but I knew that would probably make her jump up out of her seat and tell me off, so I sank down a bit and replied, “Fat chance. Remember our guide’s morning lecture? ‘The Toll Gate is the Chinese Temple of Money. The traffic is horrendous on Chang An Avenue, the Main Avenue in Beijing. There are 5.4 million cars in China and that increases by several thousand each day. You must be 18 to drive in China and there are a lot of driving schools, and car insurance is required; but that doesn’t seem to help. There are a lot of accidents.’”

At this point I just puffed up a bit with pride about how much of our guide’s lecture I remembered. Then I finished my mini lecture with, “So, Myrtle, I think we need to chill and just go with the flow. Isn’t this the land of Zen or something?” Well, that was a mistake, of course, but a brilliant one because now Myrtle could put her energies into straightening me out about Zen.

When we turned off the main avenue, I spotted the street sweeper before Myrtle did and quickly covered her mouth with my hand, which did not please her. She started to BITE me! But I pulled my hand away just in time and simply pointed out the window. She still started to emit a tiny squeal when a

truck passed so close to the street sweeper that the sweeper could have put out his hand and jumped aboard. We were stalled in traffic for a bit, and eventually we saw the sweeper mount his large tricycle and pedal away, to our relief.



The bicycle rickshaws were a favorite for everyone in our group. I liked them also, but I liked even more the little scooters that zipped around everywhere. I asked our guide if it would be possible to rent a scooter. She said with a nervous smile, "Let me see what I can find out for you." But she never did get back to me, and Myrtle scoffed and said, "The way you drive, our guide doesn't want to let you loose in this traffic!" Well, of course, I would have liked to bop her, because she knows as well as I do that I am a much better driver than she is. She gets too distracted. I wanted to remind her of the time she was telling me about some arcane factoid or something and wasn't paying attention and she ran right into the back of a cop's car. But I decided I had better not do that because I was a long way from home.

Then we all had a nice ride in these bicycle rickshaws, and all was well. The rickshaw drivers even covered our legs with pretty plaid blankets because the weather was a little chilly. Talk about pampered! I felt like royalty! I did worry a bit about the driver who would have to pedal around one member of our group who was of noticeably generous proportions. Myrtle giggled, "They probably have a special fleet for fat Americans." I just sighed.



Another thing we both liked were what I called bicycle docking stations. They looked like orange motorcycle helmets, and I wanted to ride a bicycle just to pull up to one and park. How cool would that be? One day as we passed one of these helmets, Myrtle reached out and gave it a hard rap with her knuckles. I glanced quickly at the guide, but she had not seen what Myrtle did. I hissed at Myrtle, "Why in heaven's name did you do that? That poor helmet did nothing to you!" "I was checking to see if it were porcelain. The word 'China' means porcelain, you know, and originally porcelain was reserved for the use of royals."

Just then the guide turned into a building and called out time for a potty break and I was spared the rest of Myrtle's lecture on porcelain. But guess what? That lovely thing here in this photo, in which we were supposed to deposit our little offerings, was made of porcelain. I tried to distract Myrtle by telling her this interesting bit of news. She was not impressed. The toilet was a hole in the floor elegantly covered in a shallow porcelain basin with corrugated sides. The idea was to step on the sides, one foot on each side, squat, and do your business. "Don't forget to bring your toilet paper!" our guide had admonished. Well, when I saw the challenge facing me, I thought, "Dear guide, why didn't you tell us to bring rolls of paper towels to catch all the drips down our legs?"



I gamely put one foot on each side of the toilet, started to unzip my Khaki pants, and immediately started to tip over backward from the weight of my small backpack filled with water, sunscreen, journal, toilet paper, and snacks. Oh yikes! As I thrust out my arms to right myself, I could not help but yell, "Ow" when my left hand connected forcefully with a large hook on the wall. I heard a few gasps and titters and moans and a concerned, "Are you all right in there?" from our guide. Thoroughly embarrassed, I tried to assure her I was.

OK, then, a hook! I stepped off the porcelain, shrugged off my backpack and hung it on the hook, then gingerly stepped back onto the porcelain sides, determined I would NOT let this ponderous, provoking, problematic, presumptuous, and poopy piece of porcelain prevail! (Wow! Broke my record there, I did, alliteration on steroids!) This time I got the pants unzipped, and they promptly fell down around my legs. OK then, on to Plan D, or whatever we were up to by now. I hoisted the pants back up with one hand, squatted as best I could with my other hand on the wall for balance, and found myself so nervous I could only release a few tiny drops of pee, which went gleefully right down my leg. I snatched the toilet paper that I had been holding between my teeth, frantically swabbed at those errant drops, nearly tipping myself over in my efforts, threw the paper into the nearby bin, stepped off the porcelain rims with a huge sigh and got myself decent again.

I did not even want to know how Myrtle was faring. I knew she would be a bit challenged, with her short legs trying to span the width of that basin. I tried to whisper over the stall enclosure, "Are you managing OK, Myrtle?" She snarled, "Shut up!" Well, so much for the milk of human kindness, I guess.

It turns out she fared much better than I did. She told me later that she took one look at that diabolical porcelain hole, snatched up the nearby bin, dumping all the toilet paper on the floor, then threw her jacket over the hook in such a way that she could hold on to the two jacket sleeves to balance while she sat on the bin to do her business. Clever! I definitely gave her kudos for that!

The problem is, though, that while she did empty the bin into the porcelain hole from hell, she did not pick up all the toilet paper she had thrown on the floor. At our late afternoon briefing our guide gently said, "When you use the Chinese toilets, please be sure all your toilet paper goes into the bin." My busy mind had a field day wondering just how many rolls of toilet paper the guide thought Myrtle had gone through that day!

Nevertheless, I was as grateful as Myrtle that most of the hotels and tourist areas we visited did have western style upright toilets on which our pampered western posteriors could sit comfortably.

We had a truly patient and agreeable guide, who willingly distracted us from discomfort, long traffic delays, boredom, and a host of like maladies that plague the efforts to navigate a metropolis and a country that has so many people that Mother Goose herself would be hard pressed to find a shoe big enough to accommodate even a fraction of them. In our guide's words, "China's population is a big woman, and a little man must grow if he wishes to satisfy her."

One thing that really struck me was what our guide said about the huge population in China. "That is squarely Chairman Mao's doing. After the Japanese invasion, he was sure a nuclear bomb would be dropped on China, so he told all the people it was their patriotic duty to have 'many sons and daughters of China' to carry on the Chinese people after a nuclear disaster.

The people obliged, and China swelled very quickly to a population behemoth. Chairman Mao's Great Leap Forward led to an erratic fertility rate followed by the Great Chinese Famine from 1959-1961 when millions died. In the 1970s China's population was more than 800 million. In 1971 the Communist Party raised the age for first marriages, imposed a minimum birth interval and a limit of two to three children per family. This led to the one child policy in 1980 and the birth rate dipped below replacement level in 1991.

China has now had the one child policy for over 30 years, only one child in the city, two in the country if the parents have money. (They pay the fine to have two.) In 1997 China started a five-day work week, instead of the traditional six-day work week. The Number one disgrace for a family is to have no son. Only a boy can carry on the family name. After 1949 women now keep their own name, but children carry the father's name. After the girl gets married, she is no longer regarded as a family member of her own family, and she no longer has any rights to the family property. There are a lot of abandoned girls in orphanages. In the countryside there are typically more boys than girls, 119 boys to every 100 girls.

Now, with the One Child Policy, China's population growth is under control, sometimes in favor of boys, though, because in rural areas it is considered a humiliation for a family to have no male child. When we visit a school near Xian we will see how the one child policy has changed the ratio of girls and boys in the schools. Overall in China, in the young generation, there are approximately 110 boys for every 100 girls."

We did see this in a primary school in a farming village near Xian. In the school we visited in Shaanxi Province, some classrooms even had 20 boys and 10 girls.

On the way back to our hotel, we got stuck in a traffic jam and our guide pulled out a few sheets of paper, took up her trusty red microphone, and proceeded to rattle off some factoids. I scribbled madly because I am always hoping to best Myrtle on factoids.

- Beijing is the governmental center of China, Hong Kong is the number one Commercial Center, Shanghai is the China of the future, Xian is the China of the past.
- In Mandarin, Beijing is Beijing, in Cantonese it is called Peking. In 1949 Beijing became the official capital of China. Beijing is in the same latitude as Philadelphia. In the spring there are many sandstorms from Mongolia, and vision is poor. Sandstorms also come from the Gobi Desert. Beijing has a relatively dry climate. All the balconies in Beijing are enclosed in glass because of pollution. Pollution in Beijing is from 1) Cars, 3 million and every day 1000 new cars

entering the roads, 2) Construction, 3) Burning charcoal for heat. The government tries to limit driving, which they already do in Shanghai, where they auction off license plates, the most expensive one costing \$5000. Parking is \$5-10 a day, so workers cannot afford it and ride bicycles - 9 million in the downtown area. Suburbs take two hours to commute daily by bus and subway.

- China is part Socialism and part Capitalism. “No money, no happy, no honey.” Everyone tries to get an education and a job. The requirements for a bridegroom in 1970 were a sewing machine and a watch; in 1980 a washing machine, TV, and refrigerator; in 1990, a condo in Beijing, a car, and a bank account.

At that factoid, I could not help but emit an uncalled-for, “Yikes! If we had that in the states, I think our marriage rate would take a nosedive!”

Of course, ObOff had an answer, “And a good thing that might be, to curb our high divorce rate!” She had a point. By the way, dear reader, ObOff was the nickname Myrtle and I gave to a particularly obnoxious woman in our group. It was short for Obnoxious Offender, who, in case you are wondering, had absolutely nothing in common with Offred of the *Handmaid’s Tale*.

Myrtle whispered, “How do they afford marriage here?” I think our guide did not hear her, because our guide’s next factoid was “Robbery is the most prevalent crime. You need to keep your luggage locked. Corruption in the government is very serious. There are drugs in the south near Burma.”

Myrtle, of course, erupted into a giggle fit that I cleverly disguised with a coughing fit, annoyed that once again I had to cover up for Myrtle.

The guide continued, “The Lucky Number 6666 means everything will go well forever, and the Lucky Number 8888 means you will be a very rich person.” I thought I heard everyone’s ears perk up at that, but just then we entered a parking lot in front of a small shop where our guide informed us we could order our name chops with our English names translated into Chinese in red ink. I saw a little smirk on Myrtle’s face and wondered what she would try now.

Turns out she tried to get the inscriber to etch a 6666 and an 8888 on her chop along with her Chinese name. The inscriber refused, telling her it was bad luck. OK, then. At least Myrtle did not pout about it.

Shortly after that, we stopped for dinner. As we stood in line for our table, I heard ObOff arguing with someone about foot binding, “There has been no foot binding in China now for over 100 years.” Myrtle piped right up with a snotty sotto voce that only I could hear, “I know because I am a Cantonese Scholar.” Then she stuck her finger in her mouth and pretended to gag. I only tsked at her.

I sent a prayer heavenward that our table was ready then. Our wise guide challenged us to use our chopsticks for this meal. Ha! That was a brilliant move! Who can concentrate on a good argument when you are trying to get grains of rice onto a thin stick and somehow get that stick to transfer said grains of rice into your mouth? Our dinner had 15 entrees! Well, as you can guess, most of us ended up using forks and knives. But we tried. I actually did OK with the chunks of things. I humbly acknowledge that rice is out of my league, though.

To be continued . . .